

**MEDIATED NEOLIBERALISATION:
THE PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION OF
NEW COUNTRYSIDE DRAMAS IN CHINA**

by

RAN YAN

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Department of Political Science and International Studies
School of Government and Society
College of Social Sciences
The University of Birmingham
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the production and reception of New Countryside TV dramas in China using the theory of neoliberalisation. A review of the current academic debates on neoliberalism, actually existing neoliberalism and China's neoliberalisation indicates that neoliberalism is not a static, singular, and rigidly imposed global experimentation. Rather, it is an ongoing project that is mediated by inherited social and institutional structures. Using neoliberalism as an analytical device, this thesis focuses on illustrating how China's neoliberal transformation intersects with China's media reform process. The communication event of New Countryside TV dramas was selected as the case to explain how the Chinese mass media reproduce and legitimate the Chinese state's rural neoliberal transformation agenda. By examining data collected from documents, archives and semi-structured interviews, this thesis argues that China's neoliberalisation is a state-led, media-mediated process. The state plays a dual role, creating the macro development plan for the country and guiding the mass media to endorse the policies it releases in order to win broad social support. The state influences the activities of the marketised mass media sector in two ways. Firstly, it has developed a complicated set of administrative strategies, which combine institutional regulation, financial subsidies, tax policies, market monopoly, party endorsement, etc., to encourage the media industry to produce more products that are consistent with the Socialist New Countryside Construction policy. Secondly, the state uses media reform to form new drama production organisations, and thereby changes the work routines that media professionals follow. The two new patterns of drama production make media professionals more willing to insert more New Countryside Construction Policy-related elements into drama narratives. The state thus can make its New Countryside Construction Policy known to more villagers. The fieldwork in two types of Northern villages reveals that while the New Countryside dramas can effectively increase poorer peasants' entrepreneurship in the economic sense, in both villages, they are unable to enhance peasants' identification with the party and the state in the political sense. Therefore, if neoliberalism is a governmentality which aims to cultivate subjects who are entrepreneurial in the economic sense and governable in the political sense, New Countryside TV dramas are only able to achieve half of this goal. In conclusion, by examining the institutional environment, the production process and the reception of New Countryside TV dramas, this thesis contributes to the discussions on how neoliberalism is being articulated with local inherited political and social processes during the current social transformation in China.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPC	The Communist Party of China
CPD	The Central Propaganda Department
GAPP	General Administration of Press and Publications
MRFT	Ministry of Radio, Film and Television
MRT	Ministry of Radio, Film and Television
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration
PRC	The People's Republic of China
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
SOE	State-owned Enterprise
SNCC	Socialist New Countryside Construction

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origins of the Research

This thesis examines the production of Chinese TV dramas featuring a theme of New Countryside Construction and their reception by Chinese peasants. In October 2005, the Communist Party of China (CPC) proposed the term ‘Socialist New Countryside’ at the 5th Plenary Session of its 16th Central Committee, thus launching a new rural revitalising project – the ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ campaign. In China’s *11th Five Year Plan on National Economic and Social Development*, which has been quoted by a number of other government documents, the ‘Socialist New Countryside’ has been described as the countryside meeting the requirement of ‘advanced production, improved livelihood, a civilised social atmosphere, clean and tidy villages and democratic administration’.

After this Plenary Session, there emerged a number of dramas depicting the changes taking place in peasants’ life since the launch of the ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ project. Although neither the Chinese government nor the Chinese media industry has given these dramas a particular name, rural-themed dramas depicting stories related to the Socialist New Countryside Construction campaign have become a noticeable phenomenon.

This thesis defines these rural-topic dramas as New Countryside themed dramas. This type of drama was produced after the 5th Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the CPC. Usually they feature a depiction of changes in villages since the start of the Socialist New Countryside campaign, an exhibition of achievements gained during the campaign, interpretations of specific government policies formulated under the Socialist New Countryside framework, as well as propaganda on the CPC's political ideas and theories related to this campaign.

Rural drama is a genre that Chinese officials traditionally pay particular attention to. The Chinese authorities believe that TV drama is an ideological product, thus they want TV dramas to serve the political agenda set by the CPC and the government. This has turned traditional rural-themed TV dramas into a tool for domestic propaganda. Before 2003, the production of Chinese rural dramas was monopolised by state-owned production institutions. With the planning of the state, rural TV dramas produced in this period sought to propagandise the CPC's rural policies, exhibit the achievements since China carried out the rural economic reform, set cadre or peasant role models and maintain a good relationship between rural cadres and peasants. They constitute an important component of China's 'main melody' dramas¹.

¹ 'Main melody' cultural works refer to movies, dramas and music etc. which are charged with endorsing the Chinese party-state policies and reflecting state-sanctioned interpretations of historical events.

Since the Chinese TV drama market opened up to private production companies in 2003, the manufacturing pattern of rural TV dramas has shifted from the authoritarian mode towards a more market-oriented model. Private companies have become a thriving force that participates in the production of rural dramas. After decades of development, nowadays it is rare to see rural dramas invested in and produced solely by state institutions. Most of the New Countryside themed dramas that this thesis focuses on are made or jointly made by private drama production institutions. Some of them are joint-ventures by the state and private sectors, and others are produced by several private institutions. Each manufacturing mode has produced influential works of rural drama.

For instance, in 2006, right after the launch of the New Countryside Construction campaign, a drama portraying the love and career stories of rural young generations received a good audience response after it was broadcast on Channel 1, China Central Television (CCTV). The name of this drama is *Rural Love Stories* (*Xiangcun Aiqing*, 乡村爱情). It echoes the Chinese party-state's call for more educated rural young people returning to their home village to start a career. In 2006, it won the 'Five-One Project' prize, regarded as the most prestigious state award in the country's art and cultural fields. In 2010, its ratings surpassed *Xinwen Lianbo*, a news program that aired live nightly across the Chinese mainland (Sun, 2017). *Rural Love Stories* later presented another 10 seasons, and has become the longest-running TV drama in China. Although the first season was jointly produced by state institutions and private companies, it is believed that state

institutions later quit this programme. Benshan Media, the company founded by Chinese comedian Benshan Zhao, took the dominant role in the production of its later seasons.

For another instance, in 2014, a state-owned media institution in Shandong Province, Shandong Film & TV Production Co. Ltd, cooperated with several other private or state institutions and produced *Ma Xiangyang's Journey to the Countryside* (*Ma Xiangyang Xiaxiang Ji*, 马向阳下乡记). This drama depicts an urban public servant's experiences in a traditional village when he is appointed Major Secretary of the village. This drama propagandises the Shandong provincial government's policy of 'sending Major Secretaries down to the countryside'. When it was premiered on Channel 1, CCTV, this drama received an average rating of 1.667%, the highest among programmes in the same time slots (People.cn, 2014). Moreover, this drama also received the 'Flying Apsaras Award' (Feitian Jiang), the most prestigious state award in the TV drama field, and 'Golden Eagle Award' (Jinying Jiang), the highest industrial award in the TV drama field.

The co-operation between state and private institutions on 'New Countryside' themed dramas indicates the need to re-evaluate the state-media relationship in post-reform China, in the context of China's rural revitalisation movement and the market-oriented reforms of the Chinese mass media industry. Several questions need to be considered: 1. In China's increasingly marketised media environment, do rural-themed TV dramas today still serve as the CPC's domestic propaganda tool as it did before the media reform? 2.

To what extent does the state maintain its control of rural-themed dramas? 3. Why would profit-seeking private drama production companies invest in this traditionally not-so-profitable genre? 4. How does the participation of private production companies affect the manufacturing pattern of rural-themed TV dramas? 5. Can these commercialised rural dramas accurately reflect the changes in the countryside? 6. Can these New Countryside themed rural dramas promote development and social change in the Chinese countryside?

This thesis uses neoliberalisation theory to examine how New Countryside themed TV dramas have been manufactured after 2005, how they are perceived by Chinese peasants, and the impact they have on the peasants. It aims to explain how China's overall neoliberal transformation process intersects with China's media reform processes. Therefore, this research proposes to focus on how rural dramas have been produced in the 'Constructing Socialist New Countryside' period.

The primary assumption of this study is that in post-reform China, the state uses New Countryside themed TV dramas to promote its Socialist New Countryside Construction agenda in the countryside. Specifically, via both institutional and economic measures, the state guides the TV drama industry to reproduce its New Countryside Construction agenda. These TV dramas are intended to cause changes in the attitudes of peasants towards the New Countryside Construction policies and influence their life in general.

Understanding why and how the TV drama industry follows the CPC's political agenda and the effects of these dramas will help improve our understanding of China's current media environment: while the CPC monopolises the country's serious news sector and bans direct participation of non-public capital in news production, it also exerts strong influence on the country's entertainment media sector; the ways in which it controls the entertainment products reveals the Chinese state's new propaganda strategies. Besides this, the communication effects of these dramas show how effective this new type of propaganda is in pursuing the CPC's political goals.

1.2 The New Countryside Construction Movement

The PRC's New Countryside Construction campaign forms one of the research contexts of this study. In 2005, the Chinese state proclaimed a 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' project during the 5th Plenary Session of the Sixteenth CPC's Central Committee. It showed the Chinese state's intention to accelerate countryside development. In 2006, the details of the project were officially announced when the National People's Congress approved China's 11th Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2006-2010), in which it outlined a number of policy guidelines that all levels of government should follow in order to promote comprehensive countryside modernisation (Ahlers and Schubert, 2009, p. 36). Although this document itself did not entail substantial changes at the implementation level, it gave all levels of government a target for the years to come – that is, building new villages that meet the requirements of

'advanced production, comfortable livelihood, a civilised lifestyle, clean and tidy villages, democratic administration' (shengchan fazhan, shenghuo kuanyu, xiangfeng wenming, cunrong zhengjie, guanli minzhu) (China State Council, 2006). These five facets could also be seen as a description of what a socialist new countryside is according to the state. This overall objective demonstrates the Chinese state's intention to use the central-planning regime to tackle the 'three rural issues' that have long hindered the development of the country: agriculture, villages and farmers (see, for example, Wen, 2005).

The SNCC project is part of the Chinese state's 'Building a Socialist Harmonious Society' agenda, which was announced at the beginning of the 2000s under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in order to relieve social tensions. This SNCC project proved that this Hu-Wen government was 'more sensitive to rural issues' compared to their predecessor Jiang Zemin (Looney, 2015, p. 913). As will be discussed in Chapters 2, the SNCC project reflects the change of orientation of the Chinese state towards state neoliberalism, which enables the state to play a more active role in moderating the negative impacts of marketisation (So and Chu, 2012). The state's role is mainly manifested at the central planning level.

Elizabeth J. Perry talks of the SNCC as a 'managed campaign' led by the state. She emphasises that the Chinese state during the SNCC campaign 'adopt[s] and adapt[s] revolutionary campaign methods to current reformist agendas' (Perry, 2011, p. 32).

Schubert and Ahlers (2009, p. 36, 2011, p. 29), similarly, contend that the SNCC should be understood as a central policy framework under which a number of former and new rural revitalisation policies have been brought together for local adaptation. These ideas indicate that the agenda that the central state is creating for this SNCC initiative is adopting multiple governing approaches and covering a wide range of areas.

1.3 The Transformation of the Chinese Entertainment Media

China's media reform provides another context for this research. After the establishment of the PRC, the Chinese media became part of the public sector. In practice, media plays the role of the mouthpiece of the party-state. However, since 1980s, the Chinese media has been undergoing a process of market-oriented transformation. Although the party-state maintains the absolute monopoly over the core ideological area of news production, it has gradually eased the limits on some less politically sensitive sectors, and has allowed the participation of capital in areas like the production of entertainment, business, consumer, and technical information and the financing and distributing ends of the Chinese system (Zhao, 2004, p. 204). The market reform on the one hand has reduced the Chinese media's economic dependence on party-state subsidies; on the other hand it has granted more creative autonomy to China's entertainment media professionals. The entertainment sector, in particular, is expected to yield diversified entertainment content alternative to the party's propagandist voice. In terms of rural-themed TV dramas, they

could have more thematic choices without the necessity of focusing on the state's 'New Countryside Construction' policy.

The market-oriented transformation has caused changes in both the content and the operational mode of entertainment media. Most current studies on Chinese TV dramas focus on the content aspect. Using content and textual analysis methods, these studies have revealed new trends in TV dramas, like increasing portrayals of the consumer culture, the Hollywoodisation of storytelling strategies (Ma, 2014), and the growing inclination towards entertaining. Despite the increasing influence of the capitalist market on TV dramas, ideologically, China's TV dramas have remained synchronised with the political agenda set by the CPC. Due to the limitations of content and textual analysis, current research cannot explain the reasons for this synchronisation. Therefore, an examination of the changes in the professional routine of drama practitioners is needed.

Currently, there are two mainstream opinions on China's state-media relationship. One is that the development of a market economy in the media weakens the political control of the CPC. The other notes the persistence of party-state control, holding that commercialisation is a way in which the old CPC-controlled media system accommodates and assimilate various challenges (Chen, 2004). Scholars holding the latter perspective argue that the party-state allows space for commercialisation in the entertainment media

sector because it leads to the creation of a more inclusive official culture (Barme, 1998, 1999).

The common weakness of these two perspectives is they treat the market and the state as if they are in an inherently antagonistic relationship. However, the links between the two power mechanisms have been neglected. The market-oriented transformation of the Chinese TV drama industry does not mean the wiping-out of the party-state ideology in TV dramas. The media transformation is led by the party-state. To TV drama professionals, the difference between an industry directly led by the party-state and one that is led by the party-state via market mechanisms is not as large as expected. In both situations, the TV drama industry should comply with the party-state's ideological line. In this sense, although commercialisation has the potential to diversify the themes, content and skills of TV dramas, the autonomy that TV drama-makers can obtain from this market reform is limited. In order to investigate the changes in the production of Chinese rural-themed TV dramas, insights into the TV drama industry will be incorporated into this research.

1.4 Rural TV Dramas and China's Countryside Development

TV drama is the most popular form of TV programme in China. Since the birth of the first Chinese TV drama in 1958, TV drama has been regarded by the CPC party-state as an important tool for domestic propaganda. As TV dramas are easy to understand for

audiences with all levels of literacy, the CPC has particularly high expectations of their propaganda effects in the countryside.

In the Maoist era (1958-1978), although there were a limited number of TV dramas, most of their stories involve depictions of the countryside. Almost all TV dramas in the Maoist era were produced by TV stations. Most of them came with a specific educational theme, and could be seen as a direct dramatisation of the party-state's political, economic and cultural policies regarding the countryside. Since the priority of the Maoist state was to achieve rapid industrialisation and urbanisation with limited resources (as a result of the Western economic blockade and the breakoff with the Soviet Union), most rural TV dramas during the Maoist period sought to arouse peasants' enthusiasm for sacrificing for the urban- and industry-centric socialist construction. For instance, China's first TV drama, *One Bite of Vegetable Pancake* (*Yikou Caibingzi*, 一口菜饼子), educated the people to cherish and economise on food in times of economic austerity through a rural women and her brother recollecting the hunger they suffered before 1949. In addition, during this period, some rural TV dramas also sought to set the image of model peasants who are self-reliant, selfless, hard-working and loyal to socialism.

But since TV was not yet widely accessible in the countryside during the Maoist era, the influence of these rural TV dramas was limited. From the start of China's Reform and Opening-up in the 1980s until the beginning of the 21st century, changes have happened

in the production mode and content of rural TV dramas. For China's TV drama industry, these two decades have constituted a period of transformation. On the one hand, the role of TV dramas gradually shifted from the party-state's propaganda tool to a form of popular cultural product. With increased sources of funding from the non-public sector (i.e., corporate sponsorship, advertisements, commercial loans), the yearly provision of TV dramas started to take off. On the other hand, with the commercialisation of the operational mode of TV dramas (i.e., the production and distribution modes), the influence of TV dramas began to grow. Since they started to enjoy a larger audience, the Chinese TV drama industry started to care more about the cultural tastes of the masses rather than the state's political needs.

In the field of rural TV dramas, since the market preferred a more affluent urban audience, the percentage of TV dramas focusing on the countryside began to decrease. In contrast with the Maoist rural TV dramas' frequent glorification of the peasantry, in the reform era, the image of peasants was vilified in most urban TV dramas in order to cater to the tastes of the growing urban middle class. The idea of 'peasants are backward' started to appear in some of these urban-centric dramas.

Although not many, there still were some dramas focusing on contemporary rural life. However, these rural TV dramas were not as marketised as other genres. Although these rural dramas also received some funding from the non-public sector (in the form of

advertisements or company sponsorship), most of them were produced by state-owned drama-making institutions and had governmental funding. To a large extent, these dramas still prioritised the state's propaganda needs. However, the major task during this era was no longer to activate peasants' passions for socialism construction, but to promote reformist ideas in the countryside.

At the beginning of the reform, several dramas appeared that reflected on the political movements in the Maoist era and called for reforms in grassroots politics. For example, in 1986, *New Star* (*Xinxing*, 新星), a 12-episode TV drama, gave 'unconventional criticisms on bureaucratic politics' in the countryside (Lull, 1991, p. 116, Ma, 2012, p. 1). In its rhetoric, peasants were depicted as the reformist Party Secretary's loyal supporters. As the rural reform progressed, rural economic reform became a new focus. 'Rural party leaders' became frequently seen on television. Dramas like *The Party Member Erleng's Mother* (*Dangyuan Erleng Ma*, 党员二楞妈), *In the Field of Hope* (*Xiwang de Tianye*, 希望的田野), *Male Sorority Director* (*Nan Funv Zhuren*, 男妇女主任), etc., depicted rural cadres as role models in the village who won the love and respect of the villagers by helping them to get rich. However, as discussed earlier, these rural dramas were not fully independent from the state sector. As state institutions still took the dominant role in the production process, these dramas were not able to move beyond the didactic storytelling patterns that characterise most socialist propagandist TV dramas.

As we entered the 21st century, the CPC party-state realised the shortage of rural-topic dramas and the weak competitiveness of current rural dramas in the Chinese TV drama market. With the diversification of TV drama genres and the development of drama-making skills, the propagandist rural TV dramas began to lose viewership. In this context, the party-state decided to encourage the production of rural reality-topic TV dramas and improve their quality.

In America, rural-topic entertainment programmes also became popular again in the 21st century. For some of these American rural TV dramas, countryside sceneries and the relaxing rural lifestyle have become their unique selling points in the highly homogenous urban-centric drama market.

If the revival of rural topics in the American TV drama market is a result of free-market competition, then in China, the party-state is the major force that guarantees the stable market share of rural-topic entertainment products. Under the influence of the CPC party-state, the market-oriented transformation of rural TV dramas keeps closely connected to the CPC's ideological agenda. In order to achieve this, an institutional environment and a set of professional routines that make it possible for the party-state hegemony to influence rural TV dramas have been developed. Consequently, the rural TV drama industry has presented a number of productions that are based on the CPC's New Countryside Construction programme since it entered the 21st century. In viewing this, when analysing

these New Countryside themed TV dramas, how the party-state has shaped the industrial practice of rural TV dramas must be taken into consideration.

This thesis does not seek to re-emphasise the propaganda function of China's TV dramas. Rather, it hopes to explore the new production mode of rural TV dramas in the 21st century, when China launched the New Countryside Construction plan. In order to reveal the changes in the rural drama industry, interviews with rural drama practitioners, including drama scriptwriters and producers, will be incorporated into this research.

1.5 Research Question

The core research question of this thesis is: how the Chinese TV drama industry reproduces and legitimises the state's New Countryside Construction agenda. Before the media reform, the production of rural-topic TV dramas was dominated by the state. Therefore, the representation of the countryside and peasants all served the political needs of the party in different political conditions. However, since the Chinese media started its transformation, market forces have been exerting an increasing influence on the production of rural-topic TV dramas. The market-oriented transformation of the TV drama sector resulted in the reduced provision of rural-topic TV dramas and the vilification of the peasantry on screen. After 2005, the party-state released the New Countryside Construction Policy framework in order to promote rural development. It was also around

this period that the state realised the imperative of producing more rural reality-themed TV dramas to support specific rural development efforts under the New Countryside Construction framework.

However, with the transformation of the Chinese media industry, the old authoritarian administration mechanism is no longer going to work. In the new media environment, how would the communist ideology sustain control over the production of media products, and how well does the new system work? Using the production of New Countryside themed rural dramas as a case, this study aims to offer a discussion of these issues.

A comprehensive study of the production of New Countryside themed TV dramas must involve the examination of the macro institutional environment. Therefore, this study will firstly explore what changes have happened in the institutional environment that might help to promote the production of New Countryside themed dramas. Specifically, what is the institutional context for the series of practices surrounding New Countryside topic TV dramas? This question will be answered by explaining the role that state institutions play throughout the production, distribution and consumption of New Countryside dramas. By examining the bureaucratic structure as well as the state practices, rules and narrations surrounding New Countryside topic TV dramas, this study attempts to reveal how the state, via institutional and administrative methods, guides the TV drama industry to follow its neoliberal agenda.

Secondly, what industrial norms have influenced the production, distribution and consumption of New Countryside dramas? As Norman Fairclough (1995, pp. 58-59) points out, a communicative event has a ‘discourse practice’ dimension, which suggests the huge influence of professional routines, rules and consensuses on media production, distribution and consumption. With the gradual deepening of the neoliberal transformation in China’s TV drama sector and the state’s ongoing efforts to incorporate the TV drama industry into its Building a Socialist New Countryside agenda, the rules and principles that guide the TV drama industry’s work are expected to have been affected. So in what manner have these neoliberal logics affected the routines, rules and consensuses in the TV drama industry? What industrial norms have been changed? What motivates TV drama professionals to engage in New Countryside topic dramas? By answering these questions, this research also attempts to highlight the role of Chinese media professionals as a bridge between the political agenda, the market’s profit-seeking demand and society’s cultural desire.

Finally, this research will investigate how New Countryside themed dramas have been received by the rural audience. Specifically: will peasants be more entrepreneurial after watching these dramas? Will they grow more rationality, law-abidingness, tolerance and autonomy awareness after exposure to these dramas? By encouraging peasants to reflect on these questions, this research tries to evaluate the effects of these New Countryside topic TV dramas. This research also tries to reveal the tensions that emerge between peasant audiences and the CPC state when the peasants decode the drama messages.

In so doing, it will facilitate a general evaluation of how successfully these dramas can legitimise the Chinese state's neoliberal agenda.

1.6 Chapter Outline

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework for this study. It serves the following two purposes: articulating and interrogating existing neoliberalism theories to enrich its analytical value, and situating the study of China's rural television dramas produced in the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' era within the broad literature on neoliberalism, media reform and rural social change. It highlights that neoliberalism, as a governmentality, can manifest itself in various actually existing forms, so it is necessary to pay attention to the specific processes through which neoliberalism works in different local experiments. It also finds three dimensions that add to the analytical value of the term of neoliberalism in critical media studies: the ownership and regulation mode of media institutions, media professionals' work routines in media production processes, and the interactions between media content and media audiences.

This chapter concludes that the term neoliberalism can be deployed as an analytical device to explain changes that have happened in the Chinese rural topic TV drama industry in recent decades. This research proposes to focus on how rural dramas were produced in the 'Constructing Socialist New Countryside' period. The review of literature also shows that a framework for approaching the production and reception of a contemporary Chinese media genre (in this thesis, rural TV dramas produced in the

‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ era), as well as its implications for audience identity (in this thesis, peasant identity), is still missing.

Chapter 3 develops such an analytical framework by drawing on the ‘communication event’ model of Norman Fairclough so as to link together the notions of the institutional environment, industrial norms and audience-text interaction. It also introduces the research questions and methods of this research.

Based on these discussions, Chapter 4 attempts to provide a historical background to examine the production and reception of New Countryside TV dramas. Its focus is to address how the social context, state requirements and level of regulation as well as the market structure changed the content of rural topic TV dramas in four different historical periods: the experimental period (1958-1978), the transitional period (1978-1989), the commercial period (1989-early 2000s), and the New Countryside Construction period (from 2005 onwards). This periodisation is based on the different targets for national and social construction in China’s different developmental stages. The fundamental purpose of this chapter is to investigate how the Chinese rural topic TV dramas served the need of the Chinese communist party-state at different time periods, and how this traditional role of rural topic TV dramas still influences New Countryside TV dramas today. As I will show, during the first two decades after the birth of China’s TV industry in 1958, rural TV dramas, with financial and technological support from the state, attempted to help the

newly established state legitimise its power in the countryside and thus mobilise peasants to support the state's 'self-reliance' development programmes. In the first decade after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as a way to help the state restore its relationship with the peasants, more rural topic dramas began to portray real life in the countryside as well as reflect on the rural social problems left by the leftist movements in the 1950s-1970s. However, from 1989 to the early 2000s, as China's economic reform progressed in the media sector, the rural elements became marginalised on the TV screen. Not only did the number of rural topic TV dramas declined drastically; the portrayals in them became less varied and rather propagandist. This, I argue, reflects the Chinese TV drama industry's struggle between following 'the party-state line' – propagandising the communist ideology of connecting with the peasants – and 'the market line' – maximising profit by serving the more affluent urban audiences. Since the beginning of the 21st century, while the state has launched the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' programme to address the 'three rural' problems in the country, the more industrialised Chinese TV drama industry has begun working on a new drama genre for the peasants. This new TV drama genre focuses on village developments since the 2000s; however, compared with the previous rural topic TV dramas, it presents more entertaining features. Such a chronological review, I argue, also reveals the two sets of logics based on which the Chinese New Countryside TV dramas are produced: China's unique developmentalism logic with a special focus on countryside revitalisation on the one hand, and the media reform logic which has been infiltrated by neoliberal assumptions on the other hand. This chapter argues that although these two processes seem rather irrelevant, in essence, they are highly consistent, as they both reflect the political and economic assumptions of current Chinese society that

shape a state-led, market-orientated, market-disciplinary and market-making social transformation.

Chapters 5 to 7 aim to examine how the two seemingly unrelated processes intersect with each other. These three empirical chapters consider the communication event of New Countryside dramas as an epitome of China's overall neoliberalisation process, and they each discuss one dimension of it. Chapter 5 is the institutional analysis. It asks how the Chinese state uses institutional methods to guide the production of New Countryside TV dramas. This chapter finds that China's neoliberalisation, as a process, has been realised through a series of significant institutional measures. Specifically, while China's top-down political system enables the state to actively formulate a series of national policies to encourage the provision of New Countryside TV dramas, the media institutional framework facilitates the state to entrench the market-centred neoliberal order in the TV drama industry and ensures the synchronicity between TV dramas' agenda and the Chinese state's policy agenda. In addition, the state has also developed direct administrative mechanisms (such as the pre-shooting and post-shooting censorship mechanisms) and indirect mechanisms (such as the government award systems, the state funding system, the financial award system and the state endorsement system, etc.) to encourage the media industry to produce dramas that comply with the state's rural policies. Taking these discussions as a basis, this chapter argues that during China's neoliberalisation process, the current Chinese state has developed controlling strategies that are subtler than ever before to maintain its influence over the country's media system.

Chapter 6 offers a discussion of how the changes in industrial routines facilitate the production and circulation of New Countryside dramas in China's neoliberalisation era. It proposes a processual perspective to study drama production routines; that is, viewing routines as a series of professional actions performed by specific media people in specific work settings. Based on interview data and secondary sources, it finds that before the 1990s, media professionals, who worked in state-owned media units, practised state-directed drama production routines in order to provide rural audiences with dramas interspersed with political theories; however, since the market-oriented reform began in the TV drama sector, Chinese TV drama professionals have explored two new sets of routines to make rural topic TV dramas. As a consequence, while some New Countryside drama projects are led by the corporatised state drama production units, the rest are led by independent drama production companies following completely different rules and principles. This chapter argues that the two new methods of drama production can both facilitate the full mobilisation of media resources in the state and the private sector. At the same time, the divide between the three sets of patterns also reflects a new relationship between the Chinese state hegemony, the indigenous cultural tradition and the emerging media professionalism with market awareness during China's neoliberalisation process.

Chapter 7 is the audience analysis. It examines Chinese peasants' reception of New Countryside dramas, as well as their imagination of the 'countryside' and of their 'peasant' identity in the current social and political environment. It compares the audience receptions of New Countryside dramas in two Chinese Northern villages: one represents

traditional natural villages in China, and the other represents more urbanised villages. It finds that to audiences in both villages, the utilisation of entertaining elements enables these dramas to achieve a positive impact on society; in both villages, peasants interpret the economy-related drama plots from a compliance position; however, when it comes to stories that speak highly of the state and its policies, confrontational reading occurs because in reality, conflicts between the state and ‘land-lost peasants’ frequently break out and have become an issue threatening social stability. This proves that New Countryside dramas can deliver policy information to rural society, but they are not effective tools to increase peasants’ identification with the Party and the state.

Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the empirical findings about New Countryside TV dramas as a communication event and discusses their implications for the study of state sovereignty. Based on these summaries, it reflects on the limitations of this study and suggests spaces for future research regarding media reform, the receptions of New Countryside dramas in light of audience identity, and ‘the Chinese model of neoliberalisation’.

CHAPTER TWO: NEOLIBERALISM, THE MEDIA INDUSTRY AND CHINESE PEASANT IDENTITY: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Introduction

References to neoliberalism are commonplace in contemporary political, societal and cultural studies. However, the meanings and implications of this notion are continuously evolving, so knowledge of it requires constant improvement, and this very often needs the illustration of specific cases. In addition, although neoliberalism has been used as a frame to tell the general story of contemporary social changes, current literature tends to use it based on a broad-brushstrokes understanding. There is still much work to be done to make neoliberalism a more sophisticated theoretical and analytical device. This chapter, therefore, seeks to serve the following two purposes: articulating and interrogating existing neoliberalism theories to enrich its analytical value, and situating the study of China's rural television dramas produced in the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' era within the broad literature on neoliberalism, media reform and rural social change.

This chapter first discusses the context-embedded nature of neoliberalism. The central argument, and also the point from which this thesis is launched and the area to which it aims to contribute, is that neoliberalism, as a governmentality, works in divergent ways in different societies, yet discussions on how neoliberalism is carried out in contemporary China are lacking. This chapter then moves to discuss the use of neoliberalism in critical

media studies, and explores how the concept of neoliberalism can be deployed in a more analytical way, given that current studies tend to use it just to tag or criticise contemporary capitalism but overlook how the overall neoliberal transformation of Chinese society is articulated with other political, social, economic, cultural and media processes. The third section of this chapter investigates how the concept of 'neoliberalism' can help to account for the dynamics that can be observed surrounding China's contemporary rural television dramas. By reviewing existing literature, insights can be gained into the following themes: the role of the state in China's media reform, how TV dramas legitimise the Chinese state's rural policies, and the influences of TV dramas on Chinese peasants' identity. Finally, this chapter concludes by reflecting on the findings of this literature review, arguing that a critical analysis of a contemporary Chinese media genre (in this thesis, rural TV dramas produced in the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' era) from the neoliberal perspective needs an integrative framework for approaching its production and reception as well as its implications for audience identity (in this thesis, peasant identity). However, in the current literature, such a framework is still missing. In Chapter 3, a framework will be proposed to address this issue.

2.2 Neoliberalism Theory: More than a Universal Model?

During the past few decades, the literature on neoliberalism has experienced drastic inflations in both amount and scope (Cahill et al., 2018, p. xxv). However, the various patterns of usage of this term create confusion. Before using this concept to unpack the

rich dynamics that this research concerns, it is worth clarifying the scholarly consensus on what neoliberalism essentially denotes.

David Harvey and Anna-Maria Blomgren are two of the recent, and most frequently quoted scholars who have tried to summarise the many emphases of neoliberalism (Thorsen, 2010, pp. 199, 201). Harvey summarises neoliberalism from a descriptive perspective. According to him, neoliberalism advocates the idea that ‘human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (2005, p. 2). A key point of Harvey is that state intervention must be kept to ‘a bare minimum’ (*ibid*); that is, the state cannot intervene in the market too much; however, it has to do something to guarantee a functioning free market.

Blomgren, on the other hand, addresses this issue from a normative political theory perspective (Thorsen, 2010, p. 201). She perceives neoliberalism as a wide-ranging political philosophy between two ends: ‘anarcho-liberalism’, which demands the state should be abolished altogether, and ‘classical liberalism’, which calls for a government with functions that exceed those of a night-watchman state (1997, p. 224). Thus, Blomgren’s definition highlights the internal diversity of neoliberal thought (Thorsen, 2010, p. 201). Nevertheless, based on a critical review of works written by previous neoliberal political philosophers such as Friedman, Nozick and Hayek, Blomgren concludes that the

core feature of neoliberalism is ‘giving priority to individual freedom and the right to private property’ (Blomgren, 1997, p. 224).

Despite their different focuses, Blomgren and Harvey’s accounts of neoliberalism overlap to a considerable degree. They both suggest that neoliberalism shows an inclination towards individualism, marketisation, private ownership, entrepreneurship and reduced state intervention, all of which are values beneficial for capitalist accumulation in an era of the crisis of the post-war ‘Keynesian welfare state’ (Clarke, 2005, p. 58). In this regard, neoliberalism is often considered as the ideology behind the latest phase in the development of capitalism (Thorsen, 2010, p. 196). Along with the development of globalisation, these ideas have affected many states’ economic policies and modes of regulation.

The influence of neoliberalism on state activity has received growing attention from academia. A number of scholars use the terms ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ of the state, to report the transformation of government activities in a neoliberal setting (Peck and Tickell, 2002, Dodson, 2006, Engel, 2007). The rolling back of the state implies deconstructing the institutions and policies of the post-war ‘Keynesian’ welfare state (Kelsey, 1993). Rolling out, on the other hand, seeks to introduce new institutions, policies and governmentalities to entrench the market-centred neoliberal order (Peck and Tickell, 2002). In this sense, neoliberalism has led to a wholesale revision in government practices.

As Sanford F. Schram (2018, p. 308) argues, ‘it has become the default logic for public policy making today’.

However, a critical feature of neoliberalism is that it ‘blurs the boundary between the market, society and the state’ (Schram, 2018, p. 308). Thus, simply understanding neoliberalism as a state response to capitalist crisis downplays its effects on society. A growing number of scholars have realised the necessity to take into consideration how society and the market respond to the neoliberal form of rule (Lerner, 2003, 2016). By interpreting neoliberalism as involving countless processes that associate the macro structure with individuals, it is possible for scholars to reveal its innate tenacity. As Lerner (2016, p. 20) argues, ‘the transformation of a polity involves the complex linking of various domains of practice, is ongoingly contested, and the result is not a foregone conclusion’. It is also in this regard that Clarke (2005, p. 58) proposes to view neoliberalism not just as an ideal, an ideology or a state response, but as an ongoing, and comprehensive political project, one that aims to ‘subject the whole world’s population to the judgement and morality of capital’.

In the current literature, two approaches to neoliberalism have the potential to link individual behaviours with larger political and economic structures: first, the Marxian ideological critique approach, and second, the Foucauldian governmentality approach

(Kipnis, 2007). To seek the best way of theorising neoliberalism for this research, this literature review will start by analysing the blind spots of these two approaches.

2.2.1 Two Approaches to Conceptualise the Neoliberal Project

The first approach treats neoliberalism as the culture of capitalism in the early 21st century. In this tradition, neoliberalism is as much an ideology (in the Marxian ‘fake consciousness’ sense) as an economic policy framework. This view is evident in a special issue of the journal *Public Culture* entitled *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. In the introduction to this issue, Jean and John Comaroff (2001, p. 13) propose to see neoliberalism as a culture that ‘re-visions persons not as producers from a particular community, but as consumers in a planetary marketplace: persons as ensembles of identity that owe less to history or society than to organically conceived human qualities’. Neoliberalism in their view is ugly, amoral, money-worshipping, contradictory and spectacular (Perry, 2002, Kipnis, 2007, p. 384). Studies taking this approach then reflect on how people growingly become victims of the neoliberalism culture. Examples of such influence include ‘the uncivil violence of an overly masculinised global youth culture, [the rise of] witchcraft and other forms of occult practice, and the explosion of identity politics’ across the globe (Kipnis, 2007, p. 384).

This approach is effective in revealing some key features of neoliberalism, i.e. the retreat of the state from everyday life and the growing globalisation level of capitalism. However,

the critical stance of this approach makes it unable to focus on the techniques and processes of neoliberalism itself (Kipnis, 2007, p. 385). In addition, in this thesis, I argue that such an approach tends to endorse a holistic, static, universal, and singular form of neoliberalism culture. The innate diversity and the ongoing nature of this term, as flagged up by Blomgren (1997) and Lerner (2016) and covered in earlier discussions, have been neglected.

The second theorising approach, however, provides a way of ‘investigating the restructuring of welfare state processes’ (Lerner, 2016, p. 6). It follows the idea of Foucault (2008, p. 218) that neoliberalism is ‘a type of governmentality’. Neoliberalism studies in this approach thus pay attention to what techniques and strategies of governing have been applied. They hold that the aim of neoliberal interventions is to produce ideal governable citizens/subjects, ones that are ‘both entrepreneurial in the economic sense and reasonable, law-abiding, tolerant, and autonomous in the political sense’ (Kipnis, 2007, p. 386).

The second approach differs from its first counterpart in that, while the first focuses on the negative effects of neoliberalism, this one puts emphasis on neoliberalism’s orderly influences on society (Kipnis, 2007, p. 385). It also enables investigations into the dual aspects of the neoliberal art of government – the processes of how it shapes individuals,

as well as how it is resisted by individuals (Lerner, 2016, p. 6, Lorenzini, 2018). In this sense, this approach proposes a neutral and more dynamic viewpoint of neoliberalism.

Nevertheless, the governmentality literature still faces challenges, as it offers a too broad conception of neoliberalism. According to this definition, almost all actions of the contemporary state can be labelled neoliberal, because they are all aimed at producing ideal governable subjects (Kipnis, 2007, p. 386). In addition, although the governmentality literature does not advocate a universal form of neoliberalism, Lerner (2016, p. 14) argues that it has paid much attention to broad governmental themes rather than specific neoliberal programmes or policies. Even in the few programme-centred studies, the tendency to privilege official documents results in the neglect of social resistance (O'Malley, 1996).

So this points to the importance of adopting a more flexible and more context-specific approach to explain the neoliberalism project. To pursue a more flexible framework, the insights of the governmentality literature, that neoliberalism is a governmentality rather than a unified political consciousness or a set of institutions or policies, will be taken as the primary starting point of this study. This starting angle not only justifies the plurality of neoliberalism (as many different strategies can produce neoliberal subjects), but also opens new spaces (such as processes producing neoliberal states, spaces and subjects) for investigation. As O'Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997, p. 503) explain,

Not only does [the governmentality literature] provide a theoretical elaboration which potentially opens every day and institutional programmes and practices for critical and tactical thinking, it also provides a considerable array of empirical work in terms of which interventions can be examined and thought out.

Meanwhile, in order to be more explicit, the examination of neoliberalism in this thesis will be more ‘particularised’. In other words, while on the whole it is understood as a governmentality, the use of it will be situated in specific contexts so as to show exactly which policies or political actions this research is defining as neoliberal. This will avoid talking about neoliberalism in a universal or holistic sense, and enable a deepened exploration of the contestations and struggles within the particular context.

In this conceptualisation, neoliberalism emerges as a term in plural formats. So it is worth clarifying what practices are neoliberal, and what not. On this question, the notion of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ offers useful insights.

2.2.2 Actually Existing Neoliberalism

In previous discussions, it has been made clear that neoliberalism first gained worldwide prominence during the 1970s-1980s as a state response to the crisis of the Keynesian welfare states (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 349, Clarke, 2005, p. 8). People at that time tended to over-idealise the power of this political-economic trend. Two common

misconceptions can be found in this utopia of neoliberalism: first, people tended to think of neoliberalism as ‘a singular and rigidly imposed global form’, and started to apply this formula to other places in the world without change; and second, neoliberalism was usually read as ‘a top-down imposition, a phenomenon radiating unidirectionally out from heartlands to peripheries’ (Peck et al., 2018, p. 5).

Therefore, with the efforts of some global economic institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), etc., neoliberal thoughts and ideas were expanded throughout the world as a universal law to justify the deregulation of state control, the privatisation of public services, market reform and the intensification of competition.

However, a number of scholars have noticed the uneven development of neoliberalism across regions, nations and localities (Peck and Tickell, 2002, Beeson and Islam, 2005, Harvey, 2005, p. 87, Duménil and Lévy, 2012, Peck et al., 2018). As Harvey (2006, p. 147) points out, ‘the uneven geographical development of neoliberalism on the world stage has been, evidently, a very complex process entailing multiple determinations and not little chaos and confusion’.

Under such conditions, Peck, Brenner and Theodore come up with the notion of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ as a means of exploring this complexity. They (2018, p. 4) argue that

Understood as an ideological matrix and as an adaptive rationale for ongoing projects of state and societal restructuring, fortified and guided by a strong discourse of market progress, neoliberalism plainly cannot exist in the world in ‘pure’, uncut, or unmediated form. Instead, its ‘actually existing’ manifestations are partial, polycentric and plural; its dynamics of frontal advance and flowed reproduction are marked by friction, contradiction, polymorphism, and uneven geographical development...because volatile hybridity is the condition of existence.

In this sense, ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ can be understood as a notion addressing the contextual-embedded nature of neoliberal projects. Brenner and Theodore (2002) identify three key concepts relating to ‘actually existing neoliberalism’: path-dependency, creative destruction and the city. Path-dependency suggests that choices made when deciding institutional reform will be affected by inherited institutional constraints. Creative destruction refers to the process of changing the economic structure from within. The city as well as its hinterlands (most typically, the countryside as the object to be urbanised), according to them, has become the laboratory of various neoliberal experiments.

By suggesting that neoliberal restructuring programmes exhibit various forms, this concept enables scholars to give greater attention to ‘the specific processes through which neoliberalism works in divergent societies’ (Buckingham, 2017, p. 303).

This term also brings back the question that we raised earlier: if neoliberalism as a governmentality can manifest itself in various actually existing forms, then what political programmes are neoliberal, and what not?

Peck, Brenner and Theodore propose to replace the term of neoliberalism with ‘neoliberalisation’. They argue that neoliberalism manifests itself in the process of neoliberal transformation. Broadly:

Neoliberalisation refers to a frontal process of always-incomplete transformation, to a prevailing pattern and ethos of market-oriented, market-disciplinary, and market-making regulatory restructuring, one that is being realised, never more than partially, across a contested, uneven institutional landscape, in the context of heterogeneous, coevolving, and often counter-vailing political-economic conditions.

(Peck et al., 2018, p. 7)

From this perspective, we can conclude that what can be defined as ‘neoliberal projects’ must satisfy the following requirements: (i) the programme is constantly ongoing, and is guided by a strong discourse of market progress, (ii) it is realised through significant institutional changes, and (iii) all major and fundamental actions of the programme are contextually embedded and politically mediated, meaning it always speaks with, and responds to inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices and political struggles.

'Actually existing neoliberalism' has been considered as a useful conceptual tool to understand local neoliberal experiments. In recent years, a number of empirical examinations of processes of neoliberal transformations have emerged that draw upon this theory. They start with a focus on the emergent dynamics of Western European and North American patterns of neoliberalisation (Peck et al., 2018, p. 5), which are firstly illustrated by a series of articles included in a special volume of the journal *Antipode* which was published in July 2002 (Jones and Ward, 2002, Keil, 2002, Leitner and Sheppard, 2002, Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Later, scholars use this term to explain the various local adaptations of neoliberalism in post-developmental states and post-Communist zones from Latin America, South Asia and Africa to Eastern Europe and Asia (Pak et al., 2012, Schmalz and Ebenau, 2012, Hirt et al., 2013, Chelcea and Druță, 2016, Chattopadhyay, 2017). Those global cases not only show that neoliberalism is not some isolated experimentation that can only develop well in the normative capitalist environment, but also demonstrate that it is a highly flexible theory, and reveal how it adapts to different political and economic settings. All these cases have proved that neoliberalism is not a static, singular and rigidly imposed global experimentation. Rather, it is an ongoing project that is 'forged (and often forced) in dialectical tension with inherited social and institutional landscapes' (Peck et al., 2018, p. 5).

2.2.3 Neoliberalism in the Chinese Context: Is China Pursuing a Neoliberal Mode of Development?

Yet, among all the global cases, the case of China has always been considered controversial. After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese party-state firstly adopted the Soviet Union's method of economic planning as well as political organisation (Duckett, 2020, p. 6). However, Chinese society in the 1950s and 1960s was rather different from that of the Soviet Union, as it had a larger rural population and a bigger agricultural sector (*ibid*). In order to promote the country's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the regime under the leadership of Mao introduced a 'household registration' system, which tied people to their place of birth and limited their geographical mobility in terms of working and living (*ibid*). The household registration system gradually created an 'urban-rural divide' in Chinese society: during the 1950s to 1980s, urban residents worked in state enterprises or government-run collectives, benefiting from the job security and social welfare provided by their workplaces (Dixon, 1981, Dillon, 2015); in contrast, rural dwellers were only allowed to work and live in rural communes and were given more limited social welfare provisions (Dixon, 1981). Considering the significant role of the state and the lack of a free market in the country's economy and social life, it can be argued that China in the Mao era was far from following a neoliberal approach to development.

However, after Deng Xiaoping assumed power in late 1978, China gradually moved away from a Soviet-style state-planned economy. In 1978, Deng's government announced a

programme of economic reform. To supplement this, China was also opened up to foreign trade and investment. These efforts have been called Deng's 'Reform and Open-door' policies, which ranged from the dismantling of rural communes and the adoption of the household responsibility farming system, the introduction of labour markets and the layoff of workers in state enterprises, the rapid development of commodity markets and the privatisation of public enterprises, to reduced capital controls and increased free trade agreements, etc. (Duckett, 2020). Up until today, these measures have facilitated China's unique market economy, which, according to David Harvey (2005, p. 120), incorporates capitalist elements 'interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control'.

Scholars' ideas differ on whether China is pursuing a neoliberal mode of development or not. Some scholars conclude that China is neoliberal. They attribute China's fast development since 1980s to the growing market economy and the rise of private property (Coase and Wang, 2012, p. 156) since China's Reform and Opening-up. On the other hand, there are also voices that China is non-neoliberal. Scholars in this tradition argue that the role of the Chinese state is too big in every aspect; besides, there is no free law of market and not enough protection of private property in China; moreover, China's fast development is possible only because it resisted the neoliberal order which it is challenging now (Liew, 2005, p. 219, Horesh and Lim, 2017, Weber, 2018). From this perspective, the latter camp argues that China's development demonstrates a pathway that is completely different from the Washington Consensus (Silver and Arrighi, 2000).

The contrast between these two camps of scholars is caused by their different focuses: the former rests upon a conception of neoliberalism which prioritises the economic principle of free markets; the latter, in contrast, rests upon a conception which privileges the political principle of minimal states. From this perspective, the two viewpoints are not irreconcilable. They should be considered as complementary rather than conflicting, as they together reveal the features of China's unique transformation path since the late 1970s.

It is also in such a situation that the concept of 'actually existing neoliberalism' can be viewed as a solution to deal with the disagreements. Brenner, Peck and Theodore suggest that there exists a locally adapted version of neoliberalism in China because of 'certain actions of the Chinese communist party state' to reform social-democratic governments (2018, p. 4). Harvey (2005, pp. 120-151) shares this view, and creates the term, 'Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics', to acknowledge the adaptation of neoliberalism to China's specific political economy. Similar concepts also include 'path-dependent capitalism' or 'path-dependent neoliberalism' (see, for example, Wu, 2010, Young, 2013), 'state neoliberalism' (So and Chu, 2012) and 'state capitalism' (see, for example, Zhao, 2000, p. 21). These terms have all been coined to acknowledge that China's development embraces neoliberalism, albeit the path it takes is a 'quirky, yet ultimately recognisable variant of the normative mode of neoliberalism' (Peck and Zhang, 2013). These terms, which originate from the idea of 'actually existing neoliberalism', have a profound impact on current China studies, as they enable scholars in this field to join

the global discussions on neoliberalism and thus avoid criticism of ‘Chinese exceptionalism’ (Buckingham, 2017, p. 303).

There are, however, growing concerns over whether ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ and its descendants erase China’s deviations from neoliberalism. As Buckingham (2017, pp. 303-304) points out, these concepts serve as ‘little more than pretense to explain away local differentiation as part of a generalised patchwork of capitalist practices’.

Admittedly, when using terms or theories of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, scholars should avoid going towards neoliberal essentialism – labelling every programme as the local manifestation of neoliberalism. But scholars must remain open to discussions on how neoliberalism impacts the development of localities in specific contexts. The current use of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ in literature may be imperfect. But the imperfection in current studies does not reduce the explanatory value of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’. The take-home message of this term is: what matters is ‘more than curious local manifestations of global norms, but sets of theories and practices about the world that are fundamentally the products of local history and experience ... and impactful of lived daily reality’ (Goldstein, 2012, p. 305). Therefore, in this thesis, China’s development path will still be treated as an exemplification of local ‘actually existing neoliberalism’. Nevertheless, this study will try to move beyond the China is/is not neoliberal dichotomy, as it is obvious that whether it is /is not does not affect the fact that China is undergoing a process of

neoliberalisation. Therefore, this thesis will focus on how China embraces neoliberalism in its own way.

So and Chu (2012), among the supporters of ‘China has pursued a different mode of neoliberalism’, see a significant orientation change along China’s development route. They argue that while China in the late 1970s and 1980s carried out classic neoliberalism policies to speed up capital accumulation, since the turn of the 21st century, it has been moving towards a ‘state neoliberalism’ trajectory. This term essentially means that China’s development is not solely market-led; instead, its embrace of capitalism follows a state-led path. In their words,

The Chinese state neoliberalism has a strong state machinery with a high degree of state autonomy and a strong capacity to carry out its goals. It greatly intervenes in the economy through developmental planning, deficit investment, export promotion, and strategic industrialisation. It is also highly nationalistic and authoritarian, suppressing labour protests and limiting popular struggles.

(So and Chu, 2012)

So and Chu (*ibid.*) specifically point out that ‘whereas the pre-2006 Chinese state adopted a neoliberal orientation, it is now moving toward a more balanced one between economic growth and social development’. They also stress that the new policy of ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ is significant because it signals this change of orientation towards state neoliberalism, one that enables the state to play a more active role in moderating the negative impacts of marketisation.

If, as So and Chu suggest, the turn of the 21st century is the turning point of the Chinese state's governmentality, the regulatory modes of the pre- and post-2006 era need to be examined respectively and compared. In the current literature, the former has been talked of by a number of scholars. For instance, Harvey (2005, p. 122) examines China's peculiar path of entry into the global market from the late 1970s to 2005, and suggests that the unique 'Chinese characteristics' are 'a state-manipulated market economy that delivered spectacular economic growth' which is accompanied by 'environmental degradation, social inequality, and eventually something that looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power'. Similarly, Liew (2005) talks of China's path as a state-mediated one. In his view, China's communist and nationalist revolution, its geographical features which favour developmental-state-type industrialisation, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's post-Mao self-reinvention, have enabled China's loose hug with neoliberalism.

In these arguments, emphasis has been placed on how the Chinese state carries out top-down policies to institutionalise neoliberalism. However, little attention has been paid to how this process affects individuals' neoliberal subjectivity. Moreover, treatment of how the country's overall neoliberalism progress impacts other political, cultural and social processes (for instance, how neoliberalisation affects media practices) is also lacking.

Different from the pre-2006 period, there is not much literature that focuses on post-2006 era Chinese state governmentality. While realising that due attention should be paid to the emerging changes in this era, this thesis also argues that investigation into this era should focus more on the changed role of the state in the new social and political context, the state's new agenda, the new techniques it has deployed and the tensions between the state and society. These gaps will be responded to in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis.

2.3 Neoliberalism as an Analytical Device to Explain Media Reforms

The above section discusses what neoliberalism entails, and the context-embedded nature of neoliberalism. What can be inferred from these discussions is that neoliberalism is an ongoing process which has profound impacts on industrial practices and people's everyday lives. Scholars have noted that the media is one of the most noticeably impacted areas of neoliberalism, given that in a commercial media system (be it highly or partly commercialised): i) the ownership, control and operation of the media is deeply influenced by neoliberal assumptions; and ii) the media plays an important role in reproducing and legitimising neoliberalism (Phelan, 2018, p. 545). Thus, a critical media studies perspective on neoliberalism can usually offer rich insights into the wider literature of social change. In this thesis, which seeks to do just that, it will become clear that society's neoliberal transformation is not isolated from media processes (as well as other political, economic and cultural processes). The importance of revealing such associations lies in the fact that the more is known about how neoliberal transformation process looks, feels

and sounds when it intersects with other logics and practices, the more confidence we can have in making the most use of it to serve the public.

In current critical media studies, it is difficult to talk about the changes that have happened in the global media landscape in the past few decades without mentioning neoliberalism. However, neoliberalism has been used in a quite broad-brushstrokes sense. Studies either approach it from political-economic pathways and conceptualise it as a free market ideology, or use it from cultural studies perspectives and emphasise its social and cultural dimensions. However, both of these approaches just give general narratives on how media spaces have been reshaped by market logics. As Phelan (2018, p. 539) notices, 'instead of being a focal point of intensive theorisation, neoliberalism has been most commonly deployed as a narrative and framing device – to cue a pessimistic story of how media and communication systems and cultures have changed since the 1970s and 1980s'. So how to use this term to analyse media reform in a more insightful way becomes imperative.

This thesis argues that beyond the descriptive dimension, the term neoliberalism also implies an analytical dimension. To realise its analytical potential in full, the way the term of neoliberalism is deployed in media studies needs to be refined. Therefore, based on the discussions of the problems with the current status of 'neoliberalism' in media

scholarship, this section will conclude by reflecting on how the research design of future media studies can be improved.

2.3.1 The Political Economy Approach: Neoliberalism as a ‘Free Market’ Ideology

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, in the broad political economy literature, neoliberalism is conceptualised as the ideology of capitalism at the latest developmental stage. Based on this perception, media scholars following this approach tend to understand the centrepiece of neoliberal media policies as ‘a call for commercial media and communication markets to be deregulated’ (McChesney, 2001, p. 2). Bearing this understanding in mind, political-economy-approach media studies have identified three key media areas where they find the neoliberalism ideology has made a difference, namely, ‘media ownership and regulation’, ‘media production’, and ‘media contents’ (Phelan, 2018, pp. 541-542).

The first key area that has been reshaped by neoliberalism is the ownership and regulation of media institutions. According to Pickard (2007, p. 121), the global neoliberalism trend has enacted privatisation-, deregulation-, liberalisation- and globalisation-oriented transformations within each individual state. The consequences of these transformations include the privatisation of publicly owned media institutions and the rise of private systems of media control (Herman and McChesney, 1997, p. 6, Dawes, 2017); the emergence of transnational media conglomerates (Zielke, 2010, pp. 20-22); reduced

restrictions on foreign and cross-media ownership (Phelan, 2018, p. 541); etc. According to these authors, these neoliberal policies have caused a shift of power in the global media system – as McChesney claims, ‘whereas previous media systems were primarily national, in the past few years a global commercial media market has emerged’ (McChesney, 2001, p. 2). In this sense, ‘neoliberalism’ in these studies is deployed to depict how free-market ideas have reconfigured the institutional structure of media systems in and across individual states.

The second area, media production, also has been a focus of political economy studies. If in the past, media production has followed a series of strict professional norms, then in the neoliberal age, media professionals tend to produce content increasingly based on commercial considerations (see, for example, Fenton, 2011). Typically, Lin (2016b) coined the term ‘neoliberal journalism’ to highlight how journalists’ production under neoliberalism always follows a market-oriented rationality; she argues that this results in limited journalist autonomy, unfulfilled public service, a compromised fourth estate, restricted resistance of journalists and a blurred line between news and advertisements. Seen from this perspective, the term ‘neoliberalism’ can be used to capture the tensions that free-market ideas creates between a profit-driven industry and the morally-driven media professionalism norms.

Lastly, neoliberal cultures also have influenced the media content disseminated in media spaces. A number of scholars have noticed that, whereas informative media genres dominated media spaces in the pre-neoliberal era, the neoliberal era saw the expansion of entertaining forms of content in media (Thussu, 2007, Ouellette and Hay, 2008, Murray and Ouellette, 2009). Besides this, although the neoliberal era provides audiences with a wider array of media content to choose from, since media tend to cater to the tastes of affluent audiences, the current media landscape is increasingly stratified (Phelan, 2018, p. 542). In these studies, neoliberalism is deployed to reveal the influences that free-market ideas and policies have on media products.

The above discussions thus have presented an overview of how the political economy approach of media studies deploys the term neoliberalism. As can be concluded from these discussions, a central function of this term in these studies is to critique; that is, scholars seek to reveal the emergent changes in media systems in order to criticise how the neoliberal development of media privileges corporate interests. While this critical position enables studies to capture the multiple types of tensions the neoliberal ideology creates in the media industry, these studies seem to treat ‘neoliberalism’ as a unitary phenomenon. Thus, this usage fails to highlight the context-embedded nature of neoliberalism itself. Moreover, equating neoliberalism to the ‘free-market’ ideology overemphasises the role of the state in media reforms. Although neoliberalism requires a minimal state, the state still needs to play its role (taking proper measures to guarantee a functioning free market). Reducing neoliberalism to the free-market ideology risks

'obscuring the role of the state in serving the material and propaganda interests of capitalists' (Garland and Harper, 2012, p. 413).

2.3.2 The Cultural Studies Perspective: Ideology Critique of Neoliberalism

The other approach to using 'neoliberalism' in critical media studies can be found in cultural studies. Stuart Hall's understanding of neoliberalism is one of the most influential heritages of British cultural studies. In a study on Thatcherism, Hall (1988) argues that classic Marxism theory could not explain why Thatcherism successfully generated a level of popular support that disrupted the notion of the working class as the potential agents of a radical political consciousness. Therefore, he places great emphasis on journalists' professional ideologies in enabling Thatcherism's political success, and on the role of media representations in producing an elite-driven social consensus (Phelan, 2018, p. 543).

This work also echoes many of Hall's other works on media and ideology. For instance, in 1982, Hall published an article entitled 'The Rediscovery of Ideology: The Return of the "Repressed" in Media Studies'. In this article, Hall firstly focuses on the role of ideology in the media production process, arguing that the media do not merely reflect and sustain the consensus, but also 'produce consensus and manufacture consent' (1982, p. 86). He contends that media can only survive legitimately by 'operating within, the general boundaries or framework of "what everyone agrees to"' (*ibid*, p. 87). Moreover, Hall also

points out that the media also attempt to ‘shape up the consensus’ (*ibid.*). In doing so, Hall makes it clear that media perform dialectical functions – ‘shaping the consensus while reflecting it’ (*ibid.*). In addition to media production, Hall also examines the role of ideology in media reception, saying that ‘the same set of signifiers could be variously accented’ (*ibid*, p. 73), because ‘every culture has its own forms of thinking that provide its members with the taken-for-granted elements of their practical knowledge’ (*ibid.*, p. 77).

The two works of Hall exemplify the basic stance of the cultural studies approach on media practices: overall, media presentations need to be taken seriously, as they are directly influenced by media practitioners, and they themselves have profound implications for society. The influence of media professionals on media presentations can be observed in a number of production processes, like when selecting the communication topics and themes, when choosing team members, when constructing the storyline, as well as when deciding the stylistic features for the contents, etc.

After Hall, critical cultural studies started to examine the role of different mediated practices in the production of neoliberal subjectivities. Terms like ideology, subjectivity, representation, discourse and interpellation are common in these studies. They focus on how the politics of media representation influenced the production of a series of neoliberal discourses, so critical discourse analysis method became popular in current cultural studies. For instance, Phelan’s (2014) work explores the protean feature of neoliberal

formations and the resonances between a ‘third way neoliberalism’ that disavows the notion of a market/state antagonism and a ‘journalistic habitus’ that is enacted as anti-ideological.

From the previous discussion, it can be concluded that critical media studies that follow the cultural studies approach use neoliberalism as a term to show that neoliberalisation is a complex process which involves discursive formation. Although this conceptualisation enables cultural studies to examine neoliberal affect, neoliberal subjectivities and neoliberal governmentality, it shares the flaw of the former approach. As Grossberg (2010, p. 2) points out, tagging all contemporary media processes with the term of neoliberalism ‘can produce a totalising form of analysis, which fails to grasp the dynamics of the particular social context’.

2.3.3 How to better Use ‘Neoliberalism’ to Develop Analysis in Critical Media Studies

In viewing the earlier discussions in this section, it becomes clear that conceptualising neoliberalism as a unitary concept or structure which acts on different social and media practices has major flaws. This conceptualisation can serve to name, identify, describe or critique changes happened in the media system since the 1970s. However, it neglects the idea that neoliberalism is differently articulated in local contexts. Therefore, the term neoliberalism can be used in a better way. It needs to be deployed not just as a device to name and describe. Rather, it can guide scholars towards better analysis.

So how can better analysis be achieved, and what does this mean to the research design of critical media studies? Phelan (2018, pp. 545-547) gives five suggestions. First, instead of treating neoliberalism as a static type definition or concept, media scholars should focus on processes of neoliberalisation. Second, media scholars need to be aware that neoliberalism as a ‘free-market’ ideology does not always oppose the state. Thirdly, media scholars need to develop more theoretically differentiated analyses of neoliberalism through engagement with work in other fields. Fourth, scholars need to acknowledge the political implications of the analyses, in ways that go beyond whether a process is/is not a neoliberal frame and explore what might constitute a substantive alternative to neoliberalism. Finally, more comparative studies of how neoliberal logics structure media culture in different contexts are needed.

This encourages scholars to consider how the research design of future critical media studies can be improved. This research has two suggestions. Firstly, the role of the state in media’s neoliberal transformation deserves more attention. Secondly, future research can move beyond the political economy/cultural studies debate, and try to reconcile the two approaches. By combining the perspectives of the two approaches, research can avoid political economy studies’ common mistake – trapped in economic essentialism, determinism, functionalism and reductionism and a static view of neoliberalism as a free-market ideology. An integration of the two approaches will also enable research to focus on the full and ongoing process of a media practice, rather than only paying attention to the political and economic aspect or the ideology articulation perspective of analysis.

In viewing of the literature, this study suggests that, when using neoliberalism to examine the TV drama industry, the three major areas that the two approaches cover can be used to enrich the analytical dimensions of the concept of neoliberalism. These three areas are the media ownership and regulation mode, the professional routine in media production and circulation and the reception by the audience. In doing so, the analysis could combine the perspectives of the political economy approach and the cultural studies approach. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, these analytical dimensions will be explored in detail.

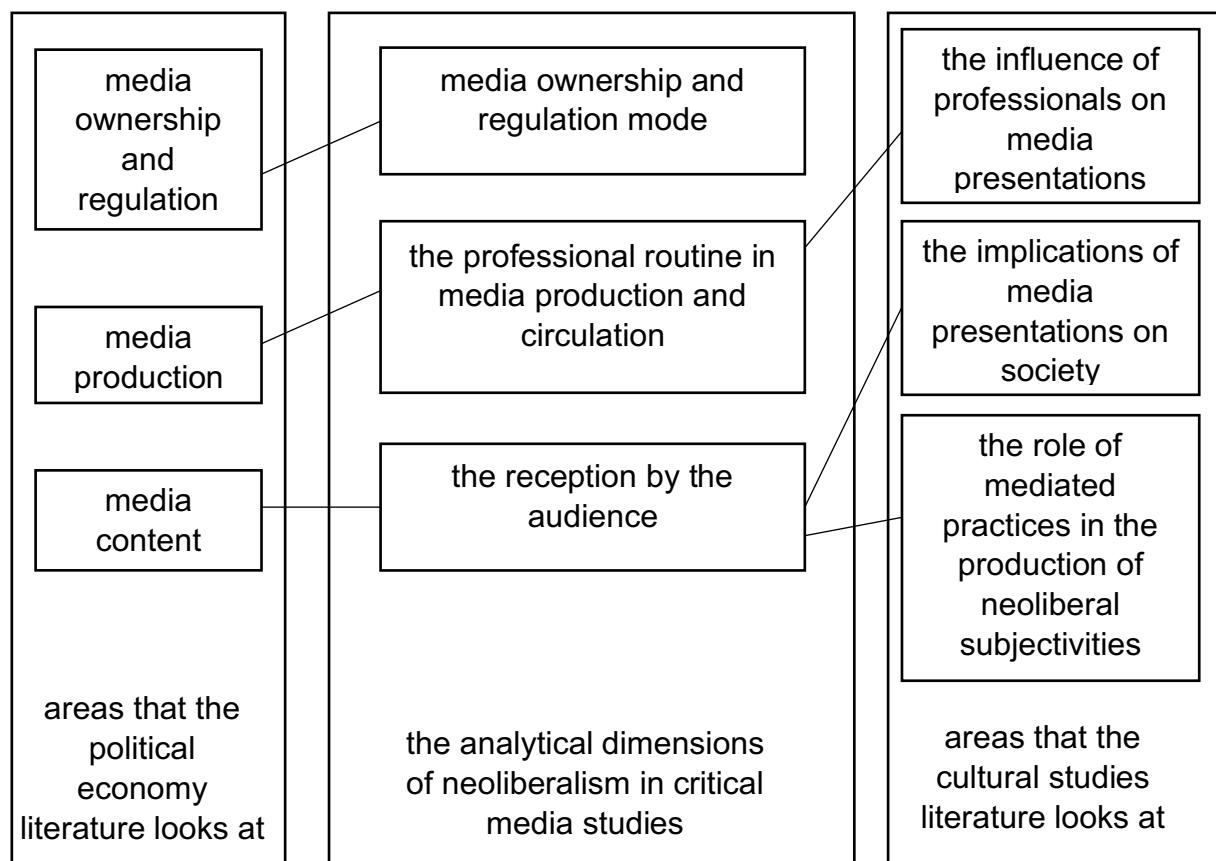


Figure 1 The Analytical Dimensions of Neoliberalism in Critical Media Studies

2.4 Understanding the Chinese Neoliberal Project from a Communication Perspective

As has become clear, the neoliberal transformation of a country's media landscape does not simply indicate fundamental changes in the media themselves. It also reflects the political and economic assumptions that have produced it; moreover, it plays a key role in reproducing and entrenching the neoliberal values in social culture. Whilst current neoliberalism studies lack an understanding of a national and policy/programme context (as discussed in the first section of this chapter), a neoliberal-transformation-of-media perspective can offer a more specific approach for examining the production and reproduction of 'actually existing neoliberalism' unique in each locality.

As discussed earlier, since 1978, China has embraced neoliberalism in its own way. A number of media scholars have pointed out that the dynamics of change in China's mass media system display characteristics unique to Chinese society and history (also see in Zhao, 1998, 2000, 2008, Winfield and Peng, 2005, Huang, 2007b, Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011). These scholars tend to interpret the nature of China's media transformation since the Reform and Opening-up (since 1978) as consequences of the changing state-market relationship in systems of communications. Zhao Yuezhi (2000, p. 21), in particular, points to the mutually constitutive yet unequal relationship between the state and the market for researching China's media reform,

What emerges is a multifaceted, although by no means symmetrical, relationship, in which the state and the market are mutually

constitutive of each other and ‘simultaneously reinforcing and undermining each other’[...] At this historical juncture, the commercialised Chinese press is fully integrated into the project of state capitalism.

Key to Zhao’s arguments is the leading status of the state in Chinese media’s neoliberal transformation. However, in the global neoliberalism scholarship, the role of the state during the neoliberalisation process has always been a controversial topic. Fundamentally, one of the most significant assumptions that the neoliberalism ideology is founded on is free-market rationality (Peck et al., 2018, p. 6, also see Thorsen, 2010). This concept often bears the utopian implication of a minimal state, which advocates removing state constraints on the economy so as to allow free-market competition to serve the public interest to the best degree. However, in recent years, a growing number of scholars have realised that minimalising the state does not equate diminishing the state’s presence in the economy (Yeung, 2000, Gray, 2010, Thorsen, 2010, Weiss, 2012, Davies, 2018, Peck et al., 2018); the key information of neoliberals’ idea of the ‘minimal state’, as Peck, Brenner and Theodore point out, is to let the state carry out fewer but more effective measures to ‘impose versions of market rule, to discipline unruly subjects – and then to manage the ensuing contradictions, environmental externalities, and social fallout’ (2018, p. 6). Globally, the political consequence of neoliberal projects over the past few decades has also proved that the free market needs the state’s power of enforcement as well as its protection (Hildyard, 1997, p. 14 in Chapter 1). In this regard, the problem demanding attention is no longer whether the state’s presence in economy is acceptable or not, but in what ways and for what purposes the state operates.

From this point of view, whether a political project can or cannot be defined as neoliberal depends on what motives the policy-makers have, as well as how the project is carried out. In the context of the Chinese media's market-oriented reform, the neoliberal stance of the Chinese state is evident in the series of strategies it has adopted to entrench the market mechanisms. Therefore, in the following section, the role the Chinese state plays in the media reform process will be first addressed, in order to explain why these state actions over systems of communications can be categorised as neoliberalism. The section will then move to neoliberalisation as a mediated process and the role the TV dramas play in this course. Chinese TV dramas are paid particular attention in this research, because they connect intellectual (especially media elites') thinking, government agenda, social change and social reality (Cai, 2017, p. 2). More importantly, TV dramas are one of the most popular forms of recreational media in China. Their large viewership includes the peasants, a group that must be carefully managed to develop China's neoliberalism. As indicated in Chapter 1, the Chinese state is trying to launch a neoliberal transformation in its countryside. The formation of this agenda leads to the re-consideration of how effectively the state can mobilise the peasants, which ultimately concerns how satisfied the peasants are with the communist state. After reviewing the above questions, finally, this section concludes by discussing how TV dramas have connected neoliberalism and the peasant identity.

2.4.1 The Role of the State in China's Market-Oriented Media Reform

The Chinese media system is undergoing a structural transformation. It has been widely acknowledged that this transformation started in 1978 as part of China's overall Reform and Opening-up project (Hong and Cuthbert, 1991, Chu, 1994, Zhao, 1998, 2000, Li, 2000, Huang, 2007b, Shao et al., 2016). Scholars believe that the development of the Chinese media before 1978 followed a 'rigid totalitarian state control mode' (Huang, 2007a, p. 405), which featured the state ownership of the media and the media's absolute obedience to central instructions (Hong and Cuthbert, 1991, Lynch, 1999). Tremendous changes have taken place during the past four decades. Nowadays, the Chinese media landscape displays a higher marketisation level. Chinese media have now gained more autonomy from the state in terms of ownership, administration and business decisions. Thus, in contrast to the pre-1978 state monopoly model, a number of scholars have now begun to characterise the Chinese media system as one shaped by double forces - the capitalist market and the Chinese communist state (Lull, 1991, Chu, 1994, Hong, 1998b, Zhao, 1998, 2000, 2008).

However, such a transformation is by no means achieved in one step. Shao, Lu and Hao (2016, pp. 29-31) identify three stages via which the Chinese state has pushed forward media marketisation. They state that the first stage, stretching from 1978 to the 1990s, featured the state's accommodation of the media's commercial activities (i.e., advertisements and distribution revenues); this was followed by the second stage, the

formation of media conglomerates under the guidance of the state from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, and the third stage, capital operations of media institutions (i.e., strategically merging or purchasing other companies to get listed on the stock market) under the state's encouragement since the 21st century. They thus suggest that China's media reform is a state initiative to deregulate and commercialise the media.

If, as Shao and his colleagues suggest, Chinese media reform is being pushed forward by the state, then it is worth exploring what exactly the state has done to promote this transformation. Stockman and Gallapher (2011b, p. 440) summarise that the active role of the state in incorporating market-based media forms and practices manifests in three aspects: privatising media ownership, deregulating and re-regulating media management and diversifying media financing. Basically, all the policies that the state has released during China's media transformation can be put into one of these three categories.

Stockman and Gallapher's view has been supported by a number of case studies. For instance, Hu (2003) and Huang (2007b) give information on changes in media ownership since China joined the WTO, saying that although the state refuses to give up ownership of the media, it now allows foreign/private capital to hold a direct, although minority (less than 49%), stake in media institutions in order to utilise their funds. In this way, the state partially transfers state ownership to the private sector. As for the management of media, Zhao (2004, p. 192, also see in Zhao, 2000) points out that the state actively closed down

small or unqualified media, merged the rest and established regional media conglomerates in order to help major media institutions achieve financial independence; despite the economic deregulation effects, the conglomeration meanwhile enabled the party-state to politically consolidate its control over regional communication. Another study has pointed out that as the state starts to shift part of its authority over the media to lower levels in the communication hierarchy, 'the party-state's dominant control over media has been deconstructed among lower administrative levels of government' (Jingrong, 2010, p. 937) via local 'reporting bans, propaganda instructions, censorship and post-coverage censorship'. In most cases, localities do so for the purpose of protecting local business giants' interests, which often concerns the local economy or party officials' own interests (p. 934). Moreover, In terms of financing, a number of scholars have pointed out that it is the state that encourages the media to finance themselves by finding new sources of funding (i.e., advertising and distribution revenue, income from market investments, etc.) (Chu, 1994, Hong, 1998b, Zhao, 2000, Shao et al., 2016).

These authors have proved that market mechanisms, although usually challenging the state's authority, were firstly introduced by the state to the Chinese media sector, and that the state has released proper measures to guarantee the normal functioning of these mechanisms. If, according to Hildyard (1997, p. chapter 1), the characteristic of a neoliberal state is it transfers resources and power away from public sectors to private ones via processes of privatisation, deregulation/reregulation, the reallocation of public subsidies to private institutions and the pooling of national/regional resources to form new

trading blocks, what the Chinese state has done in the media transformation process accurately demonstrates these neoliberal features.

As has been made clear, the Chinese media's market-oriented reform since 1978 is a state initiative. However, the question emerges as to why such changes in the media sector are necessary for the Chinese state. Shao, Lu and Hao (2016, p. 28) hold that reform in the Chinese media is by nature driven by the financial pressures of the government – the funding-provider of almost all Chinese media before the reform. They state that the primary aim of the state is to let the media 'transform itself from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one' (p. 29). Or, as Zhao (2000, p. 6) puts it, the state wants to relieve its financial burdens and promote the press (as well as other media sectors) 'as a new point of economic growth'. So during the 1980s-1990s, although the Chinese media remained in the state sector in terms of ownership, they began to operate in a more commercialised way. In an article discussing China's post-WTO media policies, Huang (2007b) names Chinese media's development approach in the 1980s-1990s a 'market socialist model'. She states that this model faces crisis in the post-WTO era, as it leads to the Chinese media's poor market performance, capital shortage and low professional standards compared with global media giants. She particularly notices that the Chinese state is trying new strategies to absorb more foreign/private capital. Like these authors have suggested, China's media reform is essentially an economic one. The political part of the media reform – keeping the media away from political or corporate biases – has not been fundamentally changed (Shao et al., 2016, p. 28). It most noticeably

serves the state's purpose to commercialise the industry, and gives rise to competition as well as privatisation in the media field. From this point of view, the primary aim of the Chinese state in China's media reform very much accords with the motives of a neoliberal state – to entrench and protect market rules.

Wu (1994) and Huang (2007b, p. 423) use the word -'kite-flying strategy' to address how the Chinese state manages its relationship with the media in the ongoing neoliberal transformation process. Accordingly, the state cannot hold the control line too tight, as that will make the media kite lose the chance to catch the wind of the global media market; instead, they must fly it at a 'higher but controllable height' to maximise the benefits it can bring and avoid possible risks. However, all the authors mentioned above tend to discuss these strategies in general terms and do not go into detail. In addition, their work reflects little on how these techniques affect the media content, and how different audiences interpret this content. The rest of this section, therefore, addresses these issues by discussing literature on the role of TV dramas in mediating China's neoliberalisation process and how this process may be related to the negotiation of peasant identities.

2.4.2 Neoliberalism and the Chinese TV Drama Industry

As discussed in the second section of this chapter, in this research, neoliberalisation will be treated as a 'mediated' process; that is, a phenomenon that is ontologically based on media logics and processes. Here I adopt Phelan's conceptualisation of 'media' as any

institutions, subjects or anything that can play an ‘in-between’ or ‘relational’ role (p. 547). In this sense, the process of neoliberalisation can be interpreted as being ‘mediated’ for two reasons. First, neoliberalism does not exist as an abstract set of propositions; instead, as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, it intersects with other social processes, and exists as an omnipresent hegemony which operates in every social institution, process and practice. Most typically, current communication media are infiltrated by these neoliberal assumptions. Although Phelan’s conceptualisation of media is a broad range category, this research only focuses on communication media as a typical case, because of ‘the extent to which different ideological discourses and sensibilities are part of the everyday texture of (communication) media cultures’ (Phelan, 2018, p. 547). Second, communication media in turn play an important role in the formulation, construction and entrenchment of the neoliberal logics in our lives. They do not just reproduce and legitimate neoliberalism, but also nurture and naturalise proponents of identity that are in accordance with neoliberal values.

The TV drama industry has taken a special role in the Chinese media’s neoliberal transformation process, because TV dramas are a dominant form of recreational media in China, so their production, circulation and popular consumption sheds light on the ‘interplay of the Chinese state, capital and popular aspirations in the restructuring of Chinese media and communication industries’ (Yu, 2011, p. 33). Neoliberal assumptions are evident especially in reality-topic TV dramas because, on the one hand, they portray realistic social issues in contemporary China, and on the other hand, they are the products

of China's neoliberal developmentalism (p. 34). The literature thus has looked in particular at two topics: i) how China's TV drama industry has been reshaped by neoliberal developmentalism; and ii) how the reality-topic TV dramas represent neoliberalism-related social topics (which will be discussed in the next sub-section).

Literature and media coverage of the reform of China's TV drama industry is much less frequent than that focusing on the reform of the TV industry as a whole. Nevertheless, scholars have focused on the changing relationship between TV dramas, the state and the market, based on the assumption that the TV drama industry, like all other sectors of China's mass media, is groping for a fine balance between the market line and the party-state line (Li, 2000, Zhao, 2004, Zhao and Guo, 2005). In the mainstream view, a commercialised market has been developing in China's TV drama sector over recent decades (Yin, 2002). During this process, the role of TV dramas has changed from a 'propaganda tool', narrative of 'social context' or of 'Chinese pedagogy, propaganda practices, and literature traditions' (Keane, 2005b, p. 84), to one of the growing 'cultural industries', as Yin (2002, p. 29) and Donald and Keane (2002, pp. 11-12) suggest. This transformation indicates that the TV drama industry is part of China's whole media neoliberal transformation process (and also part of China's overall economic reform process), as the industry begins to display an 'increasing prominence of market relations and the increasing penetration of capitalist logic' (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 535). While China's TV dramas increasingly display neoliberal features and their impact keeps growing, understanding how exactly the TV drama industry has been reformed is crucial,

as changes in industrial structure cause differences in the way TV drama professionals work, and it is these differences that reveal where neoliberal logics exist as well as how they take effect.

'Chanye Hua' (industrialisation, 产业化) thus becomes a key concept to understand the reform in China's TV drama industry. This term has been quoted in a number of government documents to address the ongoing market-oriented television reform. As Guo (2004, p. 5) points out, this concept essentially means commercialising TV services, and what it calls for is 'commercialised capitalism'. According to her, this discourse pushes 'not only the scale of economy, but also the Chinese media's progress towards market logic, commercial practice and – eventually – the capitalist system'.

But strangely enough, there are a number of similar, and more commonly used, words to address the same issue, i.e., commercialisation, marketisation, etc. It leaves one pondering why the Chinese authorities choose 'Chanye Hua' to describe this process. The most original reason, according to the authors who first put forward this term in academic work, is that 'Chanye Hua' indicates a process which is purely cultural and economic and carries less-sharp political implications (Huang and Ding 2001 cited in Guo, 2004, p. 11). To put it in more straightforward, terms like commercialisation usually have an implication of 'deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation', tags that the Chinese state is reluctant to be related to (though it actually does so); as a contrast, industrialisation tends to

emphasise less ‘the private ownership and liberalised operation’ of television (Xu, 2013, p. 373).

However, the English translation of this term reminds people of the Frankfurt School’s famous concept, ‘culture industry’, which is blamed for having manufactured the vulgar and commercial mass culture in capitalist society. Although the Chinese government deliberately distinguishes ‘Wenhua Changye’ (the Chinese translation of culture industries in plural form, 文化产业) from ‘Wenhua Gongye’ (the Chinese translation of culture industry in singular form, 文化工业) out of an aim of avoiding any associations with capitalism (Liu and Huang, 2013), ironically, Donald and Keane (2002, p. 10) suggest that industrialisation unavoidably involves ‘employing characteristic modes of production and circulation of cultural products’, so the English translation of the term ‘Chanye Hua’, ‘industrialisation’, essentially still bears implications of a capitalism critique. What matters in this debate, however, is not whether ‘Chanye Hua’ can be used to address Chinese media reform or not, but the political meanings this term has. ‘Chanye’, as a term, emphasises the profit-making nature of TV and Chinese media, and the adoption of this term instead of others highlights that the nature of China’s TV commercialisation follows a state-projected path, despite the fact that the Chinese media transformation process presents many capitalist features commonly seen in classic free-market societies.

A number of scholars point out that the ‘Chanye Hua’ reform of the Chinese television drama industry is a gradual, stage-by-stage process (Zhao and Guo, 2005, Yin, 2002, Keane, 2005b, Zhao, 2008, pp. 195-244). They hold that after the Reform and Opening-up started, China’s TV dramas first went through a transitional stage between 1978 to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the role of TV dramas began to transform from political propaganda instruments to commercial goods. As Guo and Zhao (2005a, p. 524) explicitly indicate, at this stage, television’s acceptance of advertising since 1979 and ‘the marketised provision of TV dramas’ were the two most important policies introduced for the commercialisation of the drama industry.

The first policy, according to them, marks the fact that TV programmes, dramas included, changed from state-subsidised propaganda tools to audience-oriented mass media formats. Or, as Yong (2000, p. 631) puts it, television ‘content production has shifted from the Party-centered orientation to the audience-centered orientation’.

The latter change has manifested itself in multiple ways. For instance, state-owned studios started to charge for the content they used to provide to TV stations for free, which pushed TV stations to develop content independently. In another instance, the emergence of a foreign-TV-programme trading market (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 524) also proves that the Chinese TV drama industry has increasingly embraced the capitalist market. These measures, as indicated by Zhao and Wu (2014, p. 29), greatly enhanced the quantity of

quality of Chinese TV dramas, pushed the TV drama elites to expand the subjects that TV dramas can touch upon, and created a market structure where state and private institutions and foreign capital compete with each other. Nowadays, state, non-state and foreign-invested institutions still coexist in the drama market. But in the existing literature, there is a lack of research on how differently these types of production companies operate.

The above discussions have confirmed the fact that the neoliberalisation process has caused structural changes in China's TV drama industry. But as shown clearly in previous discussions, this fact leads to a series of follow-up questions: most typically, how these structural reforms have changed the content of TV dramas, how these dramas affect Chinese audiences, as well as how the role of these dramas in consolidating the neoliberal order in Chinese society can be analysed and explained, deserve more attention.

2.4.3 Neoliberalism and TV Drama Depictions

It has been noticed that the neoliberalisation reform in China's TV drama industry has led to some changes in drama depictions. Xu (2013, p. 375) states that with the implementation of the STVPB policy, 'the content creation of independent TV production companies has thus become more subjective to official ideological requirements due to their disadvantaged position'. As a consequence, topics that are most unlikely to be refused by the censors have become more and more popular within independent production companies. Depending on which levels of government regulators carry out the

censorship and the political background during the time period when the censorship takes place (i.e., censorship will be harsher on political and modern history topics when the Chinese National People's Congress is taking place), what TV drama topics are considered risky will differ. However, as the Chinese drama TV industry is characterised by a unique form of 'state monopoly capitalism' – commercialised operations organised into a hierarchical structure of administrative monopoly (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 527) – TV programmes largely abide by the state's will. So generally, TV dramas will not have production risks as long as their depictions follow the central state's political agenda.

In such a context, a number of scholars have noted that 'Socialist Mainstream Melody' dramas have become a popular topic preferred by independent TV production companies (Yin, 2002, p. 131, Keane, 2005b, Xu, 2013, Cai, 2016a, Hong and Xu, 2018, p. 309). 'Socialist Mainstream Melody' (shehuizhuyi zhuxuanlv, 社会主义主旋律) has been used by the Chinese government to describe cultural products that promote 'nationalism, collectivism and socialism' (Hong and Xu, 2018, p. 309). Different from traditional socialist propagandist TV dramas, Socialist Mainstream Melody dramas in the neoliberal age have combined the state's ideological persuasion with 'Hollywoodised' expressive techniques (Ma, 2014). The rise of these dramas, according to these authors, is a manifestation that China's media neoliberalisation process has imposed the state's content preferences on independent commercial producers.

Besides the rise of ‘Socialist Mainstream Melody’ dramas, neoliberalism has also created another change in TV drama narratives. That is, a growing number of them have turned urban-centric. As TV dramas have become profit-seeking commodities, they increasingly cater to the taste of affluent urban audiences, and grow interest in portraying issues in urban life (Zhao and Wu, 2014, p. 30). Many realistic dramas touch upon sensitive social topics which are ‘wrapped up in the setting of a consumerist metropolis’ (Yu, 2011, p. 314), i.e., females, relationships, houses, and careers, etc. Current literature and reports have noticed the emergence of these urban realistic dramas. For instance, Hung (2011, p. 174) analyses the political economy background of the drama *Dwelling Narrowness*, and argues that this drama ‘presents an unwholesome blend of materialistic and existential queries about life, and such queries in turn afford insights into the more blurry motives behind the drama’s attempt to display the socioeconomic conditions of urban China and their relation to people’s social and moral values’. However, these scholars do not make clear why rural life has not been portrayed in the same way, and the relationship between the drama’s realistic portrayal and audiences’ interpretations.

2.4.4 Neoliberalism and the Chinese Peasant Identity

The peasants are one of the most crucial social groups for China’s neoliberalisation. Current literature reveals that China’s neoliberal development has had profound influences on this giant population. Most obviously, China’s rapid industrialisation and urbanisation processes have created one of the world’s largest migrations. In 2017, an

estimated 137.1 million people from the country's rural areas migrated to cities for jobs (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In addition, it has been estimated that these processes have also created about 2.5-3.5 million landless peasants across the country (Zhou et al., 2015, p. 288). Evidence has also revealed that China's rural urbanisation process has not well satisfied peasants' needs, as many former peasants refuse to live the urban lifestyle (Zhou and Wang, 2015). The uneven development of neoliberalism within China has also created rich-poor gaps, not only between China's city and the countryside sectors, but also within the country's vast countryside sector (Lim, 2014).

Despite their new and various formats of encounter with neoliberalism, Chinese peasants have been engaged in negotiating and contesting different positions in this neoliberal development process. Within the context of China's neoliberal development, how peasants position themselves in response to the state's neoliberal development policies can be made sense of, I suggest, by the concept of the 'peasant identity'. In the current China studies literature, scholars have used this term to describe people with rural hukou (anyone born in a legally defined rural area) (Zeuthen and Griffiths, 2011), or the processes of feeling 'from/having ties to the countryside' (Ngai, 1999, p. 2, Silverstein and Cong, 2013), feeling 'anxiety and depression activated by the conflict between inputs from the urban environment and peasants' expectation' (Siu, 2017), or 'persisting in rural patterns of provincial thought and behavior' (Frenkel and Yu, 2015). In this study, I combine these approaches and define the 'Chinese peasant identity' as the practices and

processes of ‘identifying with the political status, interests, allegiances, rights, lifestyles and cultures of people born in the countryside’.

The construction of various collective identities through TV dramas has been studied in depth. However, it is only in recent years that the TV dramas’ role in constructing collective identities has been explored in the context of China’s neoliberalisation process. Existing studies have discussed the representation of some social groups that have emerged accompanying China’s neoliberal development process, such as rural-to-city migrant workers, female migrant workers, maids, modern women, entrepreneurs, etc. Of these studies, some establish a link between TV drama discourses and elements of the Chinese peasant identity. For instance, Wanning Sun studies three drama serials which focus on stories of maids. She points out that the TV narrative of the maid ‘not only articulates an adjusted subject position of the “national women”, but also presents a powerful discursive space in which to educate national subjects and turn them into useful citizens’ (Sun, 2008, p. 97). This educational role of the depictions of the maids’ good personal traits in TV dramas highlights the potential of popular media in promoting strategic social change.

TV dramas’ depictions of the lifestyle of peasants can cause rural audiences’ behavioural changes in reality. In some developing countries, there are cases in which TV dramas are used to help solve common problems faced by peasants, such as poverty, over-population, illiteracy, inequality, etc. In communication studies, scholars usually use the term

'development communication'² to address these practices. This concept commonly refers to the application of communication strategies in developing countries for the aim of promoting social and economic progress (Waisbord, 2001, p. 1). However, this study argues that the normative theories and methodologies related to development communication cannot explain the rich dynamics in the case of the Chinese New Countryside TV dramas. The reason is that firstly, the early Dominant Paradigm³ articulated by Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and others assumes the fundamental aim of development to be individuals changing traditional lifestyles to imitate ways in North American and West European countries (see, for example, Lerner, 1958, MacClelland, 1961, Hagen, 1962). It only cares about underdeveloped areas that can be incorporated into the capitalist economic system, reflects 'a bias towards a Eurocentric vision of development' (Howard, 1994, p. 189), and has always been a postcolonial theory full of Western scholars' imagination of the world (Hu and Chai, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, it cannot be applied to social promotion projects launched by indigenous development agents.

² 'Development Communication' research addresses communication-based interventions for the implementation of social and economic improvement ideology. This term originally arose as a tool to justify the West's project of developing the Third World after World War II. In the 1950s, Development Communication was recognised as an academic discipline under the effort of scholars such as Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm and Everett Rogers. Over decades, the study of Development Communication has developed into several major paradigms. It has evolved from a focus on West-sponsored projects (the Dominant Paradigm) towards an emphasis on indigenous models (the Dependency Paradigm), and has also been informed by newer approaches such as participatory communication and public space (the Participatory Paradigm).

³ The Dominant Paradigm assumes that mass media has direct and powerful effects to promote national development goals. Its basic assumption is that underdevelopment is caused by a lack of information so it regards providing individuals with new information as the primary purpose of development communication projects. The diffusion model stresses a process of one-way, top-down information dissemination. Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations* is typical research in this approach.

Secondly, the Dependency Paradigm⁴ of development communication focuses on the global structure within which developing countries work, situating power in the hands of wealthier nations (Wilkins, 2000). It is concerned with the political struggle of developing countries seeking independence from the superpowers, emphasising the process of gaining political, economic and cultural self-determination within the international community of nations (Servaes, 2008, p. 17). Although this paradigm has broadened the scope of development communication research to a wider social context, it is unable to adequately explain the internal contradictions between the nation-state, the media structure and local communities. Thus it still does not apply to the case of Chinese New Countryside dramas.

Thirdly, the most recent approach, the Participatory Paradigm,⁵ draws attention to the power of local communities to solve their concerns. This approach does not apply to the case of this study either, as there is little local participation in the decision-making process. Therefore, this study does not seek to analyse the communication event of New Countryside dramas from the development communication perspective. In Chapter 8, a reflection on the differences between the Chinese New Countryside dramas and the

⁴ The Dependency Paradigm defines development as national self-determination and self-reliance. This idea was popular during the 1960s to 1980s with the support of a group of Latin American scholars. It assumes that the underdevelopment of Third World countries is caused by their dominated position in the global political-economic order. Its central argument is that governments should control media structures, and that media operations should avoid interventions from foreign elites or capitalist principles.

⁵ The Participatory Paradigm diagnoses the cause of underdevelopment to be a lack of local participation rather than a shortage of information. This model holds that Development Communication is not a vertical process of information flow, but rather a dialogical process of information-sharing among stakeholders around a development problem.

dramas designed in classic development communication programmes will be provided in detail.

While all the current literature emphasises the role that the TV dramas play for connecting neoliberalism discourses and the collective identity, and imply that TV dramas' depiction may influence the way peasants live their life, not much literature has paid attention to why and via what mechanisms the Chinese peasant identity discourse is constructed on TV screens, nor has the existing literature discussed how these TV drama discourses are perceived by the peasants. By investigating the production and reception processes of rural-topic dramas, this research will try to address these issues.

2.5 Overarching Aim of this Research

Based on the previous discussions, it is clear that there is a deficit within current neoliberalism literature. If neoliberalism is a context-embedded term, then how it articulates with local inherited political economy deserves more attention. In a communist country like China in particular, the role that the state plays in the neoliberal transformation process, the techniques the state employs to facilitate or regulate neoliberalisation, need more discussion.

The media play an important role in legitimising neoliberalism. Besides this, in current China, the control and regulation of media systems are increasingly based on neoliberal logics. Thus analysing China's neoliberalisation from a communication perspective can be meaningful. However, there is no close theoretical engagement with arguments by media and communication scholars about the mediated feature of China's neoliberal transformation. This gap in the literature calls for more research analysing China's existing neoliberalism from a communication perspective, and this justifies this thesis.

Based on a review of the development of Chinese rural dramas against the background of China's neoliberal development, it becomes clear that there is much work to be done to explain how China's overall neoliberal transformation process intersects with the country's media reform processes. Therefore, this research proposes to focus on how rural dramas have been produced in the 'Constructing Socialist New Countryside' period. It also proposes that a critical analysis of a contemporary Chinese media genre (in this thesis, rural TV dramas produced in the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' era) from the neoliberal perspective needs an integrative framework for approaching its production and reception as well as its implications for audience identity (in this thesis, the peasant identity). However, such a framework is still missing in the current literature. Chapter 3 will respond to this issue with a framework that integrates the political economy/cultural studies approaches.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in Section 2.2, neoliberalism, as a governmentality, needs to be examined in a project-specific approach to highlight its formal plurality and always-being-mediated feature (as Peck, Brenner and Theodore (2018, p. 4) point out, ‘neoliberalism plainly cannot exist in the world in pure, uncut, or unmediated form’). Then the uniqueness of China’s way of embracing neoliberalism has been flagged up in Section 2.3, where it was argued that although whether China is neoliberal remains controversial, it is undeniable that it is undergoing a process of neoliberalisation. Section 2.5 then established the state-led reform in China’s television drama industry as an epitome of China’s overall neoliberalisation process, arguing that it provides an example of how the neoliberalism logics work via the mediation of local contextual factors. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to generate a theoretical account for how the neoliberal transformation project is being carried out in China under the lead of the communist party-state, as well as the strategic role of the media in this process.

The central research question of this thesis is how Chinese TV dramas reproduce and legitimate the Chinese state’s neoliberal agenda. This chapter constructs a multi-method qualitative research design to answer this question. It consists of three stages of work: namely, institutional research (which seeks to explore the institutional environment of TV

drama production), industrial research (a study on the various considerations of TV drama professionals when they work) and an audience reception study (a comparison of the effects of rural TV dramas in two different types of Chinese villages). These stages of work probe into different dimensions of the examined process in this study and in so doing generate various types of data, which form a level of triangulation. In what follows, a rationale for the methodological choices made in each stage of this research plan is provided.

In the next section (Section 3.2), the main methodological strategy of this research – the case study – will be firstly introduced. It also gives reasons for why the case of New Countryside topic TV dramas have been chosen as the case of this research. Section 3.3 then outlines the operational research questions, the data collection methods adopted (secondary data analysis and semi-structured interviews), the execution process and the methodological concerns (ethical issues, reliability, validity, transferability as well as the role of the researcher) related to this research design. Section 3.5 concludes this chapter by pointing out the limitations of this design as well as the connections between this methodology chapter and other chapters in this thesis.

With regard to research philosophy, this study first rests upon a realist ontology, which assumes that the world is real but not objectively knowable (Maxwell, 2012, p. 5) so there is no absolute scientific knowledge of reality; instead human beings construct knowledge

based on different conceptual schemes to explain reality (Lakoff, 1987, p. 265). Based on this philosophy, one fundamental assumption in this research is that meanings in the communicative event (a definition of ‘communicative event’ will be provided in Section 3.2.2) of New Countryside topic TV dramas are socially constructed. Such a position entails this study paying close attention to how and why the discourse is constructed as such by specific actors, as realists claim that there can be multiple ways of understanding the world. For this reason, a qualitative methodology best fits the enquiries of this research, for it is useful for research which seeks to ‘understand the people from their own frames of reference and experience reality as they experience it’ (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 18).

Epistemologically, this research adopts an interpretivist approach, which assumes that our knowledge of the world cannot be objectively measured and represented with scientific variables or created without drawing on empirical evidence; instead, human beings understand a particular phenomenon through subjective explanation (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, pp. 26-30). To be more specific, the epistemological approach of this study could be explained as ‘constructivist-structuralism’ (term coined by Bourdieu, 1990). The structuralism perspective, on the one hand, orients this study to focus on relations between different actors involved in this research and the outer world. The constructivism position, on the other hand, enables the researcher to subjectively interpret how and why certain meanings are created by these actors. Admittedly, the insights gained from either the structure-oriented analysis or the constructivist interpretation cannot be certain, as their depth and angles largely depend on the researcher’s own perspective and ability.

For this reason, a study of this sort has no fixed answers. Research of this kind can be taken as credible as long as it can reasonably and adequately explain the phenomenon examined from the chosen theoretical perspective. This is exactly what this research seeks to achieve.

From this point of view, this thesis is explanatory and interpretive in nature. The theory is developed through an inductive approach, where the focus is on ‘using detailed readings of raw data to build a richer theoretical perspective than already exists in literature’ (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 168). Such an approach is helpful for studying context-specific processes, given that it draws the researcher’s attention to the subtle links between different themes in the ‘complex, interrelated and multifaceted social reality’ (Bhattacherjee, 2012, p. 105). It also allows the researcher to subjectively detect the themes that are often neglected in structured methodologies (such as experimental research, hypothesis testing research, etc.) (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). In this sense, inductive analysis can be stopped when sufficient themes have been identified and clear links between them have been established for building an explanation of the phenomenon. In order to facilitate this inductive sense-making process, in this study, multiple types of qualitative data are analysed using qualitative data processing software NVivo. Detailed data collecting and processing procedures will be discussed in later sections.

3.2 Case Study Design

As introduced earlier, this research tries to explore how Chinese TV dramas reproduce and legitimate the Chinese state's neoliberal agenda. A multi-method case study strategy was decided on to answer this question. According to Robert Yin (2014, p. 37), the development of theory prior to data collection marks a distinguishing point between case study and other multi-method qualitative designs (such as ethnography and grounded theory). In Chapter 2, a conceptual framework was constructed to help with the analysis of the case. This framework identified the key issues from the existing literature, and in so doing provided guidance for later-stage work in this research. In this sense, the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2 plays two roles in this research: first, it provides a theoretical proposition 'about why acts, events, structure, and thoughts occur' (Sutton and Staw, 1995, p. 378) (as explained in Chapter 2, in this research, the theoretical assumption is 'the TV drama reproduces and legitimates the Chinese state's neoliberal agenda'); and second, it serves as a vehicle for an 'analytic generalisation', which, according to Yin (p. 41), is a method of generalisation by extending the findings from a particular case to a conceptual level without drawing on statistics.

A case study design is adopted in this research given that it is good at coping with studies which investigate 'real-world cases' and assumes that the 'contextual conditions' are highly pertinent to the inquiry (Yin, 2014, p. 16). As outlined earlier, the aim of this study is to examine the production and consumption processes of rural-topic TV dramas in

China's neoliberalisation context. Clearly, in such research, contextual factors can be more thoroughly explored by adopting a case study methodology, otherwise it would be hard to generate a clear and full picture of the examined process.

The advantage of a case study design lies in two aspects. Firstly, it enables researchers to collect detailed, in-depth and multiple sources of data surrounding the examined issue (Creswell, 2007, p. 73), so that a rich and comprehensive understanding of the problem examined (de Vaus, 2001, p. 221) can be formed. In so doing, this research achieves a degree of triangulation between multiple data sources and thereby increases its rigour. Secondly, it brings this research a high level of practicality. Admittedly, some other research approaches also can deal with various types of data from real-life settings. For instance, the ethnography approach is regarded as 'an umbrella term for fieldwork, interviewing, and other means of gathering data in authentic (i.e., real-world) environments ...' (Willis, 2007, p. 237). However, ethnographies require a deep immersive engagement in the day-to-day life of the field site (Creswell, 2007, p. 68). As Yin (1994, p. 11) points out, they usually take 'long periods of time in the field and emphasise detailed, observational evidence'. Case studies, by contrast, do not need as much commitment of time and effort. Considering that this study only had three months' time for fieldwork and limited funding, a case study is the most efficient approach for the investigation.

3.2.1 New Countryside Topic TV Dramas as a Case

Stake (1995, p. 237) distinguishes three types of case studies: single instrumental, collective instrumental and intrinsic. Table 1 compares these three types. This study adopts a single instrumental design, as illustrated in the second column in Table 1.

Case Study Type	Single Instrumental	Collective Instrumental	Intrinsic
Aim of Research	To provide insights into external research issues (for instance, developing a theory).		To gain a deeper understanding of a special case (person, group, phenomenon, process, etc.)
Number of Cases	One	More than one	One
Feature	The researcher selects one case to illustrate one issue.	Multiple cases are scrutinised to address the same problem, with each case offering a unique analytical perspective.	The researcher wants to explore a unique case because it presents a very different situation (e.g. the lifestyle of an ethnic minority, etc.).

Table 1 Types of Case Study

Source: Adapted from Creswell, 2007, p.74

This research is designed to be a single instrumental case study. It is instrumental given that it aims to expand current theory for understanding China's neoliberalisation and the contributions of the media to this process. For this reason, the case chosen does not have to be as 'unique' as in intrinsic studies; instead it just needs to be 'typical' enough to illustrate this research interest so as to ensure the generalisability of the findings. The decision to focus on one case, instead of two or even more, took into consideration that this study does not seek to conduct a thematic analysis within analysis, so there is no need to make cross-case comparisons. Although multiple case designs are normally seen as more compelling than their single case counterparts (Yin, 2014, pp. 63-64), Yin (p. 51) also suggests that in critical research, a single case can provide a moderately convincing illustration of a pre-formulated theory as long as it meets all the propositions of the theory. Hence, theoretically, one typical case is sufficient for the analysis in this research.

The selection of the case in single-case designs usually follows five rationales – 'that is, having a critical, unusual, common, revelatory or longitudinal case' (Yin, 2014, p. 51). In this research, the case of the Chinese New Countryside topic TV drama (its definition is given below) is chosen for examination mainly for its critical value given its high relevance to the theoretical proposition of interest.

In Chapter 2, a theoretical proposition that media reproduces and legitimates the Chinese state's neoliberal agenda was established. Section 2.2.3 particularly pointed out that the

new state policy of ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ marked the turn of China’s neoliberalisation orientation towards state neoliberalism, an approach that enables the state to play a more active role in moderating the negative impacts of marketisation. So the ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ policy could be seen as representative of the Chinese state’s recent neoliberal propositions. In this sense, if any contemporary media products contain or reflect the orientations of this policy since the state released it, they make a good case for researching why and how the Chinese media follows the CPC state’s neoliberal agenda as well as their effects of fostering ‘neoliberal subjectivity’ (as Section 2.2.1 explains, the neoliberal project, as a governmentality, aims to produce governable subjects who are ‘both entrepreneurial in the economic sense and reasonable, law-abiding, tolerant and autonomous in the political sense’ (Kipnis, 2007, p. 386)) in their audiences.

Many contemporary rural topic TV dramas have portrayed the development of the countryside since the entrenchment of the ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ policy. With their rich depictions of the ‘Socialist New Countryside’ (a more detailed discussion on the depictions of these dramas will be provided in Chapter 4), TV’s considerable influence as the most favoured mass media in the Chinese countryside (Cai, 2012), as well as media images’ strong power to legitimise a lifestyle (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014, p. 163), TV dramas with a theme of ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ provide an ideal case for scrutinising the strategic role of media in legitimising the Chinese state’s neoliberal agenda. Thus, the theory-building in this research can be facilitated by

examining them and thereby confirming, challenging or extending the theoretical propositions raised.

Attention now turns to defining what New Countryside topic TV dramas exactly are. ‘New Countryside topic TV dramas’ is not a title widely used by scholars or the industry. As briefly introduced in Chapter 1, this research uses this term to denote TV dramas depicting contemporary Chinese peasants’ life since the launch of the ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ project. A number of this type of drama sprang up after the 5th Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of CPC in 2005. Usually, they feature a depiction of changes in villages since the start of the ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ campaign, the exhibition of achievements gained during the campaign, interpretations of specific government policies formulated under the ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ framework, and propaganda on the CPC’s political ideas and theories related to this campaign.

3.2.2 Units of Analysis

As explained earlier, single- and multiple-case studies apply to different research situations. However, choosing a single case design does not necessarily sacrifice the breadth and depth of the study. Indeed, as Yin (2014, p. 50) suggests, ‘within these two variants, there also can be unitary or multiple units of analysis’. He identifies two types of case study design based on how the analysis is developed within the single-case design:

holistic and embedded, as visualised in Figure 2. This research adopts an embedded structure, as shown in the bottom-left quadrant.

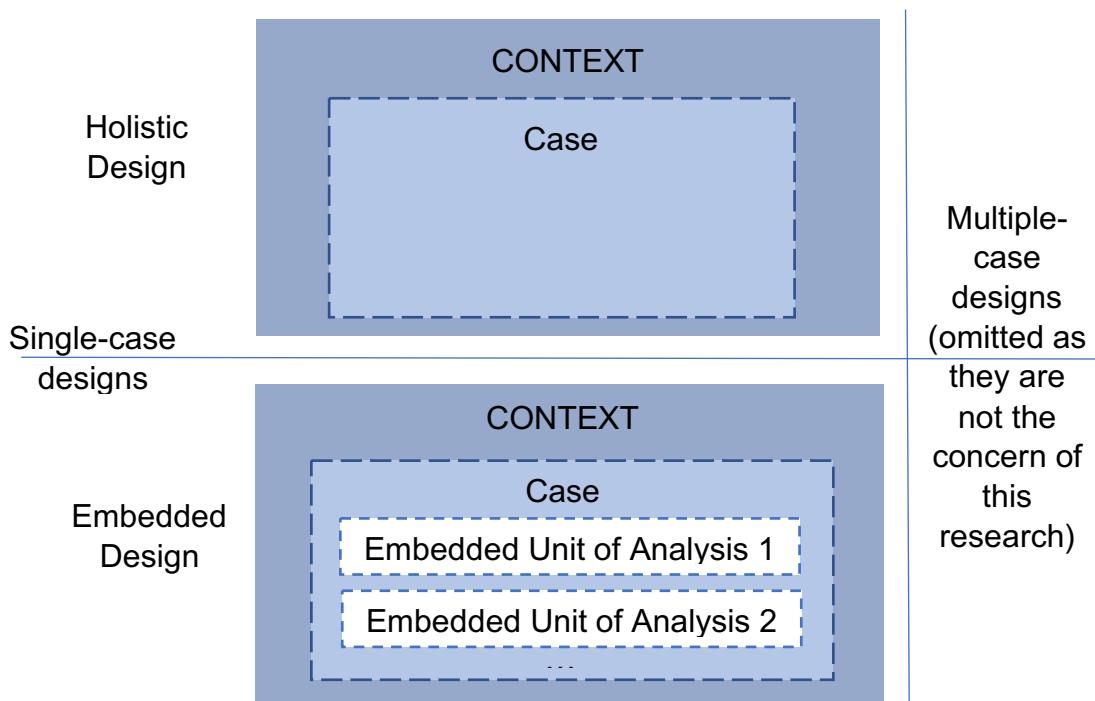


Figure 2 Types of Designs for Case Studies

Source: Adapted from COSMOS Corporation, cited in Yin (2014, p. 50)

The divide between holistic and embedded designs is caused by their respective strengths and weaknesses. The holistic design, on the one hand, ‘has merits with its unitary focus and an underlying theory of a global nature’ (Xiao, 2010, p. 868). But it has a restricted

level of accuracy, as often it lacks ‘sufficiently clear measures or data’ (Yin, 2014, p. 55). The embedded design, on the other hand, is good at handling cases in which multiple units can be identified, but it is challenging for the researcher to return from the subunit level analysis to the holistic level theorisation (*ibid*). In this sense, the distinction between these two types of design is both operational and theoretical: holistic designs are more suitable for studies underpinned by a theory of a holistic nature and do not require a large variety of empirical evidence; embedded designs, however, fit more with studies that seek to develop a theory by examining multiple varieties of data. To adopt which design depends on the nature of the enquiry, the research objective and the features of the examined objects.

This study adopts an embedded design for the reasons that: 1) its purpose is to address China’s approach to neoliberalisation, China’s media reform, and the media’s influence on audience subjectivity. These research interests need analysis at the levels of institutions, the industry and individuals; 2) the key theory underpinning this research, actually existing neoliberalism, requires the researcher to examine the process of China’s neoliberalisation in operational detail, taking into consideration how neoliberalisation is achieved via the mediation of various elements in the mass media system; and 3) the case in this thesis, New Countryside TV dramas, involves both the production and consumption processes as well as a number of stakeholders ranging from government bureaucracies and industrial professionals to ordinary audiences.

The development of the subunits examined in this research is based on Norman Fairclough's theory of 'multiple dimensions of communication events'. Building on the conceptualisation that language use in media is a 'communicative event' (which can be understood as 'a form of social practice'), Fairclough (1995, p. 54) classifies a communicative event into three dimensions. Figure 3 below diagrammatically reveals how these dimensions are linked with each other.

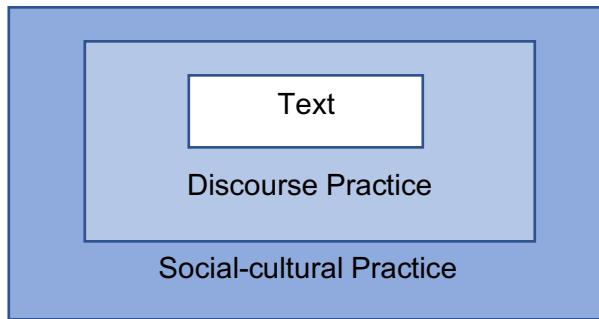


Figure 3 The Multi-dimensional Model of Communication Events

Source: Adapted from Fairclough (1995, p. 54)

According to Fairclough (1995, p. 57), a media communicative event has three dimensions of meanings:, text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. 'Text' refers to the linguistic elements used in a communicative event. Discourse practice refers to the process of text production and text consumption. The analysis of discourse practice involves the analysis of both professional routines (such as editorial procedures) and discourse processes (the transformations which texts undergo in production and

consumption) (pp. 58-59). ‘Sociocultural practice’ refers to the macro context of a concrete communicative practice. They are either the ‘immediate situational context’ of a particular communicative event, or ‘the wider context of the institutional practices the event is embedded within’, or ‘the yet broader frame of the society and the culture’ (p. 62). Fairclough claims that the analysis of socio-cultural practice is usually linked to the examination of three aspects of contexts: the political, cultural and economic (p.62).

Accordingly, in this research, attention is given to three units of analysis. The first unit focuses on the institutional environment where the communicative event of New Countryside dramas are situated. It corresponds to the ‘social-cultural practice’ dimension in Fairclough’s ‘communicative event’ model. The institutional environment here refers to ‘broad patterns of the communication context, such as political regulation and economic forms of ownership and control’ (Chen, 2004, p. 36). The focus of the second unit is on industrial norms, which, to be more specific, refers to professional rules and consensuses about the production, distribution and consumption of media messages. It reflects the discourse practice dimension discussed above. The last unit looks into the audience-text interaction. It is based on Fairclough’s discussion of the ‘text dimension’ of the communicative event, but slightly differently from what Fairclough suggests, the focus of this unit in this research goes beyond the text itself. The reason is that pure textual analysis in media studies is often challenged for having disregarded the dynamics during text production and consumption. Considering the production process will be covered by the analysis of the former two units, it has been decided that the analysis at the text

practice level in this research will look at the manners in which media messages are accepted by the audience. The relations of the three units of analysis in this research are shown in Figure 4 below. This figure also brings together the three analytical dimensions of neoliberalism provided in Chapter 2 and serves as the analytical framework of this study.

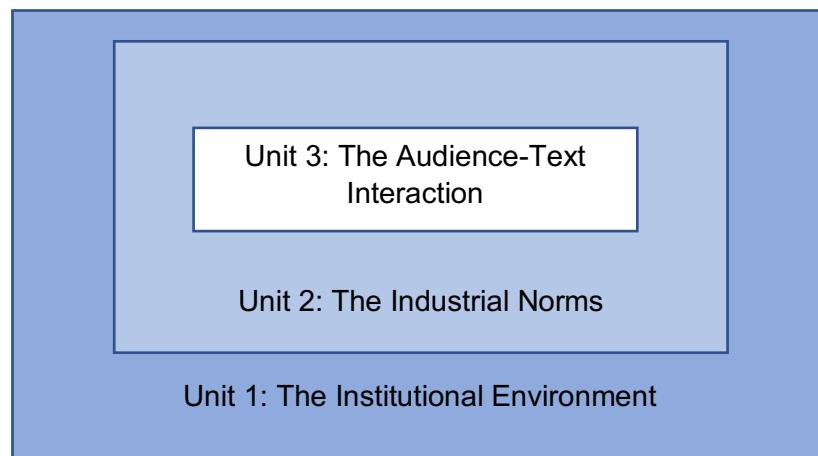


Figure 4 Units of Analysis in This Research

3.3 Research Questions and Methodology

As Section 3.2 shows, Fairclough's multi-dimensional model of communicative events is helpful for identifying the relationship between the communication context, industrial practices of production and distribution and audiences' reception of media texts. By developing three units of analysis based on Fairclough's model and analysing data collected from each unit, this study tries to answer how Chinese mass media reproduces and legitimises the Chinese state's neoliberal agenda. The purpose of this research is to critically examine China's approach to neoliberalisation under the lead of the CPC state

since the ‘Building a Socialist New Countryside’ policy was announced. It also attempts to explain how the overall neoliberalisation in the political and economic sense intersects with China’s media reform process and influences the formation of an ideal governable audience.

As explained earlier, the communicative event of New Countryside topic TV dramas has been chosen as the case to be examined. It is believed that these dramas make an ideal case for investigating the manner in which neoliberalisation is carried out in China with the help of the media and their influence on Chinese peasants’ subjectivity. To be more specific, this research sets out by operationalising the key research concern into three research questions as outlined below.

3.3.1 Operational Research Questions

Firstly, what is the institutional context for the series of practices surrounding New Countryside topic TV dramas? This question will be answered by explaining the role that state institutions play throughout the production, distribution and consumption of New Countryside dramas. As explained in Chapter 1, New Countryside topic dramas are cultural products that have a national impact. Their production is encouraged by the Central State, supervised by the National Radio and Television Administration and executed by both state and private drama production institutions. Admittedly, this involves the participation of the private sector. But the activities of the private sector cannot be

implemented without the heavy involvement of the state sector (in the form of regulation, favourable policies, official endorsement, etc.). By examining the bureaucratic structure as well as the state practices, rules and narrations surrounding New Countryside topic TV dramas, this study attempts to reveal how the state, via institutional methods, guides the TV drama industry to follow its neoliberal agenda. As Chapter 2 pointed out, any major and fundamental actions of neoliberalisation are achieved by speaking with and responding to inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices and political struggles (Peck et al., 2018, p. 7). Given that the politics of the PRC features a bureaucratic system run by a one-party state, in this research, an examination of the institutional context sheds light on the role of the CPC party-state in China's unique neoliberalisation process.

Secondly, what industrial norms have influenced the production, distribution and consumption of New Countryside dramas? As Fairclough (1995, pp. 58-59) points out, a communicative event has a 'discourse practice' dimension, which suggests the huge influence of professional routines, rules and consensuses on media production, distribution and consumption. With the gradual deepening of the neoliberal transformation in China's TV drama sector and the state's ongoing efforts to incorporate the TV drama industry into its 'Building a Socialist New Countryside' agenda, the rules and principles that guide TV drama industry work are expected to have been affected. So in what manner have these neoliberal logics affected the routines, rules and consensuses in the TV drama industry? What industrial norms have been changed? What motivates TV drama

professionals to engage in New Countryside topic dramas? By answering these questions, this research also attempts to highlight the role of Chinese media professionals as bridge between the political agenda, the market's profit-seeking demand and society's cultural desire.

The last research question focuses on how the New Countryside TV dramas have affected peasant audiences' subjectivity. As addressed early, neoliberalisation, as a governmentality, aims to produce the 'neoliberal subjectivity' in individuals. Specifically, this 'neoliberal subjectivity' manifests as entrepreneurship in the economic sense and reasonability, law-abidingness, tolerance and autonomy in the political sense (Kipnis, 2007, p. 386). Since the New Countryside TV dramas reproduce the state's neoliberal agenda, they are expected to have fostered a neoliberal subjectivity in their peasant audience. The concepts of subjectivity and identity overlap to a considerable degree, as both can answer the question of what the self is. Their slight difference lies in that while identity refers to 'particular sets of traits, beliefs and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being', subjectivity implies 'a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity' (Hall, 2004, p. 3). This research argues that an individual shows their subjectivity while they reflect on their own identity. Therefore, in this research, it is worth exploring how New Countryside TV dramas have influenced Chinese peasants' self-perceived identity. Specifically, will peasants be more entrepreneurial after watching these dramas? Will they grow more rationality, law-abidingness, tolerance and autonomy awareness after exposure to these dramas? By

encouraging peasants to reflect on these questions, this research tries to evaluate the effects of these New Countryside topic TV dramas. This research also tries to reveal the tensions that emerge between peasant audiences and the CPC state when the peasants decode the drama messages. In so doing, it facilitates a general evaluation of how successfully these dramas can legitimise the Chinese state's neoliberal agenda.

3.3.2 Data Collection Methods

As introduced above, this study follows a qualitative approach to examine the case of the communicative event of New Countryside topic TV dramas. The research strategy of this thesis, the case study, is pragmatically oriented in nature. Its flexibility enables researchers to collect detailed, in-depth and multiple sources of data surrounding the examined issue (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). This could help researchers form a rich and comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon (de Vaus, 2001, p. 221). In this study, several methods were applied to collect research data. This section first gives a rationale for why these methods were applied to address the research question in each analytical stage, and then introduces the sampling strategy and the schedule for the fieldwork.

As outlined in Section 3.3.1, this research has three operational questions. Different combinations of data collection methods were applied to address the concerns of each stage. Specifically:

1. Document data and semi-structured interviews were focused on addressing the first research question – the institutional context where the practices about New Countryside topic TV dramas are situated. At this stage, documentary data examined included government publications, organisational and institutional records, press releases, survey statistics, etc. The semi-structured interviews aimed at gaining insights from government officials working in state media regulation institutions. Together these data helped to sketch out the institutional environment in which the practices of New Countryside TV dramas take place (mainly discussed in Chapter 5).
2. Semi-structured interviews with TV drama professionals were carried out to collect data on the industrial rules, principles and consensuses about the production, distribution and consumption of New Countryside dramas. Journalistic interviews with TV drama professionals, as a form of ‘paratext’ (according to Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable (2018, p. 48), paratext refers to the text surrounding the examined cultural products that orients the understanding), were also retrieved from the Internet as a supplement to the data collected from the fieldwork (mainly discussed in Chapter 6).
3. Semi-structured interviews with Chinese peasants were conducted in two types of village in China to explore the effects of New Countryside dramas, supplemented by an examination of documents introducing the general development conditions

of each village, ranging from historical records, economic data and village government publications to media coverage, etc. (mainly discussed in Chapter 7).

The combination of these techniques increases the richness of evidence in this research. In this way, it enables the study to form a more comprehensive understanding of the examined case. The rationale and methodological concerns for using each method is set out below.

3.3.2.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis is the method of reviewing and interpreting existing documentary data. As a qualitative research technique, document analysis is frequently used in qualitative case studies (Stake, 1995, p. 68). This is because qualitative case studies seek to produce 'rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organisation, or programme' with limited resources (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). Documents can well serve their demand, as they not only are potential sources of empirical data, but also can help researchers get information that 'cannot be observed directly' (Stake, 1995, p. 68).

Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey define documents as 'social facts (or constructions)' which are produced and used in socially organised ways (2004, p. 58). They can take various forms such as government publications, organisational and institutional records,

press releases, survey statistics, etc. (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004, p. 57, Bowen, 2009, pp. 27-28). In this research, state documents about the 'Building a Socialist New Countryside' policy (e.g., government work reports, governmental rural policy documents, rural work conference communiques, press releases about rural development, statistical data about the development of the countryside, etc.) as well as those about New Countryside topic TV dramas (e.g., favourable policies for rural-themed projects, seminar or workshop report) were the main focus of examination.

The analysis of these documents in this study mainly serves three purposes. First, these documents provide information on the context within which all the practices this research involves operate. As formal records, these documents not only record who did what about the 'Building a Socialist New Countryside' campaign, but also provide data on the political, economic and social background – what Bowen (2009, p. 29) calls 'historical insights' – of these activities. In this sense, reviewing these documents can help to form an integrated understanding of the 'Building a Socialist New Countryside' campaign, including all aspects of facts that caused it and its place in China's national development blueprint. This can further enhance our understanding of data gathered from other sources, as it allows the researcher to 'contextualise' other sources of information (*ibid*, p. 30).

Second, these documents hold the answer to the first research question of this study. This study argues that the New Countryside discourse was first constructed on the national

scale. Several large-scale actors, such as the state council and Ministry of Agriculture, participated in the articulation of this discourse. The primary aim of the first research question, therefore, is to identify these key actors, reveal their respective roles, and explain how they interact during this process. Government publications and other forms of institutional records contain the above information. As Lindsay Prior (2003, p. 26) points out, ‘documents are produced in social settings and are always to be regarded as collective (social) products. Determining how documents are consumed and used in organised settings, that is, how they function, should form an important part of any social scientific research project.’ By examining the sources of these documents, what they say about rural development, why they are formed and how they can be used, the central enquiries under Question 1 can be answered. To some extent, document analysis may be the only viable way to get this information, because it is difficult to get direct access to Chinese central state officials.

Third, data drawn from document analysis can be used alongside other sources of data as a means of triangulation. Qualitative case studies usually adopt multiple research methods to increase their reliability (McQueen and Knussen, 2002, p. 211). As stated earlier, in this research, documentary data can supplement the interview data, to make a more vivid interpretation of the examined case. Moreover, documentary data can also corroborate the interview findings, so the interpretation of this study can be more dependable.

3.3.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The interview is another frequently used method in case studies (Platt, 1992, p. 37, Yin, 1994, p. 8, Stake, 1995, p. 64). As a ‘purposeful conversation’ between the researcher and the interviewee (Bingham and Moore, 1931, p. 3), an interview helps the researcher to find out other social actors’ perspectives on specific topics. Since it makes it possible to collect multiple angles of views, it is regarded as particularly useful for qualitative case studies. As Stake explains,

Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others. Two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others. The case will not be seen the same by everyone. Qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities.

(Stake, 1995, p. 64)

Based on the method of proposing questions, interview can be divided into three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. In a semi-structured interview, a set of pre-planned, open-ended questions are raised. They serve as a general framework for the conversation, while most questions will be generated during the interview based on the responses of the interviewee. This enables the researcher to ‘capture the richness of the themes emerging from the respondent’s talk’ (Smith, 1995, p. 10). Compared with the other two types, semi-structured interview features a reasonable degree of control by the researcher. As stated by Anne Galletta (2001, p. 24), ‘it is sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of your research question, while also leaving space for study

participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study' (Smith, 1995, p. 10). Because of such flexibility, the semi-structured interview is especially suitable when the researcher wants to 'gain a detailed picture of a respondent's beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of, a particular topic' (*ibid.*).

This study attempts to explore how the New Countryside discourse affects the media industry, and its influences on villagers' daily life. Since it is difficult to directly observe the two questions by other means (e.g., observation, secondary data analysis, etc.), insights from media professionals and average peasants were desired in this research. It was decided to conduct one-to-one semi-structured interviews with these two groups of participants. The reasons are as follows.

Firstly, the interview method was adopted because it can help the researcher to understand other social actor's own perspective. Thomas R. Lindlof, in *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, argues that qualitative interview needs to be done with people who have 'been there' (1995, p. 167). According to him, through the interview, the researcher can understand the experience of the interviewee, thereby gaining knowledge about events they have not participated in. In this study, the experience of government officials, media professionals and peasants are key to understanding Questions 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Specifically, viewpoints from the former group can offer expert insights into how the media industry works; experience of the peasants also matters,

because they have the best say on whether the New Countryside discourse is good for village development, so their viewpoints can help the researcher to form an in-depth understanding of the industrial and social influence of the New Countryside discourse.

Secondly, interviewing multiple groups of people forms a cross-referencing between different perspectives. No individual experience can represent the whole story. In this study, neither the media professionals nor the peasants can be sure their knowledge adequately explains how the New Countryside discourse operates. Even within each group, as the profession and lived experience of the interviewees vary, the interviews can yield rather different yet inter-supplementary interpretations. Therefore, each interview should be interpreted within the context of all the interviews. Not only that; they also need to be understood in conjunction with data obtained from other sources.

Lastly, considering that the researcher in this study had limited time in the field, semi-structured one-to-one interviews might be the most productive and efficient method to collect individual data. On the one hand, compared with focus-group interviews, one-to-one interviews save much time and effort liaising with interviewees. It is always hard to coordinate a group interview. Peasants, in particular, are difficult to organise into focus groups, because: 1) most young peasants have moved to cities as migrant labourers, so it is difficult to form focus groups across all ages; 2) as a result of the loss of young workforce, the left-behind peasants are too burdened with domestic and farm work so

barely have any interest in focus-group interviews. On the other hand, although unstructured interviews are also conducted with a purpose, they are usually so casual that the conversation may deviate from the original question. Besides, since the interviewer has little control during the conversation, unstructured interviews can take a long time to conduct; because the information is largely fragmented and cluttered, it might be even more time-consuming to analyse the data it generates.

3.3.2.3 Supplementary Data Collection Techniques

Alongside the above two methods, whenever appropriate, other sources of data were also collected, but in a less systematic way. Since Chapter 4 involves a discussion of the topics of major New Countryside TV dramas, some qualitative content analysis of these dramas was conducted. In addition, the spatial arrangements of the village, activities of the village committee and population structure of the village, all contain information about the village's development. Thus observational data collected during my fieldwork was also drawn on in this research.

3.3.3 Executive Process

3.3.3.1 Sampling Strategy

3.3.3.1.1 Sampling of Documents

The documents this study selected were from 2005 onwards. They mainly come from two sources. The first category is state documents. Many state actors have released documents related to rural development (i.e., yearly government work reports, rural work conference communiques, etc.). These documents concern the life of peasants all over the country, so most of them will be reported by state news outlets. Therefore, this study utilised the electronic news database of People.cn⁶ to identify documents which mention New Countryside. Specifically, using the search engine on People.cn, the researcher can collect a number of news articles about the New Countryside campaign. The researcher then read through the article. If it mentioned a state document, the researcher visited the relevant websites to find it. All identified state documents were put together to build up a research archive.

The second type, industrial documents, were selected based on the recordings in *China Radio and TV Yearbook*. In addition, the website of the State Administration of Press,

⁶ *People's Daily* is the biggest party newspaper in China. It provides direct information on the policies and viewpoints of the Chinese party-state. Its website, People.cn, publishes all significant news articles in *People's Daily* and a number of other newspapers under the *People's Daily* newspaper group.

Publication, Radio, Film and Television, and the website of China Alliance of Radio, Film and Television, were referenced.

3.3.3.1.2 Sampling of Interviews

There were two groups of interviewees in this study. The first consisted of cultural elites. Interviewees in this group included: 1) scriptwriters, producers, directors and editors with experience in making rural or peasant-related popular media products; 2) staff in either government media regulating departments or government rural affairs commissions, who know about the rural communication policies and can decide what content can be put into rural popular media products. The purpose of interviewing media professionals was to establish: 1) the institutional and industrial environments in which the New Countryside discourse operates; 2) media professionals' own perspectives on the New Countryside discourse.

For research convenience, most interviewees were based in Beijing. The reason why Beijing was selected as the major interview location was because Beijing has a booming popular media industry. Many cultural companies and professionals choose to base themselves there. Besides, as the capital city of China, Beijing not only has the municipal-level rural and media regulating departments, but also the national-level regulating institutions (for instance, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television). Thus, interview data could be more representative.

Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling strategy usually adopted in qualitative studies. This sampling method depends on referrals from previous interviewees to get new participants (Bailey, 1994, p. 96). It is especially suitable for studies in which the interviewees are difficult to reach. Media workers are a closely connected but quite exclusive group. Those who have experience of dealing with rural communications are even harder to locate. Therefore, a snowball sampling strategy was adopted in this study in order to reach appropriate media workers. Using the researcher's personal connections, this study accessed a few media professionals with experience in making rural popular media products. They were the first interviewees of this research, and were asked to invite more people in their social network to participate in the research. All participants were approached through email/telephone invitations.

The second group of interviewees were peasants. The purpose of interviewing peasants was to understand: 1) the village environment in which different discursive frameworks of the New Countryside campaign interact; 2) rural people's own perspectives on village development.

Whereas quantitative studies strive for big data and random sampling, qualitative studies usually emphasise the relevance of the samples to the research question and the representativeness of the samples (Patton, 2002, p. 230). In this study, peasant participants mainly came from two villages in North China: Tugou (土沟), a county-

suburban village undergoing wholesale village relocation and reconstruction in Beijing, and Chenlou (陈楼), a traditional natural village in Shandong Province.

These two villages were selected as the interview locations for the following considerations. Firstly, China has several agricultural regions. There are huge social and cultural differences between rural communities from different regions. With limited time and resources, this study was unable to cover the diversity of village cultures in China. Considering the researcher is more familiar with the country's Northern area, this study only seeks to understand how the New Countryside discourse influences the life in North China villages.

Secondly, even within North China, the development situation of each village is not the same because of their different positions in China's political and economic structure. Shandong, with a rural population of 40,760,000 in 2016, is the second largest agricultural province in North China (in terms of population) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). It is also well-renowned for the 'conservative sentiment' of its people, reflected in a lack of entrepreneurship and innovative spirit in individuals (Chung, 1997, p. 131). Village development in Shandong largely follows the old conventions. Thus villages in this province can represent the development conditions of most traditional natural villages. On the other hand, Beijing, although the capital city of the country, also has many villages in

suburban counties.⁷ However, as the most developed city in North China, Beijing has an urbanisation rate of 86.2%, the highest in the northern part of the country. Consequently, villages in Beijing also have a relatively higher degree of development, which particularly affects the villages' economic structure and villagers' lifestyle. Therefore, villages in Beijing can represent the development conditions of modern villages.

The selection of Tugou and Chenlou as interview locations was also based on convenience considerations. The researcher has personal networks in Chenlou village, so it was easy to reach interviewees. When the fieldwork was conducted, a village relocation and reconstruction project carrying the name of 'Tugou New Village' was going on in Tugou village. In recent years, with the expansion of the suburban, the problem of landless farmers has resulted in sharp conflicts between peasants, village cadres and grassroots governments. The researcher considered Tugou a typical site to study peasants' perspectives on development and the current rural land policy. So it was also selected as one interview site. All interviewees were selected based on convenience considerations.

⁷ In China, every city includes two administrative sectors, the urban sector and the rural sector. Geographically, the rural sector usually develops around the outer circle of the urban sector. So even though Beijing is a city, it also accommodates villages.

3.3.3.2 Fieldwork Schedule

In September – October 2016, major documents were collected in Beijing. The rest of the documents were collected online in the UK. All data analysis was conducted in the UK.

Semi-structured interviews with media professionals were conducted in Beijing during September – October 2016. In May 2017, interviews with peasants were carried out in the village of Chenlou in Shandong and the village of Tugou in Beijing. In 2018 and 2019 the researcher interviewed several more professionals. A total of 61 interviewees participated in this study. Among them, 14 were media professionals, 28 were peasants in Chenlou village and around and 19 were peasants in Tugou village.

3.3.3.3 Ethical Issues

A range of ethical issues emerged during the fieldwork. Firstly, anonymity should be ensured. This is especially necessary in interviews with media practitioners and staff in regulation departments, since they usually need to obey the confidentiality rules of the institutions they work at. In terms of peasant interviews, anonymity was also suggested since it could avoid causing pressure in those participants' lives. Secondly, to show respect for the participants, consent should be sought with a sufficient amount of information to understand the aims and possible risks of this research and participants' rights to quit at any moment. Thirdly, before releasing any findings, the participants'

approval should be asked for. Lastly, in order to protect the participants' identity, the primary data should be retained as confidential.

3.3.4 Autobiographical Reflections

As mentioned earlier in Section 3.1, in qualitative research, the researcher serves as an important instrument of enquiry. Compared with quantitative methods, qualitative methods rely much more on the ability of researchers, as the former only require 'standardised protocols and 'objective' numerical outcomes' (Brodsky, 2008, p. 767), whereas the latter needs the researcher themselves to 'look for, see, experience, and interpret data' (*ibid.*). As a result, a researcher's 'ways of reasoning' often condition the depth and perspectives of qualitative research (Mortari, 2015, p. 2).

As a result, reflexivity has been called for in the qualitative research area. According to McGraw, Zvnkovic and Walker (2000, p. 68), reflexivity is 'a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process'. It allows the researcher to reflect on their position in the research as well as how that has affected the decisions made in each stage of the research process: in doing so they are expected to avoid or reduce the biases caused by the 'subject matter of inquiry' (Mortari, 2015, p. 2).

As Brodsky (2008, p. 767) suggests, the ‘personal and professional skills, trainings, knowledge, and experience’ of a researcher constitute the most significant difference from the position of a research subject. Autobiographical reflections allow qualitative researchers to reflect on their own limitations from the perspectives given above. In a typical autobiographical account of reflections, the researcher’s educational background and social and cultural position will be examined. The aim of providing an autobiographical reflection is not to change the validity or reliability of the research, but to exhibit all the possible factors that may have influenced the reasoning process. In what follows, I will try to reflect on how my academic, social and cultural positions conditioned the development of this research.

As a native-born Chinese, I have spent almost 90% of my life so far (over 24 years) in my home country. Before I started my PhD in the United Kingdom, I received all my education on the Chinese mainland. All the schools I attended in China were public-owned. These are believed to be significant bases for the CPC state to give its citizens patriotic education. As patriotic education in the Chinese mainland usually confuses the concept of the nation and the state, Chinese citizens are taught to support the state and its policies since a very young age. Therefore, during this research, one question that always emerged in my mind was: as a native Chinese, what position shall I take in this research, pro or critical?

I also faced doubts that I could not conduct objective enough research. However, I disagree with this view, primarily for two reasons. First, the biases caused by my background could be reduced to the minimum by academic training. When I have the awareness of reflexivity, I try to detach myself from my feelings towards my motherland throughout the research. Second, my identity as both an insider of the Chinese society and an outsider as a researcher in the UK allows me to have a full and objective understanding of what is happening in China. Hence, my background does not limit the objectivity of this research, but facilitates an account from a non-Orientalism perspective.

In 2013, I obtained a BA in Advertising; two years later, I won an MA in Communication Studies. All the academic training I received before I started this PhD was from the communications perspective. Therefore, some degrees of path-dependency could be seen from my arguments. As can be seen from Chapter 2 and 3, a number of the theories I quote in this research are from the media field. This is also the reason why this research, which attempts to address the political economy of China's neoliberalisation process, chose a special phenomenon in the media industry as the case to examine. One important presupposition of this study is that a society's overall neoliberalisation is achieved via the mediation of other social processes. Some people may think that the findings reached via this approach lack generalisability, as the contexts of the case I examine (media reform) cannot be exactly the same as other social processes. However, I argue that the generalisability of this research is an epistemological one. Media reform in this thesis provides a cut-in point for my discussion. Although not all findings can be directly applied

to other processes, the analytical framework that I use to analyse this media reform process may be of help to studies with a similar interest.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter presents an embedded single-case research design to address the core question of this research. The design rests upon three stages of work, and at each stage, a pragmatic approach was taken to decide the most appropriate data collection methods and the data to be collected. Specifically, by focusing on the secondary data as well as interviews with government officials, it was possible for this research to probe into the institutional context of the New Countryside topic TV dramas in a political economic sense. How the industry norms affected the industrial practices surrounding New Countryside TV dramas was approached by conducting interviews with TV drama professionals. Also helpful for this stage of work were journalistic interviews with TV professionals gathered from the Internet. These journalistic interview data form a type of ‘paratext’, a term ‘originally used to refer to various texts that surround the literary text and orient its reading, but has since been adapted for use in various branches of communication and media studies’ (Mihelj and Huxtable, 2018, p. 48). After watching the examined TV dramas, peasant audiences are expected to form a ‘neoliberal subjectivity’. The third stage of work in this research aimed to analyse the reception of these dramas by Chinese peasants by conducting interviews in two types of Chinese village. It is argued that this design has high practicality.

However, any research has its limitations. As with most case studies, reliability is limited for this design, as the subjectivity of the researcher determines which data to collect and how they were interpreted. This also indicates that the result of the research may be affected by the researcher's personal biases. But the methodological triangulation between the multiple types of data increases the validity of this design. In addition, a scientific sampling procedure ensured the representativeness of the interviewees. In particular, the comparison between results in the two villages with different development levels in China increases the generalisability of the findings.

This research design was developed based on Chapter 2, where a theoretical framework was provided. These two chapters provide important guidance for the data collection and analysis of this research. That being said, what message New Countryside topic TV dramas – the research case of this research – have delivered to the audience still remains unclear. In Chapter 4, the topics and features of representative New Countryside topic TV dramas since 2005 will be introduced. It serves as a literature review for this thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR: A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF CHINESE RURAL TOPIC DRAMAS

4.1 Introduction

As a visual form of communication, television has been particularly welcomed by rural audiences. The early popularity of TV among the rural population is believed to be relevant to the low literacy rate in rural China (Lull, 1991, p. 18). Among all the TV programme types, TV serials in particular have generated cross-generational appeal. A survey shows that in 2009, over 60% of rural audiences across all ages liked watching TV dramas (Chen et al., 2009). It is for this reason that TV dramas have been regarded as an effective tool of communication in rural areas. They have played an important role in delivering information, educating the rural masses, exposing major rural social problems, channelling public sentiments and providing them with entertainment.

Rural-topic dramas are one of the TV drama genres that are most related to the life of peasants. However, Chinese rural-topic TV dramas are not static. Instead, their themes and social influences evolve with the times. In the early years, China's rural television dramas were highly dogmatic, with their stories becoming increasingly popularised alongside a growing peasant audience and in response to the emerging problems in the countryside. We should also acknowledge that the expected functions of these countryside dramas have also changed over time. Initially, countryside TV dramas were

considered merely as a propaganda device. The communist leaders were keen to use them to promote communist role models and endorse communist ideologies. This situation gradually changed as China's social atmosphere became increasingly open and the media market began to grow.

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, since 2005, an increasing number of rural TV dramas have focused on portraying life in the countryside since the entrenchment of the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' policy. This study is concerned with how the SNCC project has affected the activities of China's rural TV drama industry and made professionals follow this particular agenda in drama content. Before probing into this question, we should first acknowledge that specific social, political and market conditions play an important role in shaping the content of Chinese countryside topic TV dramas. Discussion of this is important in contextualising the features of the current SNCC dramas, which will be explored in more detail in Section 4.5.

China's TV drama sector features a centralised media regulation framework and a developing media market. A hierarchical media administrative network forms the major part of this system. It consists of television stations as well as media regulating institutions (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 527, Huang, 1994, pp. 221-222, Chan, 1993a, p. 559, Zhao and Guo, 2005). Besides the state institutions, China's TV drama sector also includes a TV drama market, in which a number of privately and publicly owned drama production and

distribution companies co-operate and compete with each other (Akhavan-Majid, 2004). This system gradually came into shape after China started the Reform and Opening-up process. Teleplay production also concerns public needs. Within the TV drama sector, professionals produce dramas in response to emerging social problems in different social contexts. These dramas in turn constantly influence the public in their ways of making sense of the past, living in the present and envisaging the future. For these reasons, the contemporary Chinese TV series is usually seen as 'a multi-faced cultural field' (Zhao and Wu, 2014), shaped by the state regulation system, the media market and the social context (the size of the audience, emergent social problems, etc.) together. Therefore, the development conditions of TV dramas in a certain time period can be evaluated by looking at the following three aspects: 1. the social context and how it influences the tasks and concerns of TV dramas; 2. how the party-state views TV as a whole and how this influences the production of TV dramas; 3. how the media market develops in this period and how this influences the content of TV dramas.

In this chapter, the history of China's rural-topic TV dramas is periodised into four major eras: the experimental era (1958-1978), the transitional era (1978-1989), the commercialisation era (1989-early 2000s), and the New Countryside drama era (2005 onwards). The periodisation is based on the development conditions of rural-topic TV dramas. By applying the 'society-state-market' analysing framework proposed earlier, this chapter attempts to provide a historical background to examine the production and reception of New Countryside TV dramas since 2005. The focus of the chapter is to

address how the social context, state requirements and level of regulation, as well as the market structure, has changed the content of rural-topic TV dramas in different historical periods. In other words, this chapter examines the development history of Chinese rural-topic TV dramas by answering the following questions: What were the features of the rural-topic TV dramas in each historical period in China, and what were they about? How did the social context, state requirements and regulation, as well as the market structure, produce specific types of rural dramas? The fundamental purpose of this chapter is to investigate how the Chinese rural-topic TV dramas have served the need of the Chinese communist party-state in different time periods, and how this traditional role of rural-topic TV dramas still influences New Countryside TV dramas today.

4.2 The Experimental Period: 1958-1978

1958-1978 witnessed the early years of Chinese countryside TV dramas. It is named the experimental period because during this period of time television was a new medium, and most programmes played were experimental (Keane, 2005a). During this period, the country's TV drama system developed rather slowly, which was associated with the lack of supply of TV components and technological expertise caused by China's sudden break-up with the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the Chinese domestic economy crisis (1959-1961) and the following Cultural Revolution (1967-1977) (Lull, 1991, p. 21). However, influenced by the Communist Party's propaganda tradition, which positions the mass media as a 'collective organiser' of socialism builders (Lenin, 1961, p. 22), TV dramas were treated

as an institutional propaganda tool of the Chinese state and were still given much attention. At that time, the working class and peasants were Chinese society's 'political backbone' (term created by Xinyu Lv, cited in Yuezhi, 2010, p. 9). In order to help the state connect with the rural population and maintain its influence in the countryside, rural life became a major topic portrayed by TV dramas.

This section aims to outline the development of rural-topic TV dramas in China between 1958 and 1978. Since the literature on TV dramas between 1958 and 1978 is limited, this section does not seek to list all the rural TV dramas produced in this period. The discussion will focus on the strong influence of the state on producing TV dramas for the peasantry, a social group which is of great significance to the leadership of the Chinese communist state. It explains how the pressure the newly established People's Republic of China faced after 1949 pushed the Chinese state to seek a self-reliant path of development, how this route pushed the state to shape new peasants, and how specific rural dramas were produced by state-owned media institutions in order to support the state's self-reliance development programmes.

4.2.1 Social Context: A Country Pursuing a Self-Reliance Development Path

After the establishment of the republic, the fate of the party-state became intrinsically linked to the peasantry. To the new communist party-state, the crucial significance of the peasantry lay in the fact that peasants constituted the majority of Chinese society. In 1949,

peasants made up 89.4% of the country's total population (National Bureau of Statistics of China). Such a population size suggests that the new state could not win the support of the Chinese people without the peasantry identifying with its values and nation-building policies. More importantly, the construction of the newly established republic could not be completed without contributions from the peasants.

The Maoist state's mobilisation of peasants in domestic development programmes fully demonstrates the significance of peasants to the Chinese party-state during 1949 to 1978. After the establishment of the PRC, China's development first faced an economic blockade from the West, and then a split-up with the former Soviet Union (Zhao, 2017, p. 4404). Under such political and economic pressure, the Maoist state led the country to follow a self-reliant path.

Mao's philosophy of 'independence in development' featured the rejection of foreign aid and the reliance on the peasants and the countryside in domestic development (Rogers, 1976, p. 223). Specifically, in Mao's China (1949-1978), development was pursued through the economic 'ruthless extraction of domestic agricultural surplus' (Zhao, 2017, p. 4404). Mao emphasised the heavy industry priority strategy and made agriculture resources finance heavy industry. As Chen (2015, p. 41) argues, this was achieved via the commune system's absolute monopoly over the ownership and distribution of the

country's rural economic resources. This, accompanied by the urban and rural household registration system, gave the state power to develop an urban-centric industrialisation.

At the same time, the Maoist state also promoted a series of policies to improve the social status of the peasantry. Not to mention Mao's repeated approval of the political role of the peasantry on official documents, the Maoist state also made a series of changes to improve rural social welfare. These efforts include: extended education among peasants⁸, the 'wiping out illiteracy' campaign in the countryside⁹, the establishment of a rural medical and health network consisting of 'barefoot doctors' and 'health workers'¹⁰, as well as a nationwide rural commune system in which vulnerable groups could get basic social care and social support from the collective. In terms of social mobility, although the household system limited the rural-to-urban flow, Mao called for a reverse flow from the urban to the rural, advocating that intellectuals should go to the rural to unite the peasants¹¹. During

⁸ During the Cultural Revolution, Mao stressed that education should be 'rural-oriented' to serve agricultural production. As a result, primary and secondary school enrolments in the rural areas were significantly improved at this stage.

⁹ On March 29th, 1956, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued *Decision on Wiping out Illiteracy*, pointing out that making the broad working masses literate is an important political task during the construction of a new democratic society. The literacy standard that The Decisions made for peasants was 'capable of using at least 1500 characters, reading popular newspapers, writing brief notes, doing simple accounting and making easy calculations with abacus'.

¹⁰ For detailed accounts of 'barefoot doctors' see 'Cong Chijiao Yisheng de Chengzhang Kan Yixue Jiaoyu Geming de Fangxiang – Shanghai Shi de Diaocha Baogao (The Direction of the Revolution in Medical Education from the Experience of Bare Foot Doctors: An Investigation of Shanghai)' (1968) *Hongqi*, 1968(3). This article marks the first time that the term 'barefoot doctor' was used by the party media. The article speaks highly of the role barefoot doctors played in the countryside, echoing the instructions of Mao Zedong regarding training a professional medical team for the rural people.

¹¹ During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the Maoist state launched a nationwide campaign of 'sending urban intellectuals to mountain areas and the countryside'. This political campaign aimed at eliminating the 'three major differences', namely, those between workers and peasants, between city and countryside and between manual and mental labour.

the Cultural Revolution, he even launched the ‘Down to the Countryside’ Movement to make city intellectuals work with and learn from peasants. Whilst the state’s urban-centric development policy created a widening urban-rural divide, these measures helped the party-state to gain broad support from the countryside.

As discussed at the beginning of this section, maintaining a close linkage with the peasantry did not just contribute to the new communist state’s legitimacy, but also could help it to mobilise the peasants to develop the economy and thus consolidate the socialism scheme. As will be discussed in Section 4.2.4, specific propaganda campaigns were carried out in the countryside in order to maintain connections with the peasants and make them serve the country’s ‘self-reliance’ development path. Some instructions relating to the content and themes of the rural propaganda were released by the state. This highlights the instrumental nature of mass communications to the power of the party-state in China. In the following section, the instrumental value of the TV system to the party-state will be discussed in more detail.

4.2.2 State Requirements: Shaping New Peasants

As explained in Section 4.2.1, the Maoist state carried out propaganda campaigns to help it connect with the masses and mobilise the peasants to support its ‘self-reliance’ development programmes. However, traditional peasants were largely passive and difficult to mobilise (Fei, 1992). Therefore, an important task for rural propaganda was to

reform the peasants. By analysing leaders' talks, state-organ newspapers coverage and relevant literature, the following section tries to map out the specific aims and intentions of the state in carrying out rural propaganda during this period.

One of the important aims of the propaganda between 1958 and 1978 was to evoke peasants' passions for the socialist construction and wake up their master consciousness as members of the newly born country. As Guo and Sun (2002) notice, during this time period, *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party and also China's most important agenda-setter, contained rich texts claiming that peasants 'threw off the oppressor', 'stood up' and 'grasped their own fate' since the establishment of the PRC. In their opinion, the rich texts surrounding peasants 'throwing off the chains' served to enact the poor peasants' class awareness and thus facilitate peasants' identification with the newly established communist state.

The other important aim of the propaganda during this period was to educate the rural population to aspire to positive qualities the state saw in peasants. This was out of both an ideological concern and an economic imperative to make the countryside and the agricultural sector a stable power source for the country's initial industrial development (Zhao, 2017, p. 4404). For example, Mao (1968) pointed out that 'it is absolutely necessary for educated young people to go to the countryside to be re-educated by the poor and lower-middle peasants'. This made the countryside an 'ideological high ground'

where peasants' loyalty to the Maoist state, their enthusiasms for socialism and their initiatives in the socialism construction were considered a model for all social classes to learn from (Yan, 2005, pp. 79-80). In another example, Dazhai, a poor village where peasants allegedly worked on their own to build a productive socialist commune, was given much publicity because it embodied the collectivism, self-discipline, hard-working and self-reliant spirit that Mao highly endorsed (Meisner, 1986, pp. 352-375) during the collectivisation movement. These qualities were highly praised by the Maoist state because they were necessary for reaching the state's development goal, which Schramm, Chu and Yu (Schramm et al., 1976) describe as the creation of a state 'purged of selfishness and greed'. In other words, peasants with these qualities were helpful for the Maoist state's socialism construction career.

4.2.3 Market Structure: A State-funded TV Drama System Serving the Party-State

China's post-1949 construction of its mass-communication system largely followed the Soviet model. Lenin's theory of the press, in particular, inspired the Maoist state to position the mass media as 'not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator', but also as a 'collective organiser' between different groups of socialism builders (Lenin, 1961, p. 22). This tradition emphasised the instrumental value of media to the power of the party-state. Mao (1965), similarly, gave instructions to the cultural elites at the 1942 Yenan

Literature and Art Forum that 'literature and art are subordinate to politics'.¹² Here he made much the same sort of appeals as when Lenin (1961, p. 45) used to call on the subordination of literature to the rule of the Central Committee. Like other forms of mass communication, between 1945 and 1978, the major role of the TV drama system was also designed to echo the Party's guidance in political and social life.

From 1958 to 1978, the production and distribution of TV dramas followed a planned economy mode. At that time, there were no market mechanisms in China's media field. Local television stations were responsible for both the production and broadcasting of TV series (this will be explained in full detail in Chapter 6). Like many other types of mass media in the early years of the PRC's history, the running of television stations was dependent on the party-state's financial assistance (Zhao and Guo, 2005, pp. 521-522).

Because of the financial independency, TV drama production was also under the tight control of the state. This control was manifested in two aspects. On the one hand, drama productions were supervised and verified by state regulators before being broadcast. On the other hand, the constrained ideological climate at that time also determined that the state policies, party-organ media coverage and thoughts and ideas of the state leaders had huge influence on drama production and broadcasting processes. In Section 4.2.2, we have discussed the specific aims and intentions of the state in carrying out rural

¹² Although this principle was proposed seven years before the establishment of the PRC, it had been widely accepted as the guiding thought of the CPC's cultural administration throughout the Mao era.

propaganda during this period. Consequently, this state-owned TV drama system started to produce drama products according to these instructions.

4.2.4 The Rise of Early Rural Topic TV Dramas

During this period, extolling the happiness of the ‘new life’ (after the establishment of the PRC), featuring stories about communist role models and echoing the policy of the Party became the three main themes the early rural TV dramas portrayed (Wu, 1997, pp. 31-43). In 1958, the then Beijing TV Station, out of which grew the later China Central Television (CCTV), broadcasted China’s first TV drama, *One Bite of Vegetable Pancake*. This is China’s first rural-topic TV drama. It is also an example of TV drama extolling the happiness of the new life after the establishment of the PRC. The drama starts with a girl’s criticism of her younger sister for wasting food, and then portrays how the two sisters recall their family’s sufferings in the old society and contrast them with the happiness in the new. It educates people to cherish grain and to treasure today’s happy life. By contrasting the past bitterness and the present happiness, this drama presents the noticeable achievements the state has gained in improving people’s livelihood, thereby having legitimised the leadership of the party. More importantly, at a time of severe material shortage, this TV drama was designed to echo the party-state’s discourse on saving food and thereby relieving the state’s pressure in the nationwide famine.¹³

¹³ From 1959 to 1961, Chinese society suffered a nationwide food shortage, known as ‘the Great Chinese Famine’. The famine was believed to be caused by a series of natural disasters. However, the previous

Similarly, other rural-themed dramas were also made to serve the political needs of specific times. They did so by creating role models for rural audiences. One representative example is *A Peach Garden Daughter Marries A Wo Valley Man* (*Taoyuan Nver Jia Wogu*, 桃园女儿嫁窝谷), which portrays the story of how a poor village guy wins his lover's father's support for their marriage. In the story, the guy proves his ability while leading the villagers to reclaim a wasteland. This drama was produced to motivate rural people to work hard towards certain social and economic goals.

Another example is *The Song of the Youth* (*Qingchun Qu*, 青春曲), which tells the story of a rural girl giving up her city job and instead going back to the village to construct her own hometown. The background for this drama was that at that time, the state released several official documents to prevent the overflow of the rural-to-city labour force. It is in such a context that this TV play was produced in order to convince the peasants to stay in the countryside.

However, from 1966 to 1976, leftist cultural policies dominated the Chinese screens. *Summary of the Forum on the Work in Literature and Art in Army Forces*, written by Mao's wife Qing Jiang and released by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, claimed that the cultural field had been 'under the dictatorship of a black anti-Party and anti-socialist line which is diametrically opposed to Chairman Mao's thought' (1966). In order

Great Leap Forward Movement and the state's 'sacrifice agriculture to nurture industry' policy also should be blamed because they severely disrupted normal agricultural production.

to show their loyalty to the Maoist state, television stations soon adjusted their broadcasting arrangements. Beijing Television Station decided to ‘broadcast more programmes which propagate the Maoist thought, build the communist warriors’ heroic images, reflect the life of the workers, peasants and soldiers, etc.’ (Lull, 1991, p. 53). Moreover, many programmes were cancelled because they were judged as vulgar, superficial and in low taste (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 523). Many television crews disbanded due to the tight political control. Instead, eight revolutionary operas were established as ‘model operas’ and then became the only entertainment replayed over and over again on TV screens. During these ten years, few new TV dramas were broadcasted except for Shanghai TV stations’ two rural teleplays, *The Daughter of the Secretary of the Party Committee* (*Gongshe Dangwei Shuji de Never*, 公社党委书记的女儿) and the *Holy Duty* (*Shensheng de Zhize*, 神圣的职责). Both focused on stories of intellectuals going to the countryside and serving the villages, which ideologically supported the state’s ‘Down to the Countryside Campaign’.

Obviously, during the first twenty years after the birth of China’s television industry in 1958, television series’ political and educational functions overrode its social and cultural ones. Most rural TV series ideologically followed the discourses of the party-state. They contributed to the implementation of the state’s rural policies. Although these stories did depict rural life, they were weak at reflecting the real needs of rural people. Despite the significant financial and technological support provided by the state, rural TV series failed

to become a public cultural sphere in which different camps of society could hold debate on rural developments.

4.3 The Transitional Period: 1978-1989

If 1958-1978 was an era when China established its own television system, which brought countryside TV dramas under strict state control, then from 1978 to 1989, a more liberal atmosphere for TV drama creation gradually came into shape. For China's TV drama industry, these ten years were a period of profound transformation brought by Deng Xiaoping's reforms. A handful of policies gradually alleviated party limitations over countryside drama production. It was also in this period that countryside TV dramas started touching upon the negative social influences brought by leftist political campaigns, which was considered taboo in previous decades.

This section aims to describe the development conditions of rural-topic TV dramas in China between 1978 and 1989. In 1978, the Chinese state officially announced the Reform and Open Door Policy. The reform firstly started in Chinese rural areas. Later, market mechanisms were introduced into other fields of social life. These measures changed the subjects and concerns of rural-topic dramas. This section provides an illustration of how the peasants resisted the leftist political movements and pushed forward rural reform, how the party-state under Deng Xiaoping's leadership permitted greater

freedom for TV drama production and how the reformed TV drama sector helped peasants to express their true feelings towards the political leftism during 1949-1978.

4.3.1 Social Context: Peasants' Resistance Against the Leftist Politics

In Section 4.2.1, we have already discussed the role of the peasants in China's development during the Maoist era. Peasants also played a key role in China's post-Mao modernisation process. Most noticeably, in the late 1970s, heavy survival pressure in the countryside pushed peasants to resist collective farming. This forced the state to reform the rural sector, which led to the dismantling of the communes and the vast proliferation of markets throughout the country (Zhou, 1996, p. 71). In this sense, it was the peasants, rather than the post-Mao state, that initiated China's transform. As Kelliher (1992, p. 244) puts it, all the radical changes of China's rural reform, such as the dismantling of collective farming in favour of the family contract system, commercial practices in the agricultural sector and township and village enterprises (TVEs), can be traced back to peasant innovations. Their struggle has been summarised by Zweig as a process of constant local opposition, step-by-step demands for new change and the final policy change at the central level (1989, p. 174).

The struggle of the peasants shows that the leftist political movements provoked growing discontent with the state among Chinese peasants in the 1970s. In this context, it was of

vital importance for the Chinese party-state to improve its image and strengthen its connections with the peasants.

The intention of the state to maintain its relationship with the peasants can be seen from the rhetoric of the party-organ newspaper during this period. At the beginning of the reform era, the party-organ media began to portray peasants as the beneficiaries of the state-initiated rural reform. For instance, in 1980, as the contracting system brought high agricultural yields to the province of Anhui, major media began criticising the Mao-endorsed Dazhai model (Vogel, 2011, p. 441). As mentioned in Section 4.2.2, this model of commune-building was given much newspaper attention in the Mao era. In November, 1980, *People's Daily* published the central Party Committee's reflections on the 'Learn from Dazhai in the Agriculture Movement', emphasising that the implementation of administrative measures should always consider local peasants' economic benefits and respect peasants' wills.¹⁴ This article delivered a message to the country that China's future rural reform would prevent interference from the political movement, and ought to be centred on peasants' interests. This can be seen as the task of state propaganda during this period. As TV was considered an important part of the Chinese propaganda system, China's TV drama sector also began to produce dramas in order to legitimate the

¹⁴ For detailed accounts see 'Comments from the CPC Central Committee on Shanxi Provincial Party Committee's Reflections on the Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture Movement' (1980) *People's Daily*. November 23rd, 1980.

power of the Party at the grassroots level. In Section 4.3.4, this will be discussed in more detail.

4.3.2 State Requirements: Encouraging Freedom in Drama Production

The post-1978 era saw the inconsistency and flexibility of the CPC government's lines of managing mass media communication. Lessons learned from the Cultural Revolution, in which extreme leftist politics infiltrated both the communication content and the institutional structures of the media and cultural systems and created a decade-long cultural stagnation, made the state start to relax its rigid political limitations on cultural production.

As a signal to society, in 1978, the then Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, delivered a speech at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress, encouraging people to 'emancipate the mind, use the brain and seek truths from facts' (Beijing Review, 1981, p. 71). In 1979, at the Fourth Congress of Literature and Art Workers, Deng further urged all levels of Party Committees to 'help literature and art workers liberate their thoughts, break the chains that Lin Biao and the Gang of Four set on their spirits'.¹⁵ Bringing the slogan of

¹⁵ For the full text of Deng's speech see Deng, X. (1979) *Congratulatory Speech at the 4th Representative Conference of China Literature and Art Workers*. Available at: <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/1979/10/30/congratulatory-speech-at-the-4th-representative-conference-of-china-literature-and-art-workers/> (Accessed: January 31st, 2018).

'a hundred flowers bloom together, a hundred schools of thought contend together', which was originally created by Mao in 1956 but was soon abandoned in the following 'Anti-Rightist Movement' in 1957, back to the frontline of the cultural field, Deng and his state gave intellectuals bigger freedom for cultural production.

The party-state's intention to launch cultural reform is particularly evident in the appointment of Wang Meng, a liberal writer and 'a symbol of resistance against the cultural hardline' (Chan, 1993a, p. 26.5), as Minister of Culture during 1986-1989. At the same time, the Deng government also started to financially decentralise its control over media institutions. In the broadcasting field, in 1983, the CPC implemented the 'four-level TV Station' policy to allow city and county governments to run their own TV stations. This enabled the state to mobilise local resources and rapidly build a nationwide television network (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 527, Huang, 1994, pp. 221-222, Chan, 1993a, p. 559).

However, the central state did not give up its control over local TV stations. The Central Propaganda Department, which was re-established in 1977, oversaw the orientations of all the country's communication content. In addition, in 1982, the state established the new Ministry of Radio and Television (MRT) to oversee China's overall broadcasting operations. From 1983, the Ministry of Radio and Television began to hold the yearly National Television Series Theme Planning Conference. At the conference, production institutions were required to report their production plans for the next year to the committee.

The conference would then decide which projects could continue. In this way, the state was enabled to eliminate dramas which went against the socialist ideology from the very beginning. In addition, it also made it possible to control the proportion of different themes (Zhang 2014:65), thereby supporting the state's arrangements in different fields at the macro level.

Soon, the outbreak of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 (this will be explained later in Section 4.4) made the Party realise the risk to their grip on power behind political liberalisation. In a state of worry that mass media might have promoted too liberal ideas much, after 1989, the Party sought to reassert control over mass communication (Zhao, 2008, pp. 21-22).

4.3.3 Market Structure: The Creation of the Chinese Media Industry

It was also during this time that China's mass media began its unique commercialisation process. As Chan (1993b, p. 25.5) and Chan (1993a, p. 26.8) point out, Deng's approach to modernisation was to have the best of both a capitalist economy and a socialist superstructure. In the cultural realm, this was seen in Deng's intervention for art to be saleable at market and at the same time to legitimise the Party's hold on power (Chan, 1993a, p. 26.8). In order to reconcile the two aims, the Deng government started to reform the country's mass-communication system in multiple ways.

The first significant policy implemented was that from 1979, mass media were given authorisation to accept advertising. This not only relieved the state's financial pressure of subsidising media, but also drove the country's mass media to care about the interests of the audience (Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 557).

Secondly, diversified sources of funds were allowed to invest in TV dramas. This pushed the previous 'state-subsidised propaganda operation' (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 524) to be more market-oriented, and therefore allowed for more freedom from the state's administrative control.

The introduction of market mechanisms into the television field largely stimulated the country's TV series production. After the marketised reform, many previous content providers (such as state-owned film studios) stopped providing free programmes to TV (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 524). As a result, generating more content independently became imperative for television stations. With funds from advertisers and other sponsors, television series soon became a profitable market. Another significant contribution of the developing media market was that it created a more liberal industrial environment in which the production of dramas was freer from political control. However, it should be noticed that the market mechanisms during this era were still at the early stage of development. Overall, the production of TV dramas was still dominated by TV stations, instead of private companies.

4.3.4 The Rise of ‘Scar-Introspection’ TV Dramas

From 1978 to 1989, the production of TV drama enjoyed a relatively freer environment. In a setting where the then state leader Deng Xiaoping repeatedly stressed that Chinese people should ‘emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts’ and ‘study the new situation and tackle the new problems’¹⁶ (1978), the media were allowed more freedom in content creation as long as they did not infringe the baseline – the leadership of the Party, and Marxist and Maoist theories. In 1980, an editorial from *People’s Daily* made it clear that ‘literature and art serve the people,’ not politics (1980). As a result, dramas with stiff political dogma no longer dominated the screen. Instead, those reflecting real life became the new mainstream. At the 1983 Theme Planning Conference, ‘real life’ was determined as the major theme for the next year (Wu, 1997, p. 190). In 1985, the conference particularly criticised unprofessional interference in drama production from political leaders (Wu, 1997, p. 193). Similarly, in 1986, the then Minister of Radio and Television, Zhisheng Ai, specifically pointed out that the television people must balance ‘learning Marxism’ and making TV dramas (Wu, 1997, p. 194).

In this context, TV drama-makers presented the audience with many works portraying real social problems. Since China’s economic transformation started from rural areas and had

¹⁶ On December 13, 1978, Xiaoping Deng made a speech at the Working Conference of the CPC Central Committee. The title of this speech was ‘Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts and Unite as One in Looking to the Future’. In the speech he encouraged the people to ‘break down the rigid thinking’, saying that the new China needed people who ‘dare to think’ and ‘dare to explore the new path’.

given rise to many new phenomena in the countryside, the television drama industry began to concentrate on these new rural problems arising from the reform.

New Star was a typical TV drama covering rural problems at that time. It portrays the story of how a young communist reformer, Li Xiangnan, implements effective reform in both villages and the county against the muddled Chinese bureaucracy. The most noticeable feature of *New Star* is how it straightforwardly attacks the corruption and dereliction problems inside the communist bureaucracy. Since it resonated well with the complaints that many peasants and workers had about officials, this drama received a good reputation at the time (Lull, 1991, p. 93).

There were also some rural stories which focused on the sufferings caused by the leftist movements. Stories like *Xique's Tears* (*Xique Lei*, 喜鹊泪)¹⁷, *The Boy Who Looks after Ducks* (*Fang Ya Tong*, 放鸭童),¹⁸ etc., reflected on the traumas on people left by the leftist movements. Just like the popularity of 'Scar Literature' in the literature field during this period (Jing, 2007), TV dramas that introspect on the scars created by the leftist political movements on society also were loved by audience at that time. These dramas were

¹⁷ This TV drama depicts the tragic love story of a girl named Xique. She was forced into a marriage by her father. Her husband's family also bought off the county and village cadres to force her to marry him. Finally, Xique committed suicide to show her will to fight against oppression.

¹⁸ In this TV drama, the main character, village boy Dandan, hides in the reed marshes in order to protect his ducks, the only source of finance of his family, from the harm of the political movement. Unfortunately, he gets bitten by a snake and becomes disabled. After the reform and opening-up, Dandan gets good medical treatment. He finally recovers and becomes the duck expert in the village.

devoted to reflecting on the lessons learned from the Cultural Revolution and helping people express their real feelings towards the leftist politics. These works show that under the state's relatively lenient cultural policies during 1978-1989, rural TV series had become more critical in themes and less dogmatic in communication, and started to concentrate on the real social problems in the countryside.

In conclusion, we could see that in this period, China's rural TV drama had developed in a freer political environment. The market mechanism and the state's support not only stimulated their production in quantity, but also created a liberal atmosphere for TV drama creation. As a result, rural TV series became able to focus on real rural social issues. To some extent, during this period, rural television series served as a cultural forum, in which many liberal intellectuals shared their political criticisms and their concerns about rural China. But meanwhile, a sophisticated state administration system was developing in order to ensure that those series were ideologically unharmed to the socialist regime.

4.4 The Commercial Period and the Crisis of Rural Dramas: 1989-early 2000s

While the Chinese television industry was trying to engage with more social and cultural debates of the day, in 1989, the massive student demonstration at Tiananmen Square¹⁹

¹⁹ The Tiananmen Demonstration was a student-led protest movement calling for political reform. In June 1989, groups of students, joined by factory workers, news agency employees and even some members of Party organisations, gathered at Tiananmen Square to call for political reform. They claimed the political

marked the end of its relative freedom. Dealing with the demonstration had not only made the state aware of the importance of having a strong military force, but equally importantly reminded them that ‘ideological force must be strongly imposed’ (Lull, 1991, p. 206) to keep the existing social order. The reason was during the demonstration, television unexpectedly transmitted the demonstration’s images to the worldwide audience, which caused many criticisms and created heavy pressure on the state (*ibid.*, pp. 182-207). Consequently, the party started to tighten control over the media system, especially over television, because of its strong power to instantly transmit images to a vast audience.

At the same time as the reform in Chinese media was progressing, the Chinese TV drama market had become increasingly commercialised. Under the market mechanisms, drama production institutions were pushed to target audiences with ample buying power. To the interest-driven media investors, rural residents just seemed unattractive. This created the marginalisation of rural-topic TV dramas during this period. Considering the small percentage of rural-topic dramas in the whole TV drama market during this time period, this section does not seek to describe the features of rural-topic TV dramas. Instead, it aims to discuss the reasons why rural-topic TV dramas fell out of the favour of the media market. This is helpful for the understanding of the emergence of New Countryside dramas, which has received substantial support from the Chinese party-state since 2005.

reform ought to be an essential complement to economic liberalisation. The breath of its social base made the post-Mao state unprecedentedly concerned about its legitimacy. Later the protests were suppressed by military methods after the government declared martial law.

4.4.1 Social Context: The Emergence of ‘Low Quality’ Discourse

Section 4.3.1 discussed the role of the peasants in China’s economic reform. But the contributions of the peasants to China’s post-Mao development were not limited to the economic aspect. Peasants also fundamentally transformed China’s macrosocial structure.

Since the Reform and Open Door Policy was announced, China has been reformed from a closed society – which, as Zhou (1996, p. 237) claims, ‘feudalised’ farmers by tying them to the land – to an open one with high spatial and stratification mobility. This is because in the post-reform era, peasants obtained the autonomy of decision-making in terms of their choices of career and place of residence. Therefore, a huge migration wave from the countryside to the city was formed. Between 1978 and 2008, the share of the workforce in primary industry in the total labour market declined from 70.5% to 40.8% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2008). Most of the population constituting this decline resettled in factories. In 2016, among the over 281.71 million farmers making a living in cities, 30% worked in the manufacturing industry. This is the largest proportion among all economic sectors (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). In this sense, when China has become increasingly integrated into the global capitalist market and has become ‘the world factory’, a major part of the country’s economic achievements and, in a greater sense, its comprehensive strength growth, should be attributed to rural-to-city migrant workers.

However, alongside this rural-to-city migration wave, there emerged a discourse in society which accused peasants of having ‘low suzhi’ (this word could be translated as ‘quality’ in English). The discourse of ‘low suzhi’ is usually associated with poverty and lack of competence. As Yu observes, in the post-1989 era, ‘migrant workers in cities are blamed for their lack of suzhi, just as local cadres blame peasants in the poor rural areas for their low suzhi’ (Yu, 2011, p. 43). Schneider (2015, pp. 336-337) also notices that at the beginning of the 2000s, while the CPC started to use ‘low quality’ and ‘backwardness’ to suggest peasants were a systematically and structurally deficient group in some of its policy documents, this ‘low quality’ discourse was pervasive in the Chinese media. The rise of the suzhi discourse shows that despite the contributions peasants made to China’s social and economic development, this population became increasingly marginalised in Chinese society because of their lack of competence in the market economy.

4.4.2 State Requirements: Strengthening Ideological Control

As stated at the beginning of Section 4.4, during this period, the party-state started to tighten control over the content of China’s television system. The state released a series of policies in order to use TV programmes to boost the audience’s confidence in the communist ideology. On the one hand, the ‘positive propaganda’ tradition, which asked television to cover more good features of Chinese political and economic reform rather than negative sides, was emphasised by the state (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p. 527). On the other hand, the state tried to prevent the emergence of an alternative ideological

framework. Like Adam Przeworski says, 'it is not legitimacy that keeps an authoritarian regime in power, but the absence of a preferable and viable alternative' (Przeworski, 1986, p. 52).

In order to weaken or even eliminate the alternative ideology, the state set tighter controls over the importation of overseas TV dramas. In 1994, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT; established on the basis of the previous MRT in 1986) regulated that the proportion of foreign TV dramas a TV station played per day should not exceed 25% of all dramas it broadcast. In 2004, government restriction was further strengthened. It was announced that in the 'golden time' (7pm-10pm), no foreign series could be broadcast unless permitted by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT; founded on the basis of the previous MRFT in 1998).

4.4.3 Market Structure: An Increasingly Commercialised TV Drama Market

The control over imported TV series provided a favourable policy environment for the Chinese local TV drama production institutions. One background of that time period is that after two decades of marketised reform, the Chinese TV drama market had become increasingly commercialised. By the early 2000s, most of the local production studios were privately-run enterprises (Shanghai TV Festival and CSM, 2004, p. 93). Under the market mechanisms, in order to attract more advertisements, drama production institutions were pushed to target audiences with ample buying power. Similarly, TV stations also showed

more interest in catering for the tastes of relatively more affluent audiences. However, at the same time, since the macro-market-oriented reform in society further widened the existing urban-rural disparity,²⁰ rural residents just seemed unattractive to many of the interest-driven investors,. Consequently, after 1989, fewer and fewer television series on television screens were made for rural audiences. In 1995, the Real Life Themed Television Drama Forum particularly pointed out the problem of a shortage of rural television dramas in the television market (Wu, 1997, p. 221). After being left out in the country's industrialisation process, peasants were again neglected by TV programme investors. Chinese rural TV dramas regrettably sank into recession.

Despite the huge influence private capital brought to the rural TV drama market, it is untenable to posit that commercialisation happened in the Chinese media market as an absolute liberalistic transformation. On the contrary, at this time, the party-state's control over the production of teleplays reached a new peak. To some extent, the commercialism is a new form of control in the television field, for the state nowadays is using 'censorship of the market' to strengthen the 'censorship of the content' (Schel, 1995, 1999). Specifically, for fear that works made by the market-oriented private studios may undermine the state's ideological framework, in 1989, the state announced the 'TV Drama Production Permission' system to enhance the industry entry threshold. In this way, only

²⁰ The reform and opening-up on the whole have increased Chinese peasants' living standards. However, since China has been developing the export-oriented economy which largely relies on manufacturing, the agricultural sector contributes only a relatively small proportion of the country's GDP growth. In contrast, the city population in fact benefits more from such a developing mode. As a result, although peasants' incomes have increased, the rural-city income gap has been increasing.

institutions with state permission could produce teleplays. Besides this, the SARFT also established a ‘publicising and filing system’ to censor TV drama themes before their production. Similarly, the ‘licensing after censoring’ system was also established to ensure the political correctness of each episode. This shows that the commercialisation of the Chinese TV drama market, which was firstly introduced by the state, is also developing along the route which the party-state designs for it.

4.4.4 The Marginalisation of Rural Topic Dramas

Despite the official media sector’s continuous attention to peasants, this group was increasingly marginalised in the overall mass media rhetoric. Fewer and fewer media works featuring a rural topic were able to create a great national sensation like in the late 1980s. By contrast, media, especially the more commercialised media, had been shifting attention onto the growing urban classes.

In television, *Aspirations* (*Kewang*, 渴望) and *In the Editorial Office* (*Bianjibu de Gushi*, 编辑部的故事), two phenomenal TV dramas in the early 1990s, focused on stories of a worker family and a group of magazine journalists respectively. Although the two hit shows also included rural characters, these characters were usually depicted as supporting roles in the main story. Out of a desire for more investments and advertising income, these dramas sought to cater to the tastes of a more affluent urban audience. As Guo, Sun and

Bu put it, *Aspirations* satisfied the urban working-class audiences' need for a collective identity midst all the turbulence caused by the 1989 political suppression and the economic reforms (Guo et al., 1993). Gradually, peasants became the group falling out of the media's favour.

In the early 2000s, the percentage of rural-themed TV dramas and films further declined. In sharp contrast to the Maoist media's repeated approval of peasants' political significance, the post-1989 media seemed to be delivering a message that peasants were no longer a crucial social group in Chinese society. Among the limited number of rural TV dramas during this period, the communist ideology was still dominant, only in a much more hidden way. 'Rural party leaders' became a frequently seen theme (Zhong and Zhang, 2009, p. 8). TV dramas like *The Party Member Erleng's Mother*, *In the Field of Hope*, etc., usually shaped rural cadres into virtue models who won the love and respect of the villagers by their moral charm. By focusing on leaders' moral charisma, these rural TV dramas skilfully catered to the official 'positive propaganda' ideology. But in fact this character design also avoided many realistic problems in the living rural world. These features all prove that rural television series at that time strived hard between state censorship and market competition.

4.5 The Development of New Countryside Dramas: From 2005 onwards

4.5.1 Social Context: Arising Rural Problems and the State Response

Rural China has, in many ways, contributed to China's unique modernisation construction. However, the country's over 60 years' development owed huge debts to the countryside. As Yuezhi Zhao (2017, p. 4405) points out, problems arising in the countryside include the 'hollowing out' of the rural society because of the labour flow, local agricultural products' lack of competitiveness after China embraced the global market, a lack of investment in the rural welfare system because of decollectivisation, the violent land-grabbing caused by urbanisation, etc. Similarly, Wen makes the point that the neglect of the well-being of the rural left-behind groups increased social discontent (2006, pp. 1-25). As Stockmann (2013, p. 25) notices, during the Hu-Wen administration, a rising number of riots, protests and petitions emerged, which made the CPC state concerned about its ability to stay in power. Many of the protests involved peasants or migrant peasant-workers (See, for example, Yu, 2007, Li and O'Brien, 2008). This situation has alerted the state, and led to the entrenchment of a nationwide 'constructing new socialist countryside' policy.

In 2006, the then Chinese leader, Hu Jintao, pointed out that 'in order to speed up modernisation, it is imperative to properly handle the relationship between industrial and agriculture development, and between urban and rural development' (Xinhuanet, 2006),

releasing a signal that the government had decided to adjust Mao's decades' long 'heavy industry priority strategy' and 'using agricultural resources to nurture industry' policy. The then Premier of China, Wen Jiabao, echoed Hu Jintao's statement by making it clear that it was time for urban areas to support rural development through various channels, and that increased financial support would be invested into agricultural and rural development (Xinhuanet, 2006). In fact, since 2004, the No. 1 Central Document of the Central Government of China²¹ has focused on rural issues for 15 years in a row. This further shows that the countryside is returning to the centre of the Chinese party-state's political rhetoric for the country's better modernisation.

In 2005, the Chinese state proclaimed a 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' project during the 5th Plenary Session of the Sixteenth CPC's Central Committee. It showed the Chinese state's intention to accelerate countryside development. In 2006, the details of the project were officially announced when the National People's Congress approved China's *11th Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2006-2010)*, in which it outlined a number of policy guidelines that all levels of government should follow in order to promote comprehensive countryside modernisation (Ahlers and Schubert, 2009, p. 36).

²¹ Every year since 1949, the first document that the central government releases is known as Document No.1. It normally points to the most urgent tasks that the state sees need to be done in the coming year. *Document No.1, 1982* was the first to address rural, countryside and peasant issues. Following it, the CPC state put rural problems into the No.1 Document 4 years in a row. In 2004, rural, countryside and peasant problems became the key word of Document No.1 again. Since then, Document No.1 has focused on these 'three rural' issues for 15 successive years.

Although the 11th Five Year Plan itself did not entail substantial changes at the implementation level, it gave all levels of government a target for the years to come – that is, building new villages that meet the requirements of ‘advanced production, comfortable livelihood, a civilised lifestyle, clean and tidy villages, democratic administration’ (shengchan fazhan, shenghuo kuanyu, xiangfeng wenming, cunrong zhengjie, guanli minzhu) (China State Council, 2006). These five facets could also be seen as a description of what a socialist new countryside is according to the state. This overall objective also shows the Chinese state’s intention to use the central-planning regime to tackle the ‘three rural issues’ that have long hindered the development of the country: agriculture, villages and farmers (see, for example, Wen, 2005). Later, China’s 12th and 13th Five Year Plans both affirmed continuous commitment to this SNCC initiative (a detailed discussion on the links between these documents will be given in Chapter 5).

4.5.2 State Requirements: Producing More Cultural Products for the Peasants

The shortage of rural television dramas at the beginning of the 21st century was only one of the many reflections of the structural divides between urban and rural areas. It shows that although the peasants had been making a great contribution to China’s development, the rural population had been unable to share what the economic reform had to offer, especially cultural products. In order to solve this problem, the Chinese party-state has been trying to remedy the imbalances between the cultural resources that urban and rural residents share. The SNCC project exactly aims to improve the current situation. In the

TV drama field, this SNCC agenda has brought about two aspects of changes to ensure that peasants can enjoy high-quality TV dramas.

On the infrastructure level, the Cuncuntong Project, one important policy under the SNCC framework, seeks to expand the scope of rural radio, television and broadband access. As part of the efforts to promote rural informatisation, in 2008, the state launched the ‘Electronics down to the Village’ Project to endorse the penetration of consumer electronics including TV sets into rural communities. Moreover, the ‘Information to the Countryside Project’, launched in 2009, also involves developing content, services and communication appliances for rural areas (Minges et al., 2014, p. 4).

At the content level, measures also have been taken to increase the production of rural-themed TV series. On 7 November 2005, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued *The Opinions on Further Strengthening Cultural Construction in Rural Areas*. The Opinions sets out concrete plans to boost the development of rural culture. Specifically, it urges local government to increase radio and TV coverage in rural areas, to develop movie screenings in villages, to upgrade rural cultural infrastructure and to organise more rural mass cultural activities, etc. In particular, it suggests multiple ways to stimulate the provision of rural-themed cultural works. These ways include ensuring a certain percentage of cultural works are rural-themed, investing more funds into the production of key rural-themed works, allocating a certain amount of honours and prizes

to high-quality rural-themed works, urging media institutions to support the spread of rural-themed works, etc. (Xinhua, 2005b). Moreover, in 2015, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly released the 12th peasant-focused ‘No.1 Central Document’²² since 2004. It calls on literature and art workers to ‘go deep into the countryside’ and get their works ‘closer to rural life’. Meanwhile, it also points out that more cultural projects which benefit the peasants need to be implemented (Xinhua, 2015).

With the support of these documents, regional producing institutions have been more motivated to create TV series portraying real rural life in the new era.

4.5.3 Market Structure: The Industrialisation of the Chinese TV Drama Sector

In the 2000s, the role of TV dramas has changed from a ‘propaganda tool’, narrative of ‘social context’ or of ‘Chinese pedagogy, propaganda practices, and literature traditions’ (Keane, 2005b, p. 84), to one of the growing ‘cultural industries’, as Yin (2002, p. 29), Donald and Keane (2002, pp. 11-12) suggest. Industrialisation thus becomes a key concept to understand the reform in China’s TV drama industry during this time period.

²² ‘中央一号文件’ , the first policy statement issued every year by the CPC Central Committee. It shows the priority of the government’s work in the coming year.

The industrialisation reform of the Chinese television drama sector is a gradual, stage-by-stage process (Zhao and Guo, 2005, Yin, 2002, Keane, 2005b, Zhao, 2008, pp. 195-244). The STVPB (Separation of TV Programme Production and Broadcasting, 制播分离) and BCR (Broadcasting Consolidation and Reorganisation, 广电重组) have had the most significant impact on the Chinese TV drama market in the post-2000s era (Xu, 2013).

The first policy, the STVPB, refers to the transfer of responsibility for producing television programmes from TV stations to privately owned independent TV production companies (Xu, 2013, p. 373). This leaves TV stations only responsible for purchasing television programmes from the companies (except for news programmes, as they are politically sensitive content) and broadcasting them according to appropriate schedules. The impact of this policy on the TV drama industry is that dramas have become more market sensitive, as professional companies (a majority of which are non-state institutions) can 'respond to popular emotions and tastes with more efficiency and flexibility' (Zhao and Wu, 2014, p. 30). Nevertheless, such a division of work also creates rent-seeking in the process of drama purchasing (Zhao and Wu, 2014, pp. 29-30), and is a 'risk transition' strategy which places private and foreign-invested companies at a disadvantage (i.e., the production risk of failing the state censorship now falls on non-state capital) (Xu, 2013, pp. 374-375).

The BCR, on the other hand, refers to combining regional broadcasting media and reorganising them into large broadcasting groups (Xu, 2013, p. 377). As noted by Zhao

and Guo (2005, pp. 527-530), the Chinese state first decentralised its management of TV services by adopting a ‘Four-level TV Stations Policy’, which involves allowing the state, provincial, municipal, and county governments to mobilise local resources to construct a nationwide TV network. This policy effectively promoted the popularisation of TV sets over the country in the 1980s. But since the late 1990s, the ‘Four-level’ policy has been overthrown by the state. In order to strengthen its control over the TV industry, the state started to limit the self-programming powers of municipal and county-level broadcasters and encouraged provincial TV station to merge those in lower hierarchies. The emergence of these provincial TV groups facilitates the state’s ‘monopoly operation’ (Gao, 2002) over the TV industry.

The BCR has created a huge impact on China’s TV drama industry in the 2000s. As Xu (2013, p. 378) notes, this policy has facilitated a strong state sector in the TV drama industry, as new conglomerates and the drama production institutions affiliated to them have absorbed huge professional resources and funds from the localities. However, not much literature has explored how exactly these state institutions work under the influence of the state and market, and even fewer authors have compared the work of the state institutions and private institutions.

4.5.4 The Rise of the SNCC Dramas and the Main Themes

As a result, since 2005, there have emerged a number of TV dramas depicting contemporary Chinese peasants' life since the launch of the SNCC project. As mentioned in Chapter 3, these dramas feature a depiction of changes in villages since the start of the SNCC campaign, an exhibition of achievements gained during the campaign, interpretations of specific government policies formulated under the SNCC framework, as well as propaganda on the CPC's political ideas and theories related to this campaign. Typical examples include *Rural Love Stories*, *Beside the Holy River* (*Shengshuihu Pan*, 圣水湖畔), *Stories of Gengtian Xi* (*Xi Gengtian De Gushi*, 喜耕田的故事), etc. They present ordinary peasants' life in the contexts of China's urbanisation and modernisation. For instance, *Rural Love Stories*, produced by the famous comedian Benshan Zhao, presents contemporary young peasants' romantic stories interpenetrated with problems of employment, investment attraction and rural elections. By portraying these problems, the drama represents how modern commercial culture has influenced the traditional lifestyle and culture in rural China. Similarly, *Beside the Holy River* discusses how rural people should deal with the relationship between economic development and the environment.

Clearly, since the beginning of the 21st century, part of the Chinese television industry's attention has been brought back to rural society. The state's policies have been a major guidance for TV workers in this change. During this period, although rural TV dramas

present a more entertainment-related tendency, their plots are more closely combined with the rural development process. To a certain extent, rural TV series are becoming more and more concerned with the daily life of the rural public.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides a chronological review of the development of China's countryside topic TV dramas in the recent decades. From the discussion, we can see that three factors have influenced the production of rural-topic TV dramas. The social context determines the basic concerns of the rural TV dramas. The Chinese state, represented by a series of media regulation departments and the policies released by them, decides the propaganda directions for rural television dramas. Lastly, the media market motivates the TV drama sector to pursue higher profits by catering to the tastes of richer audiences. The state plays a more decisive role in the production of rural-topic TV series, as neither the media marketisation process nor television series' refocusing on the countryside could be achieved without the guidance of relevant state policies.

We can also notice that, regardless of the historical period, Chinese rural-topic TV dramas always bear the responsibility of legitimising the ruling status of the party-state in the countryside and connecting the Chinese party-state and rural audiences. Even when the Chinese TV drama sector has been reshaped by market forces since the early 2000s, the

rural-topic TV dramas on the market are supportive of the state's rural revitalisation intentions. This highlights the importance of paying attention to the mechanisms through which the state has exerted influence on the marketised TV drama sector during China's market-oriented transformation.

This chapter attempts to provide a context through which to explore how China's neoliberalisation process intersects with China's media reform, as well as the detailed role the state plays in this process. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, this mediated neoliberalisation process will be discussed at greater length.

CHAPTER FIVE: GUIDING THE PRODUCTION OF NEW COUNTRYSIDE DRAMAS VIA ADMINISTRATIVE METHODS

5.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 2, China's neoliberalisation has been moving towards a 'state neoliberalism' trajectory, which could be characterised as the heavy involvement of the state in development planning (So and Chu, 2012). So and Chu further point out that China's current neoliberalisation features a focus shifted away from economic advancement onto moderating the negative impacts of economic growth. The 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' project signals this strategic change, as it shows that the state now has been giving priority to reducing the urban-rural gap and revitalising the countryside from all aspects. However, as Chapter 2 discusses, China's media industry is also undergoing a state-led neoliberal transformation, which manifests as a growing media market and a 'mutually constitutive' but 'by no means symmetrical' relationship between the state and the market (Zhao, 2000, p. 21). Thus, so far this study has discussed two clues in understanding China's unique approach towards neoliberalisation: one is the state-projected neoliberal transformation which gives priority to rural development, and the other is the neoliberal reform in China's media industry. These two processes are not isolated. In fact, they intersect with each other and co-produce a special programme genre, the New Countryside dramas. As shown in Chapter 4, while the state pools national resources to facilitate comprehensive countryside advancement, China's

media industry closely follows its agenda and has presented TV dramas on various themes to portray what ‘Socialist New Countryside’ looks like.

As we discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberalism cannot exist as an abstract set of propositions. The process of neoliberalisation always intersects with other social processes. China’s current approach to development, ‘state neoliberalism’ with a focus on rural revitalisation, also operates via the mediation of other social practices, including the media processes. Thus, as a product of this mediated neoliberalisation process, the New Countryside dramas are produced based on two sets of logics: China’s rural-centred neoliberal developmentalism logic on the one hand, and the media logic which has been infiltrated by neoliberal assumptions on the other hand. In fact, the production of these New Countryside dramas involves the Chinese state’s continual navigation, mobilisation and regulation of the media market, as well as the media and the state’s constant negotiations on content which finally lead to the media’s incorporation of the state agenda. Although these two processes seem rather irrelevant, in essence, they are highly consistent, as they both reflect the political and economic assumptions of the current Chinese society that shape a state-led, market-orientated, market-disciplinary and market-making social transformation. The purpose of the following two chapters, therefore, is to examine how the two seemingly unrelated processes intersect together, as well as the strategic role of the state during the New Countryside drama production process.

The Chinese state has used various mechanisms to guide the production of New Countryside topic TV dramas. Since the 2006 publication of the 11th Five Year Plan, which formally announced the start of the ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ project, the Chinese state has actively sought to introduce a series of rural cultural construction targets and requirements for local governments, which are consistent with certain SNCC policies, into the country’s national development documents. Section 5.2 of this chapter seeks to provide an overview of these policies, arguing that policy formulation is a powerful method of the Chinese state to encourage New Countryside drama production. It also reveals that its policy discourses are too vague to tell the TV drama industry directly what to portray. They need to be interpreted by the media professionals in different fields and at all levels, with consideration of numerous more specific policies in the TV drama sector.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Peck, Brenner and Theodore suggest that neoliberalisation is realised through significant institutional measures (Peck et al., 2018, p. 7). The third section of this chapter thus illustrates what changes introduced to China’s media institutional framework have facilitated the state to engage with the New Countryside dramas. These measures, on the one hand, entrench the market-centred neoliberal order, and ensure the TV dramas’ agenda is always synchronised with the central state’s agenda on the other hand. The role of the communist party state, as the top decision maker and the coordinator during China’s neoliberalisation transformation process, will be highlighted by a detailed examination of the bureaucratic structure of China’s TV drama sector. It also

argues that the state maintains a high degree of control over media contents amid the economic liberation of media.

Section 5.4 then accounts for how specifically the state uses this bureaucratic system to guide China's drama industry to produce New Countryside dramas. Several administrative mechanisms will be discussed. We will see that the pre- and post-shooting censorship mechanisms provide an orientation for the TV drama industry, encouraging positive portrayals of the peasants' life. But these methods are so indirect that they need to be interpreted in the context of other policies. Thus, this section will then move to how some more direct administrative mechanisms , like the government award systems, the state funding system, the financial award system, the state endorsement system, etc. encourage the industry to produce more rural dramas that comply with the state's present rural policies. These mechanisms also reveal a difference between China's current state-media relationship and the Maoist media regulation mode, which featured the authoritarian control over all aspects of media operations.

The market-orientated reform in media have depolitised the media sector to a considerable degree, however, the Chinese party-state does not want it to be separated from state policies. It is with this background that the state develops more subtle controlling strategies, either politically or economically, to maintain its influence on the country's media sector. However, as mentioned above, a number of state policies are ambiguous, so it is down to experienced TV drama professionals to interpret these policies

in order to exploit the favourable policy conditions and avoid the risks of being banned from the TV drama market. These media professionals play a key role in determining the specific themes and contents of the dramas. How this policy context influences the professionals' work and thus facilitates the production of New Countryside dramas will be discussed in the next chapter.

5.2 Formulating Policy to Encourage New Countryside Drama Production

Since late 2005 and early 2006, the Chinese state has made various attempts to introduce the target of constructing 'Socialist New Countryside Culture' and the requirements it sets for all levels of government departments into the country's national development plans, including No.1 Documents, the Five Year Plans, and major party meeting communiqués.

The first document that has such descriptions is *The Opinions on Further Strengthening Cultural Construction in Rural Areas*, which was jointly issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on November 7, 2005, right after the 5th Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the Party proposed the idea of starting a SNCC campaign to promote countryside development. *The Opinions (General Office of the CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2005)* points out the necessity of constructing a new rural cultural landscape in China, and urges all levels of governments to 'increase the degree to which the allocation of cultural resources favours the countryside areas' (General Office

of the CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2005, Item 3.10). In addition, it also sets out concrete measures to boost the development of rural culture. Item 3 of it urges local government to increase radio and TV coverage in rural areas, to develop movie screening in villages, to upgrade rural cultural infrastructure and to organise more rural mass cultural activities, etc. What makes it especially worth paying attention to is it sets specific requirements for all levels of governments to stimulate the provision of rural themed cultural products. Item 4.13 states that:

More and better rural themed cultural works should be provided to the countryside. [All levels of governments] should strengthen topic planning and content construction, incorporating the rural topic into the production plan of stage art performance, film, TV drama, book, as well as visual and audio publication sectors in order to ensure that a certain percentage of works in each category is rural themed. Special funds in the propaganda area should strengthen the efforts to fund key rural themed projects, aiming at presenting a batch of well-received high-quality cultural works to portray contemporary rural life every year... a certain amount of national honours and prizes should be allocated to high-quality rural themed works. Newspapers, Radio and TV stations should give support to the publication, circulation and promotion of quality rural themed works.

It for the first time told the society and the TV drama industry that the state needed high-quality drama series which reflect 'contemporary rural life' to support the SNCC project. It also signals that drama projects of this type will enjoy supportive policies in a number of ways.

The next national document that has similar descriptions is the 2006 No.1 Document (CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2005), where Item 8.31 states that 'Socialist New

Countryside Construction is a complex systematic project that involves politics, economy, culture, social life and various other aspects of the society'. It points out that culture is an indispensable facet of the SNCC project. In addition, Item 5.21 outlines some specific requirements on local governments, urging that 'all levels of governments should increase investment in rural cultural development'. Specifically, it states that governments should 'guide cultural professionals to go down to the countryside in order to produce cultural works that meet the needs of peasants with various backgrounds', while at the same time they 'strengthen the administration over rural cultural markets and take measures to resist the decadent and backward culture'.

Whilst the 2006 No.1 Document expresses the importance of mobilising cultural professionals to produce rural themed works to enrich peasants' cultural life, the overriding target of developing such rural culture is given in the 11th Five Year Plan, which was released 2 months after the 2006 No.1 Document. The Five Year Plans are a detailed economic development guideline for all Chinese economic sectors taken over five year periods. Compared with the No.1 documents, which are released annually, the Five Year Plans reflect the Chinese state's policy orientations over a longer period of time, so they are a document that must be considered when planning regional and industrial development matters. The 11th Five Year Plan re-emphasises the requirements for all levels of government outlined in the former document, as we stated above, and suggests that the aim of developing rural culture is to 'cultivate new peasants' (National People's Congress, 2006, Item 7). It states that new peasants are those 'who are knowledgeable,

understand modern technology and have market awareness' (*ibid.*). In this sense, the Plan provides a basic goal for the media professionals who work on rural topic cultural works to strive for. For those who are unsure of what types of media products the state wants, 'cultivating new peasants' is no mere political phrase but a guide to production practices.

The national development documents since 2006 largely repeated the descriptions in the documents discussed above. However, after years of implementation of the SNCC project, the communiqué of the 6th Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee, which was released in 2011, points out a major problem concerning rural cultural construction in the SNCC project for people working in China's cultural field. In this communiqué, 'the integration of urban and rural cultural development' is required. Specifically, it asks all levels of governments to 'increase the amount of rural cultural services, reduce the urban-rural gap in cultural development, ...reasonably allocate cultural resources between the city and the countryside, and encourage cities to support the cultural development of countryside areas' (CPC Central Committee, 2011, Item 5.4). In addition, it states that 'special rural cultural construction funds' should be established at central, province and municipal levels, in order to provide enough financial support for township and village cultural development projects (*ibid.*). At the time this document was released, there were more urban-centric media products than the rural topic ones in the media market (because urban-centric media products could bring more advertising revenues, the media market preferred them over the rural counterparts), as we discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

This document for the first time identified this problem in national development policies, and brought the shortage of rural cultural products in the market to national consciousness. Later, the 2012 No.1 Document (CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2011) echoed this call and made similar descriptions on reducing the urban-rural cultural gap. Since these documents play a guiding role in national economic and social development, they gave governments at all levels pressure to put forward corresponding policies to balance rural and urban cultural development. It is also in this context that China's media professionals, institutions as well as capitals, most of whom were based in the cities, showed growing interest in re-engaging with rural topics.

In 2013, the No.1 Document again emphasised that the distribution of cultural resources should favour the countryside. However, rather than repeat what the *Opinions* said in 2005, which put an emphasis on the balancing role of the government departments during the resource application process, this time a focus has been set on the role of social forces. In other words, this document seeks to encourage social capitals to actively take part in SNCC projects. All industries are subject to its Item 2.3 requirements, which states 'favour should be given to the countryside when making development plans, arranging projects or increasing investments' (CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2012). It is interesting to note that this document distinguishes state-owned companies and private companies. On the one hand, it states that '[all levels of government] should guide state-owned companies to participate and support rural and agricultural development'. On the other hand, it urges the governments to 'mobilise enterprises and social organisations to

support rural cultural development in forms of establishing funds, making donations, providing human or technological resources, etc.'. It also suggests that private companies doing so will enjoy preferable tax policies and get certain administrative subsidies. In this way, cultural capitals have more motivation to participate in rural-related projects. For drama production institutions, a large proportion of which are profit-seeking private-owned companies, policies mentioned in this document underline a market opportunity, for they indicate that rural topic projects secure lower cost (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016; interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October, 2016).

The 2015 No.1 Document specified detailed requirements on the contents of cultural products that the state wanted to see. In Item 3.19, it states that '[all levels of governments] should call on cultural professionals to go down to the countryside, create excellent cultural works that have rural characteristics and sing the praises of the development coming along with the changes of times, and provide healthy and beneficial cultural services loved by the masses' (CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2015). This is a rather straightforward description of the contents that the state requires. Since this thesis is concerned with how TV dramas reproduce the state agenda, it is also interesting to note the firm adherence to the state's core ideology in this document, which urges that all rural cultural projects should be targeted as 'cultivating and practising socialist core values, carrying out the thorough propaganda and education of socialism with Chinese characteristics as well as the Chinese Dream, ...and gathering enormous spiritual

strength for constructing socialist new countryside' (*ibid.*). However, the requirements outlined in this document are still vague. For drama professionals, they need to keep up with rural news coverage and study a number of policy documents to know what changes happened in the countryside worth 'singing the praises for', or what story best reflects 'the Chinese dream' (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016; interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016). However, it points out the major themes and key ideas that the state wants the dramas to address. For the first time the media industry was able to refer to these standards to plan the motif and the storyline of their dramas. It also taught the drama professionals how to engage with the state's rural policies in order to get more state support in drama market competition.

Name	Time	Purpose	Details
The Opinions on Further Strengthening Cultural Construction in Rural Areas	2005	Point out the necessity of constructing a new rural cultural landscape	Outline specific requirements for all levels of governments to boost the provision of rural themed cultural works
2006 No. 1 Document	2006	Express the importance of mobilising cultural professionals	Urge governments to guide cultural professionals to do fieldwork in the countryside to accumulate materials for drama production
11 th Five Year Plan	2006	Set out the overriding aim for the cultural construction during the SNCC project	Drama production should aim at 'cultivating new peasants'

Communiqué of the 6 th Plenary Session of the 17 th CPC Central Committee	2012	Point out the problem hindering rural cultural construction during the SNCC project	Require the integration of urban and rural cultural development, urge to reduce the urban-rural gap in cultural development
2012 No.1 Document	2012	Identify the problem of urban-rural cultural gap	Urge to reduce the urban-rural cultural gap
2013 No.1 Document	2013	Highlight the importance of mobilising social forces	Urge the governments to 'mobilise enterprises and social organisations to support rural cultural development in forms of establishing funds, making donations, providing human or technological resources, etc.
2015 No.1 Document	2015	Specify detailed requirements on the contents of cultural products that the state wanted to see	Desired cultural works are those that have rural characteristics and sing the praises of the development coming along with the changes of times

Table 2 An Outline of Major National Policies that have Influenced New Countryside Drama Production (2005-2015)

5.3 Facilitating New Countryside Drama Production via a Centralised, Market-making Institutional Framework

5.3.1 The Bureaucratic Structure of TV Drama Regulation: Two Systems of Control

The Chinese TV drama system is not politically independent. As briefly introduced in Chapter 2, in the Maoist era, China's whole media system was owned by the party-state. TV dramas, like any other forms of media products at that time, were required to serve the party-state's political and ideological needs. However, after the Chinese state launched the 'Reform and Open-up' project in 1978, the dominant role of the state in the TV field was challenged by the growing influence of the market. With the increasing financial pressure imposed on the previously state-funded drama-making institutions, the emergence of private drama-making and drama-distribution companies, and the growing importance of commercial investments in drama production, China's drama industry wanted more freedom from the state to produce the drama series that can sell well in the market. Therefore, the state needed to explore new ways to sustain its influence over the media industry.

At the turn from the 20th to the 21st century, under the shadow of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident²³, which made the Chinese state realise that 'ideological force must be strongly imposed' to keep the existing social order (Lull, 1991, p. 206), together with the pressure

²³ In 1989, university students demonstrated at Tiananmen Square to call for political reform. Later they were suppressed by the army. During the demonstration, both foreign and domestic television institutions unexpectedly transmitted the demonstration images and how the protestors were treated by the military forces to a worldwide audience, which caused many criticisms and created heavy pressure on the Chinese state.

brought by the 1997 Asian Financial Turmoil, the slowing GDP growth (Wong, 1999, p. 23) and the increasing protests of laid-off State Owned Enterprises (SOE) workers (Cai, 2002), the Chinese state started to tighten its control over the media system, especially over television. Therefore, in 1998, the Chinese state re-structured the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT), the traditional government agency overseeing the broadcasting and film sectors, into the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). Although this restructure degraded MRFT from a component Ministry of the State Council to a bureau-level supervisory organ, it strengthened the state's control over this organisation (as well as the field it oversaw), as the SARFT was a more centralised governing body and in so doing it brought the broadcasting and film sectors under closer control of the State Council. In this research, we only talk about the SARFT's influence on China's TV drama sector.

In the following years, the name, structure and responsibilities of the SARFT have undergone another series of changes. In 2013, it took over from the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP) the responsibility for overseeing news and publishing, and was reorganised into a new institution, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). In February 2018, it was restructured into the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), with its management responsibilities in the areas of news, publishing and film reassigned to the Central Propaganda Department of the Party. Despite of these adjustments, its overseeing responsibility in the TV drama sector has never changed. Therefore, in this research, these different organisations are considered different names of the same

government TV drama regulating body. Since this study mainly focuses on New Countryside TV dramas produced in 2006-2016, it uses the name, the SARFT (1998-2013) and the SAPPRFT (2013-2016) to address the influence of this government body.

Although the SARFT was led by the State Council, it sat in the overlapping zone of the Party and the State forces. On the one hand, it represented the State Council to oversee the development of China's TV drama industry. On the other hand, as any media content conveys ideologies, the CPC has dominant power to enforce policies on the drama contents. So the SARFT in actual sense received instructions and orders from two systems: the State Council and the CPC. At the administration level, it (as well as its local branches) was established to report to the State Council (and local level governments), and administrate the TV drama production and the broader aspects of the development of the TV drama sector. At the ideological level, it followed the instruction of the CPC Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and its local branches, and represented the CPD to implement its ideological guidelines in drama depictions. Figure 5 shows the bureaucratic structure overseeing China's TV dramas.

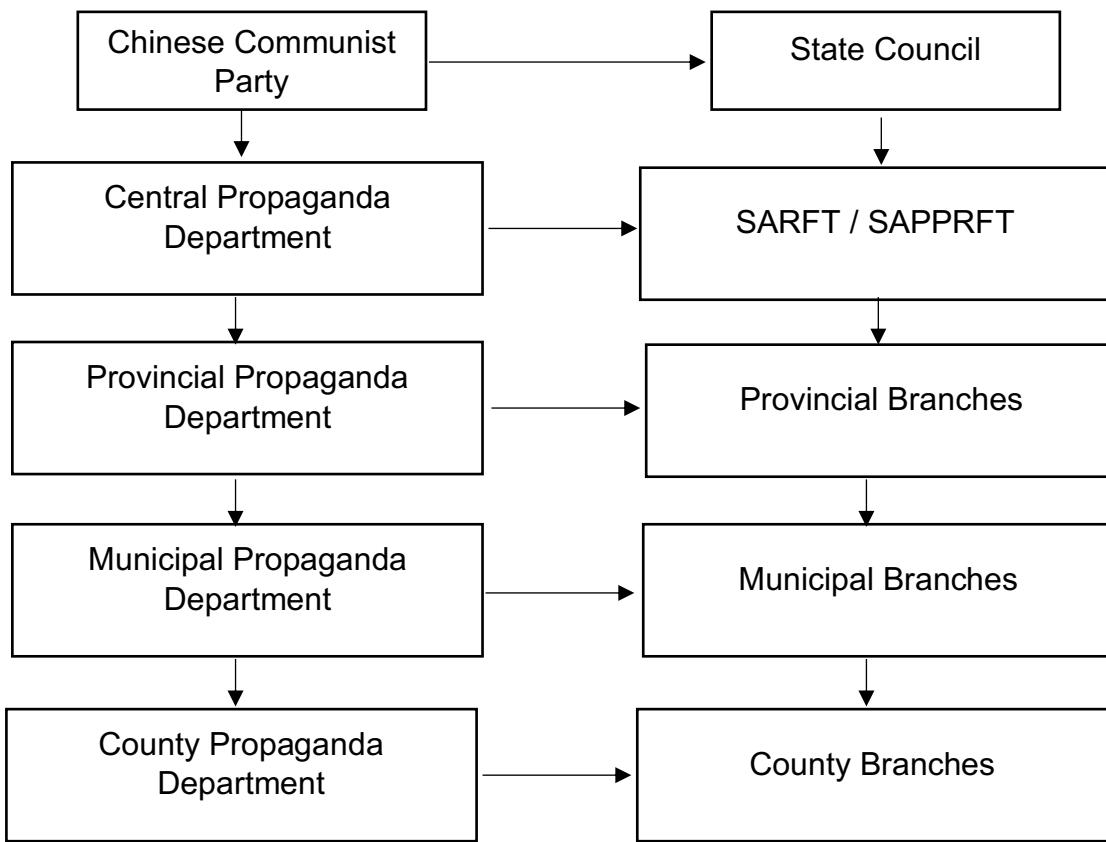


Figure 5 The Bureaucratic Structure Regulating China's TV Drama Sector

5.3.2 Providing Ideological Instructions for New Countryside Drama Production via the CPD

Both the systems have provided impetus for the TV drama industry to produce New Countryside dramas. The CPD, as the ideological engineer of the country's cultural field, monitors the content of TV dramas and guides the industry to focus more on the peasant, agriculture and countryside issues. It influences the production of New Countryside dramas in three ways. Firstly, the CPD and its local branches give direct instructions to

drama production institutions. These instructions usually appear in written or oral forms. For instance, in 2015, the CPD issued a notice calling for all media institutions to study the policies released at the 5th Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee (Xinhua, 2015). In the meeting communiqué, it emphasised a number of times that efforts should be made in the economic, infrastructure, public service, and the cultural areas to promote the construction of socialist New Countryside (CPC Central Committee, 2015). It also points out several key rural topics that deserve social attention, such as agricultural modernisation, urban-rural coordinated development, rural left-behind population, etc. These keywords are not only the policy focus, but also signal what the CPD wants drama professionals to focus on. By letting the media professionals study the documents issued at this meeting, the CPD can raise awareness within the industry about the state's concern with the rural issues.

Besides giving direct instructions, the CPD also hosts seminars or regular training sessions to instruct senior drama professionals on the ideological focuses in their work. Through this channel, cultural cadres and art elites are informed of the recent TV drama policies, what topics are the recent priorities, as well as the correct way to portray some politically sensitive topics. Participants in these trainings are representatives from both the state and the private sectors, including Party and State cultural and arts officials, senior staff from TV stations, senior members from cultural associations, artists, representatives from private drama-producing companies, etc. For instance, in 2016, according to the requirements of the CPD's 2016-2017 training plan, the CPD and the China Literary Federation jointly hosted the First Training Session on 'Studying Xi Jinping's Speech at

the 2014 Forum on Literature and Art'. This training session brought together 200 cultural officials and senior cultural professionals across the country to discuss Xi Jinping's thoughts on the country's literature and arts works (Xinhua, 2016). Participants were given lectures, and were encouraged to join in thematic seminars. What is worth noting is that Xi's speech specifically emphasises that cultural professionals must 'write for the people, express the emotions of the people, and reflect people's thoughts'. Xi gave the example of story scriptwriter Wang Yuanjian, who told him about writer Liu Qing. Accordingly, Liu lived in a village for 14 years to observe peasants' lives, and finally completed the famous novel the *History of Entrepreneurship*. Xi praised Liu for his hard work, commenting that 'he understands peasants' life so well that he knows immediately whether the peasants will be happy or not when the state releases a new rural policy'. By training media professionals with Xi's speech, the CPD let the TV drama industry know that the state wants them to learn from Liu Qing and produce more rural drama series that portray peasants' lives.

The CPD as well as its local branches also work closely with each level of Organisation Department to decide the hiring and firing of senior leaders in Party and State institutions in the state-owned media sphere (Brady, 2006, p. 63). The appointed senior leaders usually have close connections with the CPD. On the central level, senior leaders of the SAPPRFT, head of China Central Television, etc. all need to be approved by the CPD. From 2005 to 2016, the two heads of the SARFT/SAPPRFT, Wang Taihua and Cai Fuchao, both served as the Vice Minister of the CPD. At the local level, many provincial TV station heads have experience in working in provincial Propaganda Departments. For

instance, the Head of the Shanghai Radio and Television Station, Wang Jianjun, used to be the Office Director of the Shanghai Propaganda Department. As Section 5.1 briefly mentions, the state policies regarding SNCC project are mostly vague. Since these senior leaders have experience in dealing with the CPD policies, and because they have close connections with the Party's propaganda system, they can precisely interpret the Party's intentions from the given documents and instructions regarding the propaganda work. Most importantly, since in China any political mistake will be borne by senior leaders²⁴, they tend to make the most ideologically conservative decisions in work arrangements (Brady, 2006, p. 63), reflected as avoiding programme innovations and always producing and broadcasting based on the party state's agenda. Through this system, the Party ensures that major associations and institutions in the media field will always side with the Party in terms of the ideological stance.

5.3.3 Regulating Industrial Activities Concerning SNCC Dramas via SARFT/SAPPRFT

In the TV drama field, SARFT/SAPPRFT's responsibility covers the administration of drama products and the broader aspects of the development of the TV drama sector. Its primary duty is to regulate drama contents. Specifically, it coordinates the topic choices of TV dramas across the country and checks on the quality of the dramas. Every month, the SARFT/SAPPRFT releases statistics about the number of TV drama projects established

²⁴ In China's media system, if any media worker makes any political mistake in their work (i.e. make anti-CPC or anti-government comments), not only will they get punished themselves, the responsible leader directly in charge of them, and other directly liable persons will also be given a warning/a demerit recording or even be removed from their post for weak supervision.

in each thematic genre. Though the contemporary rural topic always only accounts for a small percentage of the whole, it is made one of the standing genres the SARFT/SAPPRFT statistics pay attention to. This reflects how the SARFT/SAPPRFT values this sort of dramas, and also releases a signal to the industry that more attention should be given to the contemporary rural topic. This way, the SARFT seeks to focus industrial attention on the contemporary rural topic. This also goes in line with the ideological orientations given by the CPD, as we discussed in Section 5.3.2.

The SARFT/SAPPRFT also administers the operations of various types of institutions in the television drama sector. It licenses broadcasters and production institutions, supervises their professional and economic activities and evaluates their jobs. Not only state-owned institutions, most of which are under the direct control of the SARFT and its local branches, relevant private institutions also receive a certain degree of administration from the SARFT/SAPPRFT. It is worth noting that the SARFT/SAPPRFT's role as regulator of both the state and the private sectors did not come to full play until 2005. Before 2005, there was no private economy in China's television industry. On April 22, 2005, the State Council (2005) issued 'State Council Decisions on the Entrance of Non-public Capital into the Cultural Industry', encouraging private capital to invest on a series of cultural areas like performances, theatres, museums, exhibitions, entertainment, arts marketing, cartoons, online games, advertising, television series production and distribution, film screenings in rural areas, etc. Private drama production and distribution institutions hence grew rapidly across the country, and have become an area that the state deems necessary to regulate. Nowadays, the institutions that the SARFT/SAPPRFT

administers in the public sector include TV stations, affiliated drama production institutions under TV stations, state-owned drama production institutions, etc. There are no private TV stations in China. So in the private sector, it mainly administers activities of drama production and distribution companies. As we will see in more details in the next chapter, currently, a number of New Countryside dramas have the contributions of both the public and the private sectors. They are subject to the regulation of SARFT/SAPPRFT and its local branches. With the top-down setup of the SARFT/SAPPRFT system, the state ensures its centralised administration of activities of all institutions involved in the 'New Countryside' drama production.

Besides administrative management, the SARFT/SAPPRFT is also responsible for drafting legal proposals, formulating sectoral regulations, setting industrial standards and making development plans for the TV drama industry. It takes charge of their implementation and supervision, and is also responsible for promoting reforms in this sector. These macro policies also can influence the production of New Countryside dramas. For instance, in January 2007, Wang Weiping, vice head of the SARFT TV Drama Department, informed the industry at a seminar that from February to October 2007, all satellite TV channels were required to broadcast mainstream TV dramas during the prime time slots. Later another official from SARFT explained that mainstream TV dramas referred to those 'conveying positive life attitude and healthy values' (Zhu, 2007). Without a doubt, New Countryside dramas accord with this requirement, so would get more chance to win satellite channels' prime time slots. Similarly, in December 2011, major TV stations received the SARFT's telephone call which banned them from broadcasting time-

travel TV dramas, crime and detective series as well as Chinese royal family gossip series in satellite channels' prime time slots (Oriental Morning Post, 2011). After the entrenchment of this policy, dramas that depict realistic issues would be more likely to be broadcast during prime time on satellite TV channels. Therefore, by promoting significant reforms in the TV drama industry, the SARFT left space for the New Countryside dramas to develop.

5.3.4 The Market-orientated Re-structuring of the TV Drama Industry

As mentioned in Chapter 4, before the Reform and Open-up, all TV dramas were produced by state-owned institutions, i.e. TV stations, film studios, theatrical troupes, and production studios affiliated with central state and party departments. However, after the reform, non-state actors began to play a growing role in the drama series industry. Since 2005, when the state officially allowed private capital to participate in drama production (though many private companies had already participated in activities in this field for years) , these non-state institutions have demonstrated higher flexibility and adaptability in coping with market situations. During the late 2000s, the state-owned TV drama production institutions' performance was surpassed by the private sector. According to data released at the 14th Plenary Session of the 11th National People's Congress, in 2010, the number of private TV programmes' production companies in China reached 2800. In 2013, there were 6,574 companies running the film and TV programme business, and private capital accounts for 60-70% of the total national TV drama investments (Zhan, 2014). The state also wanted to reduce the burden of funding the state-owned drama

production institutions, as many drama series these state institutions made were too propagandist to sell well in the market. In this context, the state started to lead a market-orientated restructuration in the TV drama industry. As Weber (2002, p. 57) states, what the party wanted is a ‘competitive, self-funding structure in the domestic television system’.

As briefly discussed in earlier sections, one major move of the state was to acknowledge the contributions of private institutions in the TV drama sector. In 2003, the state started to issue drama production licences to private institutions. This also signals that the Chinese state was encouraging the participation of private capitals into the drama series sector.

On the other hand, the state took an active role in promoting the restructuration of state-owned TV drama production institutions. State-owned TV drama production institutions are also state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Like the reform in other types of SOEs, the state actively promoted the corporatisation of these institutions and the introduction of market mechanisms into their daily operations. Under the idea of ‘state owned institutions managed as enterprises’, the state-owned TV drama production institutions remain public assets but were pushed into the market and run like a company.

The reform of the Shandong Film and TV Group (SFTG) is a typical example of the changes that happened in state-owned drama production institutions in China. It was formed on the basis of the former Shandong Film and TV Producing Centre, one of the state’s oldest film and TV production institutions founded in 1986. In 2012, it was reformed

into a state-owned and province-administrated cultural group, covering a wide range of businesses including film and TV drama production and distribution, artist management, audio-visual publications, etc. The reformed institution remains a public unit, thus its decisions are still strongly influenced by state media regulation departments. Some of the major decisions, the subject selection in particular, in many cases still reflect the feature of the planned economic production mode – commissioned by the state for political purposes. However, its drama projects did not run on special governmental subsidies. Instead, the operation of it absolutely follows the market logic. Multiple mechanisms enabled the reformed SFTG to operate this project via a complete marketable mode. Firstly, though administratively a public unit, the reformed SFTG no longer relies on the state subsidy as its major financial source. Instead, it is pushed into the market, and in order to support itself, it has to manage its business just like a private enterprise. To increase financial efficiency, it encourages using bank loans and embraces outsourcing investors, especially private investors due to their flexibility and the amount of capital in the private media sector. Secondly, the reformed SFTG also seeks to decentralise. By promoting the producer responsibility mechanism via which a producer team has management freedom and shares more responsibility for their own profits and losses, it gives full play to the producer team's creativity and entrepreneurship, having largely motivated their enthusiasm for maximising profits. Their profits also come from multiple sources, mainly the copyright fees and the advertising revenues.

In this way, the Chinese state ensures that it still holds ownership of a large proportion of quality media resources, but at the same time private capital can be absorbed into the

state-led media system. In addition, with the centralised institutional framework outlined earlier, the state is able to decide how drama institutions from both the public and the private sector are managed. This also makes it possible for the Chinese state to utilise private funds as well as the public resources (i.e. professional drama production teams) to develop some less profitable TV drama genres, including the rural topic dramas.

5.4 Specific Mechanisms to Guide New Countryside Drama Production

5.4.1 Post-shooting Censorship: Orientating Dramas towards the ‘People Orientation’

All dramas shown on TV must be approved by the Chinese government. It is the SARFT/SAPPRFT’s duty to censor the contents of TV dramas before they can broadcast on screen. The SAPPRFT’s No.63 Document, entitled *Regulations on TV Drama Contents*, states that dramas with the following violations will be banned from broadcasting:

1. Violating basic principles of the Constitution; 2. Threatening national unity, national sovereignty and territorial integrity; 3. Divulging national secrets, threatening national security, offending national honours or harming national interests; 4. Inciting ethnic hatred and discrimination, infringing on ethnic customs, hurting national sentiments or undermining ethnic solidarity; 5. Violating national religious policies, promoting religious extremism and cults, superstition, discriminating or insulting religious beliefs; 6. Disturbing social order and undermining social stability; 7. Advocating obscenity, gambling, violence, terror, drug abuse, instigating others to commit crimes or teaching criminal methods; 8. Insulting or slandering others; 9. Harming social morality or national cultural traditions; 10. Infringing on the legal rights of juveniles or harmful to the physical and mental health of juveniles; 11. Other contents prohibited by laws, administrative regulations and rules.

(SARFT, 2010)

However, these regulations seem rather vague to TV drama professionals. To them, the censorship result is usually rather unpredictable (interview with interviewee 8, scriptwriter and producer, November 2016; interview with interviewee 9, scriptwriter, October 2016). This is caused by the ambiguity of the policy wording, the various backgrounds of the experts in a censorship team, as well as the different standards that central and provincial-level censoring bodies apply (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016; interview with interviewee 5, a member of the TV drama censoring committee, November 2016; interview with interviewee 7, a censor hired by the Censor Committee under the Beijing Municipal Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, October 2016). In order to avoid political risks, censors tend to pick on the dramas by the strictest standards (interview with interviewee 7, a censor hired by the Censor Committee under the Beijing Municipal Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, October 2016). Dramas failing the censorship will be sent back to their makers for revision. The revised dramas will have to go through a second inspection. Before passing the censorship of the SARFT/SAPPRFT, no TV dramas can be distributed, traded and broadcasted. Failure to obtain this approval often means that all the work that the team has previously done is wasted. Even though they can go through another round of inspection, major correction often results in an increase in cost. What is worse, delays in the censoring process often mean the drama will miss the best timeslot for broadcasting.

Since TV drama makers cannot afford the consequences of failing the censorship, most drama production teams choose to work on politically less sensitive topics, and tell the story in a way that will please the party-state. So the question arises as to what drama contents will be easier to pass the censorship. According to the SARFT's No.63 Document,

The production and broadcasting of TV drama content should follow the orientation of serving the people and serving socialism and the guideline of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom, letting a hundred schools of thought contend'. We must keep 'staying close to the reality, staying close to life, staying close to the masses', adhering to the principle of 'prioritising the social benefits and at the same time balancing social and economic benefits', and ensuring the correct literary orientation.

(SARFT, 2010)

One key word in this document is orientation. In the PRC's history, more than one senior Party leader has explicated what should be the correct orientation for socialist literature and art products. For instance, at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao Zedong emphasised that the stand of socialist cultural workers is 'that of the proletariat and of the masses'. Jiang Zemin claims that the Party should always 'represent the fundamental interests of the majority'. Similarly, 'staying close to the reality, to life and to the masses', is a guideline that China's former Chief Secretary Hu Jintao proposed in 2003 for the PRC's propaganda work. The Party has been claiming that the principle of serving the people is the overriding principle of socialist literature and art work. In the above SARFT regulation, it also stresses that drama content should follow the orientation of serving the people.

Therefore, the key to passing the censorship, according to these descriptions, is to reflect the ‘people orientation’ that the CPC has been endorsing in drama contents. ‘People orientation’ in fact contains several meanings. Firstly, it entails portraying the real lives of the ordinary masses. As one interviewee said, ‘we do not encourage Gao Da Quan images (perfect figures) because they are not real. Perfection is not what life is about. So the storyline should be more human – close to real life, and reflect the human nature’ (interview with interviewee 5, October, 2016). People orientation also means serving the taste of the masses. One important factor the censorship team will consider when they examine a drama is whether the ordinary audience will like it or not. So a good drama should neither be too ‘elitist’ nor too ‘down to earth’; rather, the state advocates cultural products that are ‘easy to read and easy to watch’ for the masses in order to achieve the best propaganda effect (interview with interviewee 5, October 2016). Equally important, people orientation also implies an ideological stance - the socialist stance. According to interviewee 5, a drama depicting the Great Purge campaign led by the former Soviet Union leader Stalin was considered problematic by the SARFT. Thus having a pro-socialism regime stance is prerequisite for passing the censorship. In addition, a drama considered proper for broadcasting should be positive in tone - it should avoid depictions of the grey zone of society. Instead, it should focus more on the bright side of socialist social life, and should be able to ‘boost positive morale for socialist construction’ (interview with interviewee 5, October 2016). For instance, in any dramas depicting contemporary Chinese society, justice must defeat evil, and good guys must conquer the bad (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016).

In this sense, drama contents portraying the story of the masses, meeting the demand of the masses and reflecting the positive side of the socialist social life are what the Party-state advocates. In the PRC's history, peasants and workers are considered as the main body of the Chinese masses. The PRC's Constitution (The National People's Congress and The Chinese Political Consultative Conference, 2018) specifically stresses that workers, peasants, and intellectuals are the major forces for socialism construction. Thus the censorship team will not be hypercritical about TV dramas depicting stories of these social groups.

Besides, since the censorship team favours positive depiction, dramas reflecting the positive sides of peasants' life will have less difficulty passing the censorship. Controversial depictions in rural dramas usually involve the dark side of the contemporary village life, such as family conflicts, grassroots-level corruptions, adult affairs, dirty talk, gambling, uncivilised behaviours, etc. (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016). In addition, when it comes to plots that involve crimes, violence and politics, the censoring team usually will apply more strict censorship standards, as these plots are more likely to reveal too much of the dark side of society. But the censorship will be looser on light-tone plots, such as family issues, inspirational topics and entertaining plots, as plots of these themes are less likely to infringe the 11 regulations (interview with interviewee 5, October 2016).

Consequently, there are fewer problems with positive-tone rural topic dramas to pass the censorship. These inclinations have made TV dramas depicting the good life after the government launched the ‘Socialist New Countryside’ campaign as one of the safest topics to pass the censorship.

5.4.2 Pre-shooting Permit System: Establishing Market Monopoly

Apart from censorship rules, the Chinese government also uses a TV drama permit system to control the production of TV dramas. According to the SARFT’s No.63 Document, only licensed institutions are permitted to make TV dramas. Specifically, only institutions meeting at least one of the below criteria are qualified to make a TV drama:

1. Having a TV Drama Production License (Class A); 2. Having a Radio and TV Programme Production and Business Operation License; 3. TV stations (including Radio and TV Stations and Radio, Film and TV Groups) above the city level; 4. Having a Permit for Movie Production; 5. Other institutions qualified to apply for a TV Drama Production License (Class B).

(SARFT, 2010)

Every TV drama programme should be produced by an institution with a TV Drama Production License (either Class A or B). Of the two types of licenses, the Class A license grants institutions a broader autonomy, as it allows the production of multiple dramas within 2 years; Class B, however, only allows the production of one drama, and is valid for

6 months only. According to the SARFT release (*ibid.*), till June, 2018, China had 18,728 institutions eligible for drama production. Only 113 institutions had a Class A license.

According to one interviewee, whether an institution can get one of those licenses depends on a variety of factors, including its registered capitals, its previous performance and whether it has foreign funding (qualified institutions must be 100% Chinese funded). Notably, the State administrative agencies believe that an impressive list of previous productions could demonstrate the institution's expertise and, perhaps more importantly, political reliability. To get a Class A license, the institution must have successfully completed more than 6 TV films or over 3 TV series in the past 2 years. In this sense, the Class A license is also a demonstration of the institutions' expertise. Professional teams would prefer to co-operate with institutions with the Class A license.

This way, the Chinese Party-state sets up strong market monopolies in the TV drama industry. The Party-state has the power to allocate drama production licenses to suitably obedient institutions. Under such restrictions, more Class A licenses have been issued to state-owned drama production institutions. In 2018, 63 out of 113 institutions with the Class A license were from the state sector, constituting 53% of the total (NRTA, 2018). The reason why more state-owned institutions have got the Class A license is that these studios are assets of the Party-state, so the Chinese Party-state power retains authoritarian modes of intervention in the activities of these studios. In other words, these

institutions directly follow the Party propaganda system's ideological instructions. With a Class A license, these institutions can be more focused on working under the State's instruction.

If the private institutions can prove they comply with the Party line (through previous performance), the Party-state is also willing to allocate them this license, and thus enable them to make more profits from the drama business just like State institutions. Over the years, more and more private institutions have either obtained the Class A or Class B license. In 2016, over 80% of the country's drama production studios were outside the state sector (Liu, 2017, p. 18). Some of them operated drama projects with their own license, some ended up relying on state institutions - by paying a fee to a state unit and issuing the drama under its name or as a joint production - to legitimatise their productions (Zhao, 2008, p. 213). Through this mechanism, the Party-state keeps drama production institutions loyal to it in the hopes of gaining more business autonomy and winning more business opportunity.

Besides the licensing system, the SARFT/SAPPRFT also established the 'Register and Approval' mechanism, and a distribution permit mechanism. Specifically, qualified drama production institutions must submit a production application to register in the SARFT/SAPPRFT or its local branches. On that application form the team should specify the theme, the main characters, the historical background and the storyline of the

proposed production. Dramas involving the depiction of politically sensitive topics, such as ethnic issues, diplomatic issues, national security, etc. also need to submit an approval by the relevant State regulating agencies (for instance, dramas portraying ethnic groups should be approved by the Ethnic Affairs Committee). The NRTA/former SAPPRFT and their local branches are responsible for inspecting the qualification of the institutions and the proposed projects. Every month the central NRTA website will publicise all the approved drama projects across the country. Once the project is made public on the website, the team can officially start to work on it.

After the drama is completed, the tape will be sent to the NRTA/former SAPPRFT and their local branches for censorship. Through a strict procedure of content inspection, as discussed earlier, dramas that are considered ‘proper’ will be licensed a distribution permission. Only with this permission can dramas enter the market – be distributed, traded and broadcasted or participating in any TV festivals.

Through the ‘Register and Approval’ and distribution permit systems, the Party-state can always take back the market access of TV dramas that do not conform to its regulations. For instance, in 2010, the former SAPPRFT stressed that institutions without a Radio and TV Programme Production and Business Operation License are banned from all industrial festivals (SAPPRFT, 2010). In 2016, about 400 TV dramas, roughly 20,000 episodes, failed to get the distribution permission (Liu and Ling, 2017).

Under this system, rural dramas reflecting the happy life with the Chinese government's rural development policies dramas have attracted the attention of many drama production institutions. A majority of these dramas are made by state institutions with the Class A license. They produce these dramas to coordinate with the Party-state's political plan. For instance, one interviewee from a state-owned drama production company explicitly stated that his company received a request from the CPD's branch in his province asking them to make a drama on a recent government policy (interviewee 2, October, 2016). However, private drama studios also showed interest in these dramas. In August, 2018, among the nine New Countryside themed dramas publicised by the SARFT website, eight were made by private institutions. This, on the one hand, shows their compliance with the Party's ideological line and reduces the difficulty for them to earn a license in order to enter the market. On the other hand, it can build up their portfolio and thus help them win more business opportunities in the future.

5.4.3 Ensuring SNCC Drama Provision through State Coordination

Besides the above two indirect means, the Chinese State also directly guides the industry to focus on New Countryside themed dramas via cultural policies. This was achieved through the 'television drama topic guidance' system, manifested as a series of formal and informal signals released by the Chinese Party-state.

From 1983 to 2006, China's TV drama production career was influenced greatly by central planning. The SARFT hosted annual meetings to give instructions on the thematic choices of the coming year (Zhao, 2008, p. 213). At the end of each year, all drama production institutions were requested to report their proposed productions in the coming year to the SARFT; in the first season of the next year, the SARFT would host the topic planning meeting to determine the proportions of different topics, and issue approvals to qualified projects based on the production plan (Zhang, 2014b, p. 65). Through this central planning mechanism, the SARFT could ensure a certain proportion of rural topic dramas in every year's drama market. For instance, in 2005, the SARFT topic planning meeting urged to tighten the restrictions on historical and ancient dramas, and loosen the standard for contemporary dramas (Liu, 2005). According to Wang Weiping, the then deputy director of the TV Drama Department of SARFT, it particularly paid more attention to the production of rural dramas (Zhou, 2006, p. 2). As a result, that year saw several rather influential rural dramas, such as *Meili De Tianye* (*The Beautiful Countryside*) and *Shengshuihu Pan* (*Beside the Holy Lake*).

However, since 2006, the topic planning system has been replaced by the 'Register and Approval' system as discussed earlier. With the monthly updated results on the SARFT/SAPPRFT/NRTA website, drama studios will get to know all the information of the approved drama projects in the TV drama market. According to the SARFT, the new system aims to 'simplify the regulation procedures, reduce the government's administrative cost' and let the market regulate itself (SARFT, 2006). Though the State no

longer gives direct plans on the proportion of different drama topics, it still uses other ways to guide and coordinate the industry's thematic choices. These methods have changed China's TV drama 'topic planning' system to a more subtle 'topic guidance' mode.

Specifically, this topic guidance mechanism consists of a series of formal meetings on the country's TV drama sector, separate political and cultural documents, fewer formal speeches of senior leaders and propaganda officials, as well as the editorials and commentary articles from state news outlets. Through these measures, the State guides the industry to pay more attention to the production of New Countryside themed dramas.

The State's encouragement of 'New Rural' themed dramas first could be seen from formal meetings. Although since 2006, it has been rare to see official documents using the term 'topic planning meetings', the Party and State drama regulation agencies still host similar meetings to guide the country's TV drama work every year. These meetings provide guidelines regarding the focus of the next year's TV drama production. For instance, in 2006, the SARFT hosted a 'National TV Drama Work Meeting', when it said that the SARFT would support the production of contemporary rural and children themed dramas in the coming year (Beijing Youth Daily, 2006). In the same year, the CPD and SARFT also jointly hosted a seminar to encourage TV drama professionals to learn from two well-received rural dramas - *Newcomers to The Urban* (*Dushi Waixiangren*, 都市外乡人) and *Do Not Think Bean Buns Not Food* (*Bien Doubaobudang Ganlian*, 别拿豆包不当干粮).

Yang Zhijin, the then Director of the Literature and Art Bureau of the CPD, pointed out on the seminar for the attendees that these two dramas did well in portraying the audience's life (Gao, 2006, p. 1). This way, the Party and the State call on the industry to pay more attention to contemporary rural topics. Since more works of this topic are expected, these themes will naturally have less difficulty in getting the licenses and passing the censorship.

Equally important, the inclination of public media resources with rural topics also means the state media would be willing to endorse rural dramas. The exposure on state media outlets forms free advertising. This further attracts drama institutions to work on rural topics. As one TV drama/film director explains,

The state is willing to use their power and voice to endorse your drama. In this way, the influence of your project could be greatly enhanced. And as a consequence, it becomes easier for you to raise funds and supplement your expenditure... The socialist background gives Chinese rural topic dramas more advantages than that of other subjects. With media outlets endorsing rural drama projects, for free, the risk of investing in them is low, and in the meantime the money required for marketing and advertising could be less than other projects. Low risk and low cost enable rural dramas to attract quite a few investments. As a result, with the same amount of income, your profits will definitely be higher. Therefore, quite a few commercial capitals would be very happy to participate in your project.

(Interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016.)

In less formal forms, state leaders' and propaganda officials' speeches, as well as state media outlets' editorials and commentary articles also deliver some information to

influence drama production. According to one interviewee, these sources of information can indicate the recent state policies on cultural development. He also argues that there is a wide range of media channels to inform cultural workers of these policies,

Even the least open men will watch television, use cell phones, read newspapers or get exposed to other sorts of media. So they will know what things that media covers... Each level of government department has propaganda plans. They will hold press conferences when they carry out a new policy... In fact, I think cultural workers, as members of the public, receive rich information from those channels.

(Interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016.)

For instance, on May 3, 2018, Party newspaper *People's Daily* published an article entitled *Creating More Well-received and Well-sold Rural Dramas*, calling on the drama workers to 'go to the village to experience rural life, get rid of working behind closed doors, explore new ways of storytelling, new art styles and new marketing strategies'. Representing voices of the Party, this article releases a signal to the drama industry that what the country needs is not ordinary rural dramas, but quality rural dramas that are close to life and have good business performance.

5.4.4 Other Administrative and Financial Means

The Party-state also guides the drama industry to pay more attention to New Countryside dramas through administrative and financial means, combining mechanisms of market

and administrative regulations as well as moral acknowledgement. One such mechanism is the government award systems. The Five-One Project, an award established by the CPD to encourage ideologically inspiring cultural products in the fields of plays, TV series, books, articles and films, is a typical state award of this sort. In the Five-One Project awarding list, there always are several SNCC themed dramas. For instance, from 2012–2014, 30 TV dramas won this award, of which three portrayed how villages achieve noticeable development under the CPC's policies. In 2017, eight TV dramas won this award, of which *Ma Xiangyang's Journey to the Countryside* (2014) is a rural story portraying how the Party leader leads a village to develop. In addition to the Five-One Project Award, the 'Feitian' Award, an award for excellent television professionals hosted by the SARFT/SAPPRFT, also awarded a series of contemporary rural dramas. A more directly related award is the 'Golden Ox' Award, which was awarded by the Chinese Federation of Culture in conjunction with the CCTV Rural Channel between 2009 and 2015. The two organisations jointly hosted a 'New Countryside TV Art Festival' for a succession of seven years. Each year, the festival awarded well-received New Countryside themed TV dramas of that year. These awards are an encouragement for drama professionals who work on rural dramas with a contemporary topic.

Another mechanism is the state funding system. Although the interviewees did not mention any targeted state funding for producing New Countryside TV dramas, rural topic drama products have been favoured in a number of state funding allocation processes in the TV drama industry, as mentioned in a series of documents outlined in Section 5.1. For

instance, the SARFT/SAPPRFT funded quality TV drama scripts every year. In their 2015 guidelines of how to select funded projects, the SARFT/SAPPRFT specifically stressed that it ‘majorly supports contemporary topic projects’ and ‘majorly supports public-benefit topics such as drama scripts on significant revolutions and historical events, rural topics, ethnic minority topics, children topics and traditional culture topics, etc.’ (SAPPRFT, 2015).

Besides, although the State does not provide targeted funding for New Countryside TV dramas, successful New Countryside drama production teams sometimes receive money from the provincial-level government or state-owned production studios for high ratings and good reputation. As an interviewee mentions, in 2015, one of his rural dramas sparked heated discussion in society and had won several significant professional prizes. Since his company is a provincial-level state-owned drama production studio, the provincial government awarded his company. Both he (as the producer of the drama) and the director were given a certain amount of money (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016).

Last but not least, the State has another effective means to encourage production of New Countryside themed dramas: the ‘good drama recommendation’ system. Specifically, since 2010, the SARFT/SAPPRFT releases a list of dramas on their website that they consider to be good. The State encourages TV stations to broadcast some of the recommended TV dramas. Although it is unnecessary to broadcast all of the

recommended dramas, the State requires major provincial TV stations to select a certain number of them to purchase and broadcast at prime time (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016). When there are some significant political events going on, the State will push TV stations even harder to broadcast the dramas it recommends, in order to ensure that TV stations' programme scheduling can coordinate with its propaganda plan. For example, in November, 2014, the SAPPRFT recommended two TV dramas, one of which was the rural drama mentioned earlier, *Ma Xiangyang's Journey to the Countryside*. This drama depicts how an urban official led a village to develop. The SAPPRFT speaks highly of it, saying that it 'touches upon the difficult issues during the rural reform, and describes the happiness and hardships of the peasants on their way to a happy life on the basis of in-depth observations of the rural reality' (SAPPRFT, 2014). In the 31 dramas celebrating the 19th Party Congress, a number of them involve depictions of the New Countryside, including *Sun Guangming's Journey to the Countryside* (*Sun Guangming Xiaxiangji*, 孙光明下乡记), and *Warm Village* (*Wennuan de Cunzhuang*, 温暖的村庄) (Yang, 2017).

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter mainly discusses how the Chinese state uses administrative methods to promote the production of New Countryside TV dramas. Policy formulating, a centralised and market-orientated institutional framework, the pre-shooting and post-shooting censorship scheme, the state coordination system, as well as other financial and

administrative means enable the state to exert influence on the TV drama industry. Generally the state still has a big say in all aspects of the TV drama sector. Private capitals are encouraged to participate in activities in this sector, but they are under the state's administration and contributed funds for the production of New Countryside dramas. However, the state policies need to be implemented by the drama professionals. How these policies affect the professional routine of these professionals will be discussed in full length in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER SIX: INDUSTRIAL ROUTINES INFLUENCING THE PRODUCTION OF NEW COUNTRYSIDE DRAMAS

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, we have addressed that China's neoliberalisation developmentalism with a focus on rural revitalisation intersects with the country's media neoliberal transformation process. It also proclaims that such intersection exists throughout all media processes, ranging from media regulation, media production and distribution, to media reception. Thus Chapter 2 argues that the media ownership and regulation mode, the professional routine in media production and circulation, and changes in the subjectivity of the audience can be used as the analytical dimensions for explaining how China's media follows and legitimises the state's rural-centred neoliberalisation agenda.

In Chapter 5, we have already examined how the 'state neoliberalism' with a focus on rural revitalisation has changed China's media ownership and regulation system. As illustrated in Chapter 5, the Chinese state encourages the production of New Countryside dramas via a series of administrative methods. Different from the CPC's propaganda tradition in the Maoist era, which featured the authoritarian control of the media in both the political and the economic sense, Chapter 5 argues that the Chinese state in the neoliberalisation era has developed a more complicated set of administrative strategies, which combines institutional regulation, financial subsidies, tax policies, market monopoly,

party endorsement, etc. to guide the media industry to produce drama contents that are consistent with their ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ policy. These administrative methods are the most direct, but by no means the only way of state involvement in the production of New Countryside TV dramas. Thus at the end of Chapter 5, it is pointed out that, since China’s market-orientated media reform depoliticised the media sector and made it more independent on the state’s control (at least financially), the Chinese state has developed more subtle controlling strategies to sustain its influence in the media sector, and these strategies are usually left to the professionals to interpret and implement. Following Chapter 5, this chapter shifts the attention from China’s media administrative system to media professionals, trying to explore the contributions of these professionals to the production of New Countryside dramas.

Media professionals have played a significant role in driving China’s media reform. As Stockmann and Gallagher (2011, p. 436) noticed, the marketised Chinese media helps the state to achieve ‘remote control’ with reduced propaganda instructions and directives given to the media professionals. However, this ‘remote control’ cannot be realised without the active co-operation of media professionals (e.g. journalists, editors, directors, scriptwriters, producers, etc.). Specifically, Stockmann and Gallagher point out that the media workers will study various signals released by the state (i.e. leaders’ speeches on what issues are allowed or how to report about certain issues, previous news articles on similar issues, etc.), and learn from previous mistakes to make the right decision. Previous research on Chinese journalism has yielded ample discussions on how journalists balance

diverse interests (the state, the market, the audience and the intellectual community) to help the state to maintain its power (Bai, 2012, p. 392). However, not enough information can be found on what behaviours and strategies have been adopted by other professional groups in the Chinese media circle. By focusing on TV drama professionals (scriptwriters, directors, producers), this chapter hopes to fill a gap in the current literature.

The new behavioural patterns of Chinese TV drama professionals can effectively reveal how they help the state to achieve ‘remote control’. Stockmann and Gallagher (2011, pp. 9-10) argue that since the neoliberal reform in Chinese media began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese media professionals’ daily practices have been transformed by the combination of state and market pressure. This is indeed the case with the Chinese TV drama sector. For China’s TV drama industry, such a change is associated with the fading away of the state-directed standardised production mode, the sustaining power of the state over China’s TV drama production, the outbreak of independent producers and scriptwriters’ autonomy, and the development of the media market. Under these circumstances, two new TV drama production patterns emerged in the 1990s along with the progression of the neoliberal reform in China’s TV drama sector. One of the two patterns is normally seen in state-led TV drama productions (productions led by state owned drama production institutions with/without the participation of private companies), and the other is usually adopted in private-led TV drama productions (productions led by private drama production companies with/without the co-operation of state units). They

could be seen as TV professionals' responses to the changes brought by China's media market-orientated transformation.

As discussed in Chapter 2, media professionals follow specific routines to perform regular tasks at work. Routines usually are formed in specific organisations. Different organisational attributes determine that there will be fundamental differences in the actors' patterns of actions in different institutions (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011, p. 443, Howard-Grenville et al., 2016). Consequently, along with the reform that happened inside China's drama production organisations, there emerged two sets of new drama production routines.

Broadly, media routines manifest themselves in two ways. They could either be treated as entities, such as the rules, norms and consensuses written in documents of media organisations, or as the regular behavioural patterns of activities in these organisations. This study adopts the latter perspective. It proposes to view routines as a series of professional actions performed by specific media people in specific work settings (Feldman and Pentland, 2003, p. 94). In so doing, this chapter follows a process-orientated approach to study how these new routines have contributed to the emergence of New Countryside dramas.

The processual approach is preferred in this study because a focus on actions and processes, rather than static procedures and principles written in documents, dissociates routines with stability, and enables explorations on the variations, adaptations, developments and changes of professional routines (Dionysiou and Tsoukas, 2013, p. 183). Thus it enables this research to explore why these new routines replaced the ones in operation before the neoliberal transformation in China's TV drama sector in late 1970s. A process-orientated approach also highlights that professional media routines are never mindless standard performing procedures. It emphasises the importance of agency, as the agency of media professionals plays a key role while choices are made about what and how they should perform in different settings. Thus, compared with the entitative view of routines, the processual understanding can more effectively explain the changes and evolution of professional routines, as well as the key role of professionals in promoting the reform and adapting to contextual changes.

The primary aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the routines in play in the production and circulation of New Countryside rural TV dramas. But before we move to these new routines, it is worthwhile to explain what the old routines were. Considering this, Section 6.2 introduces the drama production routines before the 1990s. Drawing on literature and interview data, this section argues that professionals practising the state-directed standardised production routines were not interested in producing contents that satisfy the audiences, rather, they were keener to provide audiences guidance interspersed with political theories. The drama production routines will be accounted for

in line with the framework outlined in Chapter 2, which notices that professional routines can exercise a significant impact on at least four key activities in a production process: the themes dramas choose to convey, the selection of team members, the types of plots and characters portrayed in the storyline, as well as the stylistic features integrated into the drama. This section also shows that the state media work ‘units’ system is what makes this set of routines possible, as this institutional network ensures that all related professional practices were funded by the state and prescribed following the instructions. Since market mechanisms were introduced to Chinese media in the 1980s, professionals have found that they could not apply these routines in private production institutions or the reformed state institutions, so they have explored new routines to adapt to the work modes in the new industrial environment, as we briefly mentioned in Chapter 4.

Section 6.3 and 6.4 then discuss the sets of routines performed in state-led and private-led TV drama productions respectively, thus contributing to the answer to the second research question of this study (which asks what new industrial routines have influenced the production and distribution of New Countryside dramas). We will see that in state-led New Countryside drama productions, rural-policy-related drama topics will be considered to be of high value. Professionals performing this set of routines pay attention to serving the state’s rural revitalisation agenda, so the recruitment of team members, the selection of plots, etc. all have taken the state’s interest into consideration.. This pattern of drama production also provides a platform for some degrees of commercialisation, as it encourages utilisation of the funds and professional teams in the private sector. This set

of routines relieves the CPC state media institutions' financial pressure to spread political propaganda, and helps the CPC state to address the New Countryside related policies to the rural audiences in a more popularised way.

The other set of routines, which was performed in private-led New Countryside dramas, was accounted for in Section 6.4. It shows that in these productions, rural themes are considered to be worth portraying the most, because they present high profit potentials and low market risks. While the plot and style developments prioritise audience interest and demonstrate high market awareness, private drama professionals like to co-produce with state media units, or integrate as many policy elements into the drama as possible, in order to exploit the resources (related policy information, institutional support, broadcasting chances, distribution net, etc.) that the state-backed units can bring. This set of routines enables professionals in private media institutions to make money and realise self-worth, and it also provides a platform for them to speak for the peasants out of a sense of social responsibility.

The nature of the divide of the two sets of patterns, as well as their differences from their counterparts before the 1970s, are summarised in Section 6.5, which concludes that this reflects a new relationship between the Chinese communist state hegemony, the indigenous cultural tradition, as well as the emerging media professionalism with market awareness during China's neoliberalisation process.

6.2 Drama Production Routines before the 1990s

From when the first TV drama was broadcast in 1958 till the late 1980s, China's drama production presents characteristics that were typical in a 'communist authoritarian media system', which favoured directive productions by state-owned drama production institutions (Lee, 2003, p. 18). During this period, China's unique planned economy system produced a network of state-owned media units. These state-owned production organisations make the fundamental drama production units. Like many other state-owned work units at that time, these institutions were called 'danwei'. They did not just provide a place for drama production, but also organised the social life of media professionals, functioning as the basic units for employment, residence, resource allocation, as well as social welfare distribution (Chai, 2014, p. 184).

Different from privately owned media systems, China's drama production danweis in the planned economy era were not consolidated into large competitive networks (Keane, 2005a, p. 83). Instead, since the major drama making institutions were affiliated with TV stations, they were managed under the state-built TV station network. In 1958, there was only one TV station in China: the Beijing TV station. In 1970, the number of TV stations rose to 32. By the end of 1972, there was at least one TV station in each of China's 29 provincial level administrative regions except Tibet (Hong, 1998a, pp. 46-47). Such an arrangement shows the state's intention to guarantee that each region had its local broadcaster as well as the programme production centre.

However, this does not mean that the central state gave the localities full autonomy in TV programme development. In the 1980s, as most cities and counties also established TV stations, TV stations were organised on four levels: central, provincial, city and county (Redl and Simons, 2002). Most TV stations above the county level produced dramas. Horizontally, each level of TV station was under the administration of the government of the same level, so the government could always exert impact on the production decisions of local stations. In addition, the hierarchical institutional structure of the Chinese government ensured that lower level governments always followed the instructions from those above them. Vertically, the lower level stations, county stations in particular, were encouraged to relay programmes produced by higher level stations. This means productions by the central and city level stations usually had more broadcasting chances. In this way, China's drama production was brought under the powerful monitoring of all levels of governments. Their influence manifested itself in two aspects: firstly, in the 1980s, the drama production of TV stations usually was subject to state quota (Keane, 2005a, p. 85); secondly, the party-state could always commission drama production tasks to the TV stations (Ma, 2014, p. 525).

Living and working in the danwei, China's early drama professionals are always subservient to the drama production danwei's regulations and interest. As a result, their daily practices need to show respect for the principles that the danwei, as well as the powerful supporter behind them - the Chinese party-state, prescribed for their daily practices. Taking a progressual approach, this chapter argues that the production routines

in a drama making danwei could be illustrated by examining how the professionals perform the four production practices identified in Chapter 2: topic selecting, team building, as well as narrative and style development. The way these professionals work showed a set of production values unique to this specific era.

6.2.1 Thematic Choices: Following Party Instructions

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Chinese TV drama production danweis were financially and politically dependent on the Party. Most of these danweis were affiliated to TV stations (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016) – one of the most typical state owned and operated broadcasters in China. Some were state-owned theatrical troupes (e.g. the China Central Broadcasting Theatrical Troup) (Zhang, 2019) or film studios (e.g. Bayi Film Studio, Changchun Film Studio) (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016), which were given the responsibility to produce TV dramas after television was introduced to China. A common feature of these units was that they were institutionally administrated by party-state organs, so they had the responsibility to unconditionally promote the party-state policy. Thus, professionals in these danweis tended to start new drama projects based on the state's directives, thoughts and policies.

During this period, the party-state had a keen interest in making 'educative' TV dramas (Keane, 2005a, p. 85). This is because TV dramas, the same as other forms of media, were regarded as a propaganda instrument of the party-state, so educating the Chinese

public about the communist state's ongoing policies and providing them political guidance became the tasks the state gave to drama production danweis in the early years of the PRC history (Zhu et al., 2008, p. 4).

In practice, for a great deal the planning of a drama project depended on the direct instructions from the party-state. Drama professionals chose general themes to start with according to what the state's policy priority was (interview with interviewee 6, director in chief of a programme of CCTV Rural Channel, October 2016). This policy information usually came in the form of organised meetings or issued documents, which were then reinterpreted into dramas with the help of drama professionals (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016). For instance, as briefly introduced in Chapter 4, the first Chinese TV drama *One Bite of the Vegetable Pancake*, tells a story of a woman teaching her younger sister to save food. According to an interview with the professionals making this drama (Zhang, 2019), they chose to do a drama surrounding the food-saving theme because, one of their leaders at China Central Broadcasting Theatrical Troup attended a meeting organised by the China Central Broadcasting Bureau, and brought back the message that the state wanted all media danweis to propagate the political message of economising food. The professionals finally decided to make the novel *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake* into a TV drama because the simplicity of its story made it easy to be adapted for TV screens. This case demonstrates the decisive influence of party-state instructions on the planning of a TV drama in the planned economy era.

Where the way of the state directing themes to the drama production danweis was most effective, was that it reduced the time required to make decisions within the production institutions. In addition, it could make different types of media institutions (e.g. news press, TV stations, radio stations, film studios, etc.) create consistent media products, thus could maximise the propaganda effects. However, as was shown in the case of *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake*, the thematic choice of dramas at that time was made based on the party-state's propaganda needs, thus it lacked attention to the real demands of the TV audience. In addition, it can be noticed that this top-down approach did not give enough space for the creativity of the drama professionals.

6.2.2 Team Building: Co-operation within the State Sector

After the thematic decisions were made on the basis of state directives, the specific work of producing the drama was assigned to drama professionals in state production units by the higher level leaders in the units. As part of the state sector, the TV station-based drama production units received annual subsidies from the state (Keane, 2005a, p. 85). So financial issues were not the major problem for these state commissioned drama projects. The only problem that the project leader should consider, therefore, was how to find the best crew for the project.

In those early years, specialist expertise in the TV drama field was not an indispensable criterion for choosing team members. This is because TV dramas were still a new media

genre in China at that time, so few media professionals knew how to make great TV drama products. Rather, working on these state-commissioned drama productions required passion for the job, the striving spirit, as well as a strong sense of mission (Zhao, 2010, p. 55). With only few successful models to follow, poor working conditions, heavy workloads as well as the stress caused by live broadcasting (as stated in Chapter 4, early TV dramas were on-stage dramas broadcast live on television) (*ibid.*), producing TV dramas in these years was no easy job for Chinese media workers. Therefore, drama projects favoured professionals with ‘a sense of altruism and acceptance of the national project’ (Keane, 2005a, p. 85).

Professionals working on one TV drama did not necessarily come from one production unit. A typical co-operation mode was having scriptwriters, producers and directors from the TV station, with the support from other related units. This helped to make use and take advantage of the respective resources of each type of *danwei*. Taking *One Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake* as an example, whilst its two directors came from Beijing TV Station and the China Central Broadcasting Troupe respectively, the actors were invited by the China Central Broadcasting Troupe (based in Beijing), and the scenic designers were found at Bayi Film Studio (based in Beijing) (Zhou, 2017, p. Chapter 2). Similarly, in 1964, Tianjin TV station produced the drama *Moving* with the performance of Tianjin People’s Art Troupe; in 1960, Changhun TV station (based in the Jilin Province) and Harbin TV station (based in the Heilongjiang Province) co-produced the drama *March Snow* with the actors from Heilongjiang Radio and Television Art Troupe (based in the Heilongjiang

Province) (Zhao, 2010, p. 49). Although the danwei system was often linked to low mobility of employment and the spatial closure of each danwei compound (Chai, 2014, p. 185), these cases show that effective coordination existed between different types of media danweis. We can also notice that geographic proximity played an important role in facilitating cross-organisational co-operation in China's early TV drama productions. This could be caused by the closer interpersonal connections between organisation leaders in the same geographic area, the shared cultural and aesthetic values, and the low transportation costs.

In this sense, we can see that the media danwei system played an important role in organising the production of different types of drama professionals. Not everyone can work in a danwei, as the danwei system allows the state or provincial drama ministry to only assign jobs to individuals with proper professional training (Bjorklund, 1986, p. 22) that show respect to socialist norms (Chai, 2014, p. 184). This way, this system ensures that all the professionals are loyal to the national project. However, the task inside a danwei was usually assigned in a top-down manner, so it is difficult to know leaders' specific considerations regarding whom exactly the work should be allocated to. But from the above discussion, it can be seen that in the planned economy era, a sense of commitment and responsibility to the national socialist construction project was highly appreciated in drama professionals in the industry.

6.2.3 Narrative and Character Setting: Serving the Party Doctrine

The narratives in most early year Chinese TV dramas are seen to be propagandist. The ultimate aim of dramas in this time was to help legitimise the party-state's rule. Thus a key criterion for media professionals when they were designing drama plots was whether the story accorded with the party-state doctrine. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Mao Zedong's discussion on the relationship between arts and politics greatly influenced drama professionals' work. According to Mao,

Party work in literature and art occupies a definite and assigned position in Party revolutionary work as a whole and is subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period. Opposition to this arrangement is certain to lead to dualism or pluralism, and in essence amounts to 'politics--Marxist, art—bourgeois', as with Trotsky...The revolutionary struggle on the ideological and artistic fronts must be subordinate to the political struggle because only through politics can the needs of the class and the masses find expression in concentrated form.

(Mao, 1965)

Mao insisted that socialist art work must be pro-proletarian, pro-socialism and pro the Party. Following this guidance, developing narratives that could sing the praises of the communist regime became the basic principle for TV drama professionals. Ma (2014b, p. 525) names dramas of this sort 'socialist dramas', pointing out that professionals in the Maoist era were wholly concerned with the Party's propaganda needs. As a result, despite the fact that TV dramas during this period portrayed a wide range of stories, the key political message the portrayals of these dramas delivered was always that only the Party can bring the Chinese people to a happy and bright socialist society. For instance, some

of the most typical drama narratives at that time were about the celebration of the new life, the praise of heroes and socialist role models, and the critique on the feudal or bureaucratic ideas. (Zhao, 2010, Zhou, 2017, p. Chapter 2). In order to emphasise the significant contributions the party-state made to the people, dramas usually contained quite a few depictions of rural poverty without the party-state's interventions, as well as people's woes and grievances over such kind of miserable life (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016). Like 'political preaching' (Ma, 2014, p. 525), media professionals instilled the ideological lessons and propagandist information into the drama in a direct manner.

In addition, the party-state also explicitly required professionals to promote them, and the socialist role models it endorsed, in a positive image. During this period, the state provided specific practical guidance for arts and cultural professionals to follow. The most typical was the 'Principle of Three Stresses', which was proposed in 1968. It asked the country's propagandist professionals to construct positive images for socialist heroes, urging them: 'Of all the characters, stress the positive ones. Of all the positive characters, stress the heroic ones. Of the main characters, stress the central ones.' (Silbergeld, 1999, p. 2003). This guidance reflects the party-state's desire to set up a superior image of the communist heroes before the public.

Principles like these were considered as practice guidelines in drama production danweis. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when violent class struggles were common, drama professionals had to obey these three principles, or they were likely to be charged with anti-socialism and even risked losing their job. This way, the party-state ensured that all the narratives and characters of TV dramas were ‘politically correct’ with positive portrayals of the party-state and the socialist role models, and without any deviation from the party-state doctrines. However, this convention of developing TV dramas created highly conceptualised narratives and stereotyped characters in TV dramas.

6.2.4 Stylistic Features: Applying Unsophisticated Aesthetic Techniques

TV dramas during this period of time were stylistically modest. Due to the fact that most early TV dramas were broadcast live, the professionals mainly made TV dramas following the conventions for stage performances. In terms of the format, before the 1980s, all TV dramas were single-act plays, which an interviewee called ‘short and non-serial TV movies’ (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October, 2016). Most of them were shot indoors. It was not until 1981 that China’s first serial drama, *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* (*Diyi Shiba Nian*) appeared on the screen (Zhu et al., 2008, p. 4). However, this drama did not gain popularity among the audience because its narrative was not as appealing as the imported TV dramas at that time, such as *Huo Yuanjia* (Hong Kong, 1982) and *A Doubtful Blood Type* (Xueyi: Japan 1980) (Zhu et al., 2008, p. 5). This shows the unsophisticated feature of China’s early year TV dramas, and also highlights the

importance to understand China's early years TV drama production in the context of cross-border drama exchanges (*ibid.* p.5). As will be discussed later, with the progression of the Open Door and Reform Policy, Chinese media professionals gradually learned more drama production techniques from their foreign counterparts, and enriched the formats and expression techniques of socialist TV dramas.

With regard to the style of the portrayal, early years professionals adopted a 'down-to-earth' principle (interview with interviewee 6, director in chief of a programme at CCTV Rural Channel, October 2016). The plots that professionals created were close to real countryside life. In the talk given at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art, Mao put forward the idea that art creation should 'gain raw materials from the life of the people, typify the contradictions within them and produce works which awaken the masses' (Mao, 1965). This principle was taken as the guideline in early years' TV drama creation. As a result, in rural drama production, almost all the plots were set in village working and life settings (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October, 2016), and the typical images professionals created for peasants were poor and hardworking people who barely took care of their appearances (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State Regulatory Institution, October 2016). This kind of portrayals reflected social reality at the time, and thus helped the audience to build familiarity with the drama story.

In addition, since the drama professionals were only concerned with presenting the party doctrine with no intention to entertain the audience or make a profit, they gave little priority to artistic sophistication (Ma, 2014, p. 525). Artistic conventions, codes and techniques (e.g. using popular stars, appealing to humour, appealing to sarcasm, personalised characters, etc.) were therefore not well established in these early year dramas. Professionals tended to portray the story in a plain tone, thus these dramas were unable to meet the audience's needs and arouse as much emotional engagement as their imported counterparts.

6.3 New Routines in State-led Productions and their Influences

Since the 1990s, China's media sector has undergone a process of rapid transformation from an authoritarian planned system to a market-orientated capitalist one (Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 553). A number of changes happened in China's previously public owned TV drama sector, including the reduced control of the government over the daily business operations of drama organisations, the development of marketing mechanisms (e.g. the introduction of the advertising revenue system, the copyright fee system, investment practices in media projects) in the TV drama sector, the rise of media professionals' autonomy, etc. These changes show that like the reform in other areas, the reform in China's TV drama sector also has an inclination towards marketisation, reduced state intervention and individualism - typical features of neoliberalisation.

Among some of the interesting features of this neoliberal media system are the rise of two types of new drama production institutions: the commercialised state-owned drama danweis, as well as the proliferating private drama production companies. As discussed earlier, drama professionals' production routines are shaped by unique organisational attributes (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011, p. 443, Howard-Grenville et al., 2016). With the two new organisations' operation and management modes completely different from the state-owned drama production danweis, it is worth exploring what changes have happened to drama professionals' behavioural patterns.

Over the years, independent productions have been an increasingly influential model in the American and Western European TV drama production practice. Globally, TV drama production follows a 'publishing model', which features the heavy involvement of independent companies in the production processes (Keane and Liu, 2009, p. 246). In the US, this is reflected as the independent studio system, in which the studios sell series to the national TV networks and the independent producer plays a key role throughout one drama programme (Cantor, 1971). In Western Europe, the independent producer also is the key figure. This is caused by 'the privatisation of public channels and the licensing of new commercial channels' since the 1990s (Keane and Liu, 2009, p. 246). Take the UK for example, from 1983 to 1996, the share of independent production hours on British television rose from 268 hours to 4664 hours, a result fuelled by the establishment of Channel 4 and the 25% independent production quota imposed on BBC and ITV (Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport, 1998, p. 106). By outsourcing the drama

to private companies, the broadcasters saved budget on labour costs, and by doing so they also managed to get help of outside TV drama professionals to focus on content creation. It also provides an incentive for independent companies to reasonably allocate resources, so that their work can be most cost-effective and efficient.

However, in China, independent TV drama production is not as dominant as in America and Western Europe. The reason is, the legacy of the state controlled media system determines that there are no liberal-democratic-style independent drama institutions in China. Instead, the state remains powerful in the drama sector. Typically, state-controlled drama production danweis are still influential in the post-reform era. Although China's neoliberal reform era has seen these former state organ institutions marketised and the state control over them weakened, they remain in the state sector, and are still subject to the regulation of the party-state.

As introduced in Chapter 4, in order to achieve political control and market efficiency in regional media industries, since the late 1990s, the Chinese state has been actively promoting the integration of media outlets within a same region (Zhao, 2004, p. 192). Many drama production danweis, which used to be a part of the regional TV station, thus became a business segment, or a subordinate enterprise, of the newly merged regional broadcasting conglomerates. Typical regional broadcasting conglomerates include Shanghai Media Group, and Shandong Film and TV Media Group.. China Television

Production Centre (CTPC), which belongs to the national broadcaster CCTV, is China's state-owned drama production enterprise on the central level. Regional production centres not only help the local broadcasting conglomerates to monopolise local TV serial operations, but also enable their productions to compete with imported dramas as well as those made by other domestic competitors (Yu, 2011, p. 34).

In an interview with a high-level official, Zhao (2004, p. 194) finds that how these broadcasting conglomerates work in the post-reform era can be summarised as 'using administrative measures to integrate, and using market measures to operate'. Accordingly, in nature, these broadcasting conglomerates, with a number of media enterprises affiliated to them, are defined as 'shiyé' danweis. Their fundamental production purpose is 'the production of public goods and services', which is completely different from the profit-orientated 'qiye' danweis (*ibid.*, p.196). However, in the daily operation, they are run like corporatised businesses and are supposed to participate in market competition. Since the 1990s, these conglomerates have introduced a series of market mechanisms led by the party-state to improve efficiency. Employees in these drama production companies, therefore, are still directly regulated by corresponding party-state organisations, but their professional practices have been greatly influenced by market logics.

Working in these corporatised state drama production units, drama professionals have developed a new set of routines to balance between the business imperative and the

political duty to serve the need of the party-state. On the one hand, they have not totally broken away from the state directives and the socialist orthodoxy that the state organ media must follow. On the other hand, they start to look at the needs of the audience, and begin to seek for higher profits in a number of ways.

As discussed in Chapter 4, between the 1990s and 2000s, there were not many rural topic dramas produced in China because of the low profitability of the rural subject. Moreover, of the limited numbers of rural dramas produced during 1990s-2000s, a majority represented a poor and backward countryside. However, since the state launched the ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ project in 2005, the New Countryside subject fits into the state’s propaganda agenda. Professionals in corporatised state drama production units thus have been more willing to portray rural issues based on this ‘Socialist New Countryside’ construction blueprint (a detailed explanation of this blueprint has been given in Chapter 1). As in the 1990s, the new production routines have facilitated positive portrayals of the countryside by impacting the professionals’ strategies in four major professional processes.

6.3.1 Thematic choices: Meeting the Requirements of the Party and the Market

Since state-owned drama production units began corporatisation, the market has challenged the party-state’s domination of TV drama production. Many studies on Chinese TV dramas have revealed that the traditional state-commissioned way of producing

dramas has been partly overthrown, and drama professionals in those institutions increasingly care about the market needs (Zhao, 2004, Keane, 2005a, Zhao and Guo, 2005, Zhu et al., 2008, Ma, 2014). They began to evaluate the profitability and market risks before starting each drama project. In one interview with the editor-in-chief of the Shandong Film and TV Media Group (SFTMG), it was pointed out that, currently, professionals in their company must do tight market research before starting a drama project. She specifically pointed out that professionals' views on the role of TV dramas had changed - since the reform started in the media sector, TV dramas are no longer just a vehicle of ideologies; instead, they have become a type of cultural commodities; therefore, as the content provider, it is of vital importance for the professionals to carefully evaluate how the market will value a drama subject (*Qilu Evening News*, 2016). These views show that China's state owned drama production companies are starting to take the market demands into consideration.

However, the increasing power of the market does not mean the disappearance of the party-state influence on drama production. Though the Chinese drama production units have been integrated into big broadcasting corporations, these corporations remain a public unit, thus their professionals' decisions in many cases still reflect the feature of the planned economic production mode. This means that the party and government still oversee the daily practices in those TV drama production units and still can give commissions to them. Their directives have become a regular source of themes for professionals.

Since the ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ campaign began, this policy has become one of the Chinese state’s most urgent policy priorities. Thus it soon got into the state and local level governments’ propaganda agenda. Many state owned propaganda institutions, including the reformed state-owned broadcasting groups, began to produce relevant cultural products following the signals (in the forms of government documents, party-organ press news, talks given by party-state officials, etc.) released by the state (interview with interviewee 14, actor, October 2018). During the fieldwork, one interviewee described a New Countryside TV drama project in which he participated as ‘a political task’ assigned by the party-state authorities, and expressed recognition of the party-state and its various branch levels as the regular topic provider of their work. He explained how the party-state directives helped them to establish a New Countryside drama project,

A vice-minister in charge of the film and TV drama sector in our Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department found our institution. He asked if we could make a TV drama to propagate the ‘City Cadre Goes down to the Countryside’ policy²⁵. At that time, the task was like ‘given’ to me...the Propaganda Department is like our policy guide

(interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016).

The themes that the state and market prefer are usually rather different, but in some cases, the influence of these two forces is not contradictory. Many state-proposed subjects are evaluated to be of great commercial value. The New Countryside topic is one of the most typical examples, as the national policy background - China’s state-led neoliberalisation

²⁵ This is a rural promotion measure launched by the Shandong provincial government in order to solve the insufficient talent problem in the countryside. It could be seen as a provincial-level policy practice under the framework of ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’.

with a focus on rural revitalisation - gives this topic more chance to be broadcast on influential platforms than other subjects. As a number of sources reveal, the national broadcaster, CCTV, tend to pre-order TV dramas that are considered to be promoting the party-state's policy priorities as a way of showing support for the party-state (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016; interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016; interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016; *Qilu Evening News*, 2016). A director, in particular, pointed out that the state media as well as other state organs' backing usually brings about positive evaluations of a New Countryside TV drama project's market value:

State media outlets will endorse these rural drama projects for free, so the money required for marketing and advertising could be less than other projects. Therefore, the risk of investing in them is low. Low risk and low cost enable these rural dramas to attract sufficient investments from society.

(interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016).

In this sense, professionals in corporatised state-owned drama production units need to take into account the requirements of two masters, the state and the market, before initiating a TV drama project. This new routine enables professionals to discover more diversified drama themes that meet the demands of the audience. More importantly, it is effective in ensuring that the market-based state drama institutions still perform the role of the state's propaganda instrument, and can always serve the state's political needs. This principle has driven many New Countryside related drama projects out of both political and economic concerns.

6.3.2 Team Building: Producer-centred Public-Private Co-operation

Different from the pre-1990s era when drama production tasks were assigned to professionals in state production units and ran in an authoritarian manner, the reformed drama production units seek to decentralise their operations. Many of these institutions start to promote the producer responsibility mechanism, via which a producer team has management freedom and shares the responsibility for their own profits and losses (Xu, 2008, *Qilu Evening News*, 2016). The reformed state owned drama production units give full play to the producer team's creativity and entrepreneurship, having largely motivated their enthusiasm for maximising profits.

The producer of a programme has control over the selection of the production team. Since the market-orientated reform started, the selection of team members in corporatised drama production units has started to attach greater importance to professionals' expertise. Producers usually will prefer professionals who have experience in the proposed drama genre. Sufficient understanding of the topic, profound insights into it, as well as sincere interest are essential for being a member of the core team (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016).

For some positions (e.g. scriptwriters, actors, etc.), professionals are not even necessarily selected from the public sector. In fact, as long as they demonstrate enough professional ability, there is a large possibility that they will get the work. For instance, during the

fieldwork, it was found that several state-participated New Countryside drama projects are written by the same independent scriptwriter. He was invited to join the New Countryside drama projects because several of his previous dramas were broadcast in CCTV prime time and won national popularity. According to him, the key to his success is his long-term focus on rural issues and sufficient understanding of the state documents (interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016).

Where this new criterion for selecting team members was effective was in taking a pragmatic approach to bring together experienced drama professionals into one project, making it possible to exploit the wisdom and expertise of professionals outside of the party-state units. In this way, producers in corporatised state-owned TV drama units can employ external experts and consultants to help them with subjects that they are not familiar with. It is especially helpful for the production of New Countryside TV dramas, as by hiring professionals with the experience of living in the countryside or who are rural issue experts, the team, in which a majority of the staff are usually urban elites, will be able to approach the countryside issues in a more constructive way.

The professionals in a New Countryside drama project usually pick up rural topic drama as a career out of their sense of social responsibility (interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016; interview with interviewee 8, scriptwriter and producer, November 2016). To help the people live a better life is a typical political ideal of Chinese

Confucian intellectuals. The Confucian cultural tradition with a special attachment for the countryside has existed in China for over 2,000 years. It has profoundly affected the way Chinese people, especially the intellectuals, think and behave. It believes that it is the literati's responsibility to help the state/king to govern the country. The ultimate ideal for the literati, therefore, is to help the people live and work in peace and contentment. Many external drama professionals treat rural TV dramas as something that can help improve the life of peasants,

Writing rural dramas is a job that requires genuine affection for the countryside. You should have a deep love towards the peasants and care about the whole country, rather than simply take TV dramas as a form of entertainment... My fundamental starting point when writing a rural drama is whether the depiction can bring benefits to peasants. When I go to the countryside to do fieldwork for my writing, I will always talk with the young rural cadres first. We will discuss how to be a good cadre [and I will make the identified problems known to the audience in order to raise public awareness]

(interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016).

In terms of the funds, different from dramas in the planned economy era, most of the drama projects in corporatised state drama production units do not run on governmental subsidies. Instead, the operation of them absolutely follows the market logic. To increase financial efficiency, these institutions encourage professionals to use bank loans and embrace outsourcing investors, especially private investors due to their flexibility and the amount of capital in the private media sector.

For instance, in an interview with the president of the Shandong Film and TV Media Group (STFMG), Lv Peng, it was pointed out that their institution actively encourages co-operation with private companies; for the sake of sharing risks and costs, SFTMG even requires that every project should have no fewer than 3 investors (Cai, 2016b), but in order to ensure the effective control of the drama content, the share of the SFTMG investment in the co-production should be no less than 50% of the total (*Qilu Evening News*, 2016). This principle pushes drama producers to actively seek for co-production partners from the private sector. Outsourcing funds can not only be a good way to solve the problem of capital shortage in some state-owned drama production units. In the case of some drama genres with a propaganda undertone, for example, New Countryside topic dramas, it also helps to relieve the fiscal burden of the party-state, and pushes the professionals to focus more on market demands thus saves the dramas from overt pedagogy.

Unlike the pre-1990s era when TV dramas were broadcast by TV stations that were associated with the production units, since the 2000s, completed TV dramas do not necessarily air on the subordinate channels under the same local media conglomerate. Currently, more production units prefer to trade the dramas on television fairs or distribution websites (i.e. Beijing Entertainment Exchange Network) in an open way (Keane, 2005a, p. 90). Thus it is also the producer's duty to promote, distribute and sell the drama.

In this sense, we could see that in corporatised drama production units, producers are the key person to ensure the smooth and efficient implementation of TV drama projects. Although they work in state-owned media groups, they have bridged together the professional networks in private and public sectors by selectively using resources they could find in both fields. This producer-centred mechanism permits the producers in the state sector greater control over drama creation directions compared with their counterparts before the 1990s, as they now have more autonomy to choose colleagues with the same interests and sufficient expertise. This way, it facilitated the production of New Countryside TV dramas, as it enables the state units to work with external rural drama experts. These experts can direct the dramas to focus more on the real life problems in the countryside, instead of just repeating the party-state doctrine. However, this mechanism relies too much on producers' network and ability, which creates some producers' monopoly over the rural drama markets.

6.3.3 Narrative and Character Setting: Producing both Entertaining and Propagandist Portrayals

Corporatised state-owned drama institutions tend to develop narratives that are supportive of the state policy but do not directly repeat the doctrines of the party-state. Although propaganda is still a core function of their TV dramas, professionals in these state institutions increasingly seek to make their contents serve the public interest. Therefore, some innovative strategies of portrayal have been developed, in order to help them produce both popular and propagandist narrative forms.

The first strategy is developing positive portrayals of the reality. Real life topic dramas unavoidably address authentic problems, concerns or controversies in reality. Though these issues can arouse public attention, bold portrayals of them can reveal the negative side of society. In the Maoist era, these topics were considered the grey zone of society, thus they were rarely depicted in TV dramas. As stated in Chapter 4, it was not until the 1980s that some TV dramas began to develop a critical and reflexive look at the Chinese society and the Chinese bureaucratic system (Bai, 2014, p. 235). But this sort of critical TV drama was rarely seen since the Tiananmen protest in 1989 as a result of the tightened political environment. With the looser political climate since the 2000s, depictions of the social problems appear on screen again, as a response to the state's call for more real life topic TV dramas. Influenced by the party-state's positive propaganda principle (as mentioned in 6.2.3), professionals in state drama production units tend to portray these negative issues in a more subtle way.

Specifically, professionals will still avoid paying too much attention to some depressing issues; e.g. the birth control policy, crime stories, etc. in drama depictions. The reason is that these problems 'lack appeal' to the current audience, who take TV dramas as a form of entertainment (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016). What can be noticed here is that, unlike the Maoist dramas which avoided depictions of social ills for fear of causing social chaos, TV dramas since the 2000s avoid these topics mainly out of commercial concerns. But the post-2000s TV dramas do not entirely refuse depictions of negative issues. They portray social problems out of motivation to make use of the social

impact of these issues to attract the audience. In the case where the drama addresses some social ills, the professionals tend to minimise the significance of the problem, shift the focus to some non-core aspects of the issue, or interpret it in a way that is in the party-state's interest (interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016). These guidelines also show that the key principle of current state drama professionals when covering real life plots is to offer the audience convincing official interpretations of the social problems.

The strategy of developing positive portrayals has been widely employed in New Countryside dramas, as it offers professionals a way to address the various tensions in the countryside in the transformation era. For instance, in *Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside*, the drama touches on the sensitive issue of land ownership. It portrays how a village senior takes a widow's farmland, and how the Party secretary helps the widow to get it back. In the context where the Chinese state's land requisition policy has triggered increasing social conflicts across the country, this set of narratives shifts the focus from land disputes between the state and the villagers to those inside the villagers' community. By doing so, the drama resonates with one of the most important things that peasants relate to: the farming land. At the same time, the Party secretary's mediation between the two peasants also built up his image as a just and responsible village cadre, which emphasises the authority of the party-state and accords with the 'socialist' aspect of the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' discourse. An interview with the general manager of CTV Media (a CCTV controlled media production corporation) suggests that this drama's portrayal of the land ownership issue leads to huge social attention (Qiu,

2014). As the vice minister of the Shandong Propaganda Department Xu Xianghong observes, the positive narratives enable this drama to be both enjoyable and as such thought provoking (Xu, 2014). The key to such effects is that positive portrayals enable professionals to effectively turn the depressing rural social issues into light tone comedic stories. This way, New Countryside dramas can address some social problems key to the state's 'New Countryside Construction' plan without being too propagandist or infringing the party-state's interest.

Another strategy is deglamourising the images of party-state officials. As a part of the party-state's propaganda system, it is the official TV drama professionals' duty to maintain or beautify the image of the party-state and its officials. To achieve this goal, the pre-1990s TV dramas chose to sing praises for these socialist officials as discussed in 6.2.3. However, professionals in the post-2000 era realised that the perfect images of party-state officials could not persuade the audience, as the masses felt these idealised characters were alienated from their lives (Bai, 2007, p. 139). In the current TV drama market, the party-state professionals have realised that cultural products should not simply propagate, but they need to convince the audience via 'ideological naturalisation' - making the dominant ideology lifelike (Ma, 2014, p. 527). As the carrier of the party-state ideology, the image of the party-state officials particularly needs deglamourisation. In practice, 'constructing more lifelike leader characters that reflect human nature' has become a basic principle that the state encourages professionals to follow (interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016).

Deglamourising party-state officials has greatly enriched the storyline of New Countryside dramas. This is achieved in three ways. Firstly, it permits the professionals to focus on the private lives of party-state officials. Instead of being just a busy public servant, now the party-state official can develop romantic relationships, participate in recreational activities, etc. This strategy can effectively enhance the believability of these images. In addition, it also can add to the interest level of the serials, which enhances its appeal to the audience. Secondly, it lets the party-state official have a distinctive personality. Taking *Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside* as an example, the party secretary was depicted as 'a city yuppie' (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016). Via this technique, party-state officials seem to have more personal charisma compared with their counterparts in the pre-1990 era. Thirdly, it allows the officials to be inexperienced or even have flaws. This usually facilitates propaganda, as by portraying the struggles and growth of an inexperienced official in the village, it gives a demonstration for the real cadre officials on how to deal with the various problems emerged during the 'New Countryside Construction' campaign. In cases like this, the dramas sometimes become the party-state's training material for rural cadres (interview with interviewee 3, scriptwriter, October 2016; interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016; interview with interviewee 36, village party secretary, May 2017).

6.3.4 Stylistic Considerations: Beautifying and Popularising the Portrayals

Stylistically, since the 1990s serial drama professionals have been paying increasing attention to the artistic and aesthetic aspects of a drama. This principle has most obviously influenced the practice of state-owned drama production institutions, because the high stability of jobs in state run enterprises brings state professionals lighter commercial pressure compared to their private counterparts. Consequently, as Jing Lei, a producer in SFTMG puts it, state professionals can constantly strive for greater artistic quality of their dramas without being too worried about these dramas' market performance (*Qilu Evening News*, 2016). In an interview with Kong Sheng, a famous producer in SFTMG, he advocated that professionals should view the TV dramas not just as commodities but as artistic goods. He thus emphasised the necessity for professionals to carefully consider the use of professional techniques, such as light and shadow, the arrangements of the scenes etc. in their productions (Lin, 2016a). Different from the pre-1990s dramas, which only sought to accomplish their political duty, state TV drama professionals now seek to achieve better visual effects and technique sophistication.

The constant pursuit for quality has enhanced the visual performance of state-made New Countryside dramas. Most state made New Countryside dramas are keen on representing a beautiful countryside, in order to provide the audience with visual enjoyment. This just fits the requirements of the 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' project, which seeks to build 'clean and tidy villages' as one of its five objectives (as discussed in Chapter 1).

Taking *Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside* as an example, in the spirit of promoting the beauty of the countryside, the team took many scenes portraying natural sceneries of the village. A regular picture is the giant pagoda tree at the end of the village. Episode 1, for instance, paints a beautiful picture of the harmonious co-existence between peasants and the village sceneries – under the shade, neighbours sit together beside an old stone mill, chatting, laughing, and enjoying beautiful opera melodies lingering around the ear; by their side some goats are chewing grass freely and leisurely. The production team of this drama would prefer to categorise this drama as a ‘countryside drama’ rather than a ‘rural drama’, as the former title could evoke more romantic and nostalgic fantasies in people’s mind, and these were exactly the thing that the team wanted audiences to relate with (Zhang, 2014a).

In addition, since the enterprise state owned drama production institutions must consider the acceptance of the market (interview with interviewee 4, producer, October 2016), professionals have begun to apply more entertaining elements and forms in their portrayals. This strategy has made many New Countryside dramas more appealing to the audience as well as advertisers. The most widely applied technique is hiring A-list popular stars. For example, Wu Xiubo, one of the highest paid male actors on Chinese television, was invited over to play the major role of a party secretary sent down to a village. Similar cases also include Jin Dong in *Guangming Sun's Journey to the Countryside*, Guo Jingfei in *Qing Lian*, etc. Besides A-list stars, some New Countryside dramas also attempt to use more young actors in order to attract younger audiences. The participation of popular

actors and actresses to some extent has changed the public stereotypes about rural topic dramas, which seemed to be full of unattractive faces and unstylish images. In this manner, the political narratives in New Countryside dramas are wrapped with popular formats, which makes these New Countryside dramas more appealing to their audience.

6.4 New Drama Production Routines in Private-led Productions and their Influences

Despite of the sustaining influence of the state in the media sector, the majority of drama production units in China are privately owned. Currently, there are more than 6000 TV drama production institutions in China. More than 4/5 of them belong to the private sector (*Qilu Evening News*, 2016).

Maximising profits is the main driving force of these companies' activities. They gain profit by selling dramas to state-owned TV stations for money or commercial slots which they can sell to advertisers (Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 560). These non-state actors have been actively pushing forward the commercialisation of media initiated by the party-state, because media entrepreneurs' desire for money is in line with the party-state's intention to utilise privately produced content to connect with the masses without increasing media subsidies (Lynch, 1999, Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 560). However, different from the independent drama companies in the North American or West European media structures, Chinese independent producers operate under the heavy impact of a strong state.

Influenced by such a unique political system and media structure, and the impact of the ‘imported media professionalism with market awareness,’ (i.e. the global media industry’s consensus on media’s rights, duty, ethics, legality and credibility) (Lee, 2003, p. 16), the non-state drama production actors have developed a set of market-based routines to produce TV dramas that are in the interest of the party-state and themselves.

Like corporatised state owned drama production danweis, since 2005, an increasing number of these independent actors also have started to make New Countryside dramas. The aim of this section, therefore, is to discuss how their unique production routines have facilitated the production of New Countryside dramas.

6.4.1 Thematic Considerations: Seeking High-Rating and Low-Risk Types of Topics

In the former two types of drama production organisations, the party-state has been an important provider of thematic choices for state drama professionals. However, in private drama production companies, independent professionals are not obligated to be the party-state’s propaganda instrument. Efficiency and profits have become the priority of the professionals when they evaluate the value of different drama themes (interview with interviewee 11, scriptwriter, September 2018; interview with interviewee 13, editor at CCTV Rural Channel, June 2019). The motivation of these drama professionals is that, like in the case of many other Chinese private enterprises, in non-state drama production companies, only those who can bring significant income to the institutions, either by

enlarging the audience group or attracting sponsors and advertisers, can have high salaries as well as high indirect benefits (such as bonuses) (Lee, 2000, Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 563). As a result, media entrepreneurs and professionals in non-state institutions have been actively seeking opportunities to invest in high-rating and low-risk types of serials topics.

The preference for high-rating and low-risk types of TV drama themes has made New Countryside dramas an ideal choice for some private drama production companies. Two key factors have given professionals confidence in the market potential of New Countryside dramas. Firstly, professionals will consider if the drama topic will be needed by TV stations, in order to judge how high the market risk is. In the case of New Countryside dramas, what offers professionals faith in their value is the state broadcasting quota for rural topic dramas. Many drama entrepreneurs invest in this topic because the state requires that at least 10% of the TV dramas broadcast each year should be rural themed ones, and this quorum will have to be strictly enforced by TV stations (interview with interviewee 11, scriptwriter, September 2018). As mentioned earlier in this section, the rural topic cultural products were marginalised in the market during the 1990s-2000s as a result of media commercialisation. When the current Chinese rural topic TV drama market is still at the lower level of development and has limited participants, a quality rural TV drama is ‘almost a winning investment opportunity’ for entrepreneurs (interview with interviewee 11, scriptwriter, September 2018).

TV stations' demand for quality rural themed TV dramas has become more obvious since 2015, when the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television required that one new TV drama can be broadcast on a maximum of two satellite channels at launch (interview with interviewee 1, director, October 2016). So it can be expected that the premiere rights of a good rural topic drama will be seized by TV stations. To drama production professionals, a good drama used to be defined by its educational values (as shown when we discussed the routines in the pre-1990s danweis) and the professional sophistication level (as shown when we discussed routines in corporatised state-owned drama production units). However, since the media reform started, for TV stations, the potential to have a high rating has become the major criterion for selecting good dramas. This has pushed professionals to incorporate more popular elements when making rural topic dramas. This has led to a distinguishing feature of New Countryside dramas: – they are more entertaining and more relatable to peasants' real life than the previous fictional rural stories.

Secondly, professionals will also consider if a drama topic can receive preferential treatment or subsidies from the government. Developing themes in line with the state's propaganda agenda is an effective way of lowering the market risk, as this usually means favourable tax policies, special subsidies, as well as other material support and assistance during the production and distribution processes. A well-informed cultural entrepreneur (usually the manager of the company) plays a key role in providing professionals with ideas about drama topics. As indicated in the interview with interviewee 13, an editor at

CCTV Rural Channel, many entrepreneurs in independent production companies have connections with people working in party-state propaganda systems. So they usually have a relatively quicker and deeper understanding of the social situation and the state intention. They will evaluate the industrial and political environment and identify the topic that meets the demands of different levels of governments. In the current political environment where all levels of governments are committed to building the ‘socialist new countryside’, many entrepreneurs could sense that the state needs popular media products to propagate the current achievements and call for peasants’ support for this ‘Socialist New Countryside Construction’ campaign.

For instance, interviewee 13 indicates that a staff member at CCTV ran a private team to make a rural TV drama promoting a local government’s achievement in developing the countryside. According to this interviewee, he decided to create this drama because he was informed by one of his personal connections who was an official in the local government. This official told interviewee 13 that the local government wanted a drama like this. In another case, a private company selected a rural comedy topic which focused on the development of a village troupe. This topic was chosen because the team had connections with a city-level propaganda department, and thus knew that the local government wanted to promote this story (interview with interviewee 11, scriptwriter, September 2018). As these cases show, these cultural entrepreneurs act as the bridge between different interest groups, making use of the information they get from their own

political resources, providing professional expertise for state propaganda needs, and making money for themselves in doing so.

6.4.2 Team Building: Co-operating with State Broadcasters

Although the operations of private drama production organs are highly commercialised, in terms of team building, many of these institutions are prone to co-operate with state-organ broadcasters. The co-operation is beneficial to both sides. On the one hand, since state owned broadcasters monopolise the country's broadcasting channels, co-production with them usually enabled private drama making companies to exploit these state-backed co-operators' respective resources: broadcasting opportunities and a safe distribution net (Yu, 2011, p. 35). On the other hand, what the private drama production organs offered in return were their funds and expertise in engaging with different audiences, which is exactly what the state broadcasters and the drama production institutions affiliated to them were lacking.

State broadcasters are attracted to join in the joint venture for the purpose of purchasing a good drama at a low cost. The co-operation between them can take various forms. Typically, the independent company will get a deal with the broadcaster prior to the production. The broadcaster will allocate airtime to the company; then the independent producer will sell the slots to advertisers for generating production revenues (Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 560, Keane, 2005a, p. 86). In some occasions, more than one private

drama production organ and TV station will join in a drama project, and their respective shares and roles in the joint venture vary on a case by case basis. Usually the co-operation is facilitated through personal connections between entrepreneurs in private institutions and high ranking leaders in broadcasting companies (interview with interviewee 11, scriptwriter, September 2018; interview with interviewee 12, actor, October 2018).

In order to co-operate with state broadcasters, private drama production institutions need to ensure the contents of their dramas are strictly in line with the party-state policies. Dramas that are considered politically controversial will not be accepted by TV stations. This has pushed private drama professionals to actively focus on topics that reflect the policy priorities in order to cater to the state broadcasters' tastes. Dramas that can facilitate the construction of the New Countryside dramas as the state plans, thus become a safe choice for professionals. For instance, in the case of the New Countryside topic drama *Rural Love Stories*, till 2015, 8 seasons had been released. In the credits of the 8 seasons, the name of the Film and TV Department of CCTV Art Centre and two north eastern provincial TV stations, Heilongjiang TV Station and Jilin TV Station, come up frequently. Co-operating with these state broadcasting platforms to some extent guaranteed *Rural Love Stories'* distribution channels, as these TV stations monopolised the broadcasting channels in this drama's major target regions. Therefore, many rural dramas were still struggling to find broadcasting opportunities and over 50% of the dramas in general could not meet the audience (interview with interviewee 6, director in chief of a

programme at CCTV Rural Channel, October 2016). The first three seasons of *Rural Love Stories* premiered at prime time on CCTV 1, with the following four premiering on Heilongjiang, Liaoning and other big provincial TV Channels. The 8th season, however, was refused by all TV stations, and this happened right after the key entrepreneur in the production company, Benshan Zhao, got involved in a political scandal with a high-ranking party-state official. This season finally ended up broadcast on an online platform, which was under looser regulation from the state. The different circumstances of the 8 seasons demonstrate the importance of playing within the party-state line.

In order to increase the chance of being purchased by TV stations, private production companies tend to co-operate with external professionals who know the party-state policies, the propaganda orientations and the needs of state broadcasters. The flexibility of private companies enables them to hire external experts freely. For instance, interviewee 13 indicated that one independent New Countryside drama project hired a scriptwriter who retired from the Central Propaganda Department. Similarly, interviewee 11 mentioned that in a New Countryside drama project in which he participated, one of the scriptwriters came from a city-level propaganda department. Their contributions to the projects are that they know how to link the drama narratives to the party-state's rural policies, and they know how to present them in a way that serves the state's propaganda needs. In this sense, one of the key criteria for selecting team members in private-led New Countryside drama projects is familiarity with the state's rural policies.

The co-operation between non-state drama production companies and state owned broadcasters also means that, during China's neoliberal transformation process, the party-state organs and the private investors have gradually found a common interest in extracting profits from the media (Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 561). However, since the co-operation is facilitated by personal connections (interview with interviewee 7, a censor hired by the Censor Committee under the Beijing Municipal Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, October 2016), some private producers of New Countryside dramas tend not to invest in drama content but in bribing TV stations. This breeds corruption and rent seeking in China's TV drama sector.

6.4.3 Narrative Setting: Building Connections with Policy

Compared with state-led dramas, private institutions have more political freedom to portray rural life, as they are not an official organ and thus shoulder no ideological responsibility. However, professionals in private drama production institutions usually choose to portray within the party line, link the narratives with state policies, and sometimes even proactively promote the official ideology. Their advantage in identifying the popular tastes also enables them to deliver the political discourses in a more acceptable way. Politicalising the content along the party policy has not contributed to the attractiveness of the story, but largely guarantees its distribution and airing (Interview with interviewee 2, staff at State TV Regulatory Institution, October 2016). In this sense, private

drama institutions' alliance with the state should be seen as a survival strategy, instead of an artistic technique.

Meanwhile, we should also notice that though the private-led dramas seek to follow the state line, they are different from the state-made propagandist dramas in terms of objectives and orientations. They put rural population's tastes, instead of the educational aims, at the core, and seek to relate to the social reality or offer practical values to peasants to make profit. As interviewee 11 (scriptwriter, September 2018) said, one of his stories depicted a village officer who just graduated from the university. He needed this character not because he could use her to sing praises for the state's policy of College Graduates Work as Village Officials. Instead, he constructed this character because she is an outsider to the village, so he could introduce the stories in the village to the audience from a third person perspective.

6.4.4 Stylistic Considerations: Appealing to Popular Tastes

In order to achieve a high rating, private drama production institutions have realised that they have to avoid complete duplications of real life or being too vulgar. Therefore, most of them choose to follow a light comedy style.

The preference to the light and funny story tone enables private professionals to produce more comedic rural dramas. These dramas usually feature a storyline centred on peasants and their small household affairs. For example, in a number of media reports regarding *Rural Love Stories*, the term folky usually comes up as this drama's most distinctive feature. Generally, this term describes a communication strategy of staying close to the masses and satisfying their basic needs. While many other dramas choose to create a dream that is lofty and highly ambitious for the audiences, Zhao and his team choose to connect with the audience in a folksy way that is not too high-minded. Therefore, instead of making over bureaucratic talks, they focus on ordinary peasants' everyday life, and throughout the portrayal directly speak to rural peoples' basic needs after hard work – the needs for pleasure, excitement and relaxation that they can understand.

6.5 Conclusion

As the above discussions show, both of the two patterns can produce TV dramas that are consistent with the state's 'Socialist New Countryside Construction' agenda. The current Chinese state ideology (in this study, Building a Socialist New Countryside) has strategically utilised and incorporated the media professionalism and the Confucian cultural tradition to make the media professionals follow its agenda. It is from these discussions that one gets to know how China's current TV drama market works under the state regulation, and how the Chinese state manages to keep the content orientation of TV dramas consistent with its policies.

In addition, it is also based on such discussions that this chapter argues that the Frankfurt School's discussions on the culture industry, which criticise the standardised production of cultural content in capitalist societies, also have value for understanding China's media production in the country's neoliberalisation era. Horkheimer and Adorno, two key figures in the Frankfurt School, point out that with the development of technologies, cultural production has become an industrial process, which is primarily characterised by the 'sameness' of everything it produces (2002, p. 94). They further explain what caused the unanimity, saying that 'the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardisation, mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society' (*ibid*, p. 95). In the case of New Countryside dramas, it can be seen that in China's neoliberalisation era, media institutions have developed fixed work patterns. Although there are two sets of such routines, they are working towards the same goal – increasing the entertainment value of drama content and ensuring that the drama content synchronises with the state's political agenda. They play the role of 'the technology of the cultural industry', and have made media professionals the agents of China's state-regulated media industry. Consequently, these routines can produce highly homogeneous drama products.

Another feature of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, is its commodification. In an industrial society, media products have turned into nothing but business. They further criticise that the culture industry has 'transposed art to the consumption sphere,' where the arts lose their original function of critique but only find

value in exchange (*ibid*, p. 107). From the discussions in this chapter, it can be seen that under the impact of the market, maximising profits has become the major impetus of all types of drama production institutions. In this sense, the Chinese media industry in the neoliberal transformation process also demonstrates a strong commodification feature. However, different from capitalist societies, in which the rationalism tendency of the culture industry makes the meaning of art purely dependent on its value as a commodity (*ibid*, p. 127), the Chinese media industry must always follow the guidance of the communist state. If the capitalist culture industry is purely subordinated to economic and technological production and consumption (Liu, 2015, p. 157), the Chinese media industry serves two masters, the capitalist market and the communist state, despite the fact that the two forces are mutually constitutive but by no means symmetrical.

Interestingly, Adorno and Horkheimer also reveal the ideological nature of mass culture. They exemplify the idea that the cultural industry constructs reality for its audiences with the cases of movies. In addition, they also argue that the ideology hidden in cultural products helps the capitalist system to keep enslaving the masses. Accordingly, the cultural industry provides the public with amusement and entertainment, which end up being the prolongation of work under capitalism. They argue, ‘it [pleasure] is sought by those who want to escape the mechanised labour process so that they can cope with it again ... The only escape from the work process in factory and office is through the adaptation to it [industrially produced cultural products] in leisure time’ (*ibid*, p. 109). Moreover, they argue that the culture industry appears to provide the public with many

liberal and democratic aspirations they desire. The masses, therefore, cling to whatever the culture industry offers them so tightly that they even stick to the embedded ideology that enslaves them (*ibid*, p. 106). Horkheimer and Adorno thus conclude that capitalist production enslaves the masses ‘in both body and soul’ (*ibid*, p. 106). Chapter 7 examines how the media products produced by the commercialised Chinese media industry influence rural audiences, in order to compare this with the impact of culture industries in capitalist society.

CHAPTER SEVEN: EFFECTS OF NEW COUNTRYSIDE DRAMAS IN TWO VILLAGES

7.1 Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 outlined how the state uses administrative methods to encourage the production of New Countryside dramas, as well as how the state's ideological justification for the 'New Countryside Construction' campaign influences the practice of TV professionals and has facilitated more portrayals of this campaign in drama productions. However, a new question emerges as to whether New Countryside dramas can help the state to legitimate its rural policies as it expects. This question can be broken down into several sub-questions , like what the rural audience feels about the depictions of countryside development in these dramas, how peasants would relate these depictions to their own experiences, and in what way these dramas have affected the rural audiences' life. In this chapter, these questions will be approached through examining Chinese peasants' viewing habits, their reception of New Countryside dramas, as well as their imagination of the 'countryside' and of their 'peasant' identity in the current social and political environment.

In order to analyse rural audiences' viewing experience of New Countryside dramas, questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted in two villages: one is Chenlou, a traditional natural village located in the Shandong Province; and the other is

Tugou, a suburban village to the north of downtown Beijing. China is a big country with huge regional differences and uneven development. The choice of two Northern villages has taken into consideration that there are significant cultural differences across the regions. As the majority of New Countryside TV dramas are in Mandarin or with northern dialects, and a number of them depict the life of the northern villages, northern peasants are more likely to have watched these dramas.

Tugou is a village situated in the suburbs of the northwest district of Changping, Beijing. In 2004, it had a population of over 2,400. Tugou is under the administration of Xiaotangshan Town, one of the first batches of National Development and Reform Pilot Towns. About 16km away from Beijing municipal centre, Tugou enjoys a good business and economic environment because of its advantageous geographical location in the Beijing suburban economic zone, as well as convenient transportation to the centre of Beijing and the Capital's International Airport. In July 2009, Future Science City (FSC), an IT-focused industrial park, started construction in a planned area of about 10 square kilometres from the Tugou village. In 2013, 15 state-owned enterprises, including the Shenhua Group, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation, the State Grid Corporation of China, China Oil and the Food Import and Export Corporation, had settled in the FSC, bringing a large well-educated population into this region and having created a large number of work opportunities for surrounding areas. Because of the construction of this FSC, the farming lands and the old residential areas of Tugou village were demolished.

In recent years, the village built modern residential buildings in the north of the FSC, naming this area Tugou New Village.

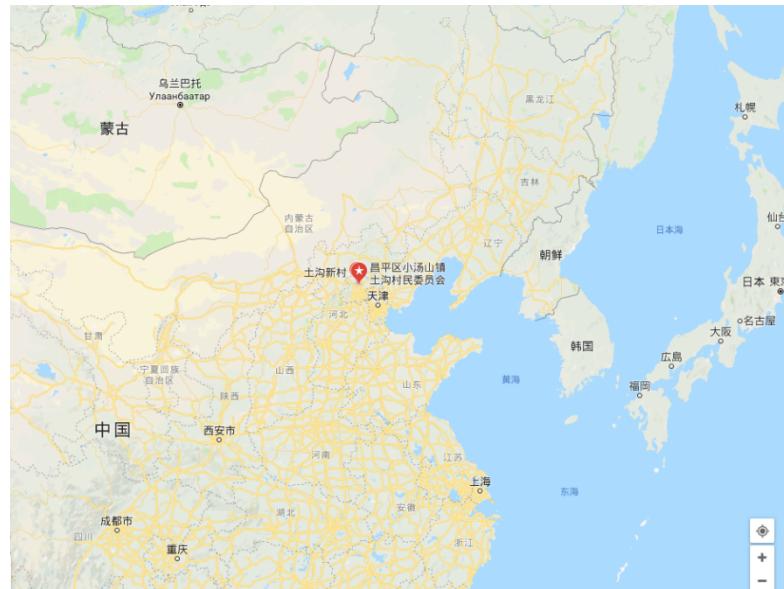


Figure 6 The Location of Tugou Village in China

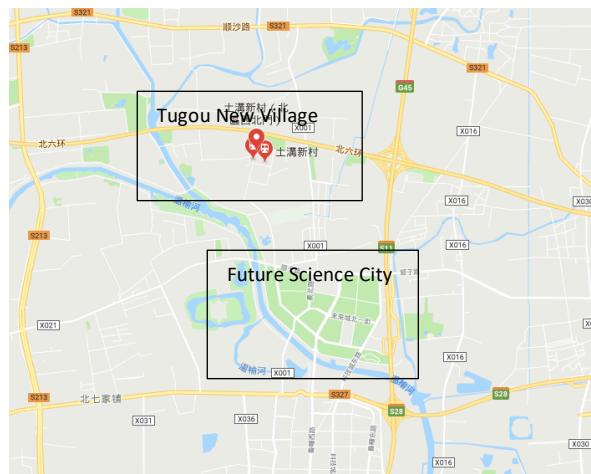


Figure 7 Tugou Village and Future Science City

Chenlou village is located in the Southwest of the Shandong Province. It is a natural village in the Huangdian County, Dingtao District in the city of Heze. Chenlou is considered by local residents as a big village in Huangdian County. Every family in Chenlou village has farmland. Generation after generation, people in this village have lived from growing corn, wheat, cotton, garlic, spring onions, etc. However, in recent years, Chenlou village gradually gets famous for its excavation businesses. With the development of China's urbanisation, construction sites in big cities need skilled labourers that can drive excavators. Many young male peasants in Chenlou village thus learned excavator operating skills, and migrated to big cities to earn money, leaving other family members at home to take care of the farmlands. Successful excavator drivers chose to start up their own excavator companies. Many families in Chenlou village own more than 1 excavator (about 400,000-500,000 RMB / 46000-57000 GBP each).

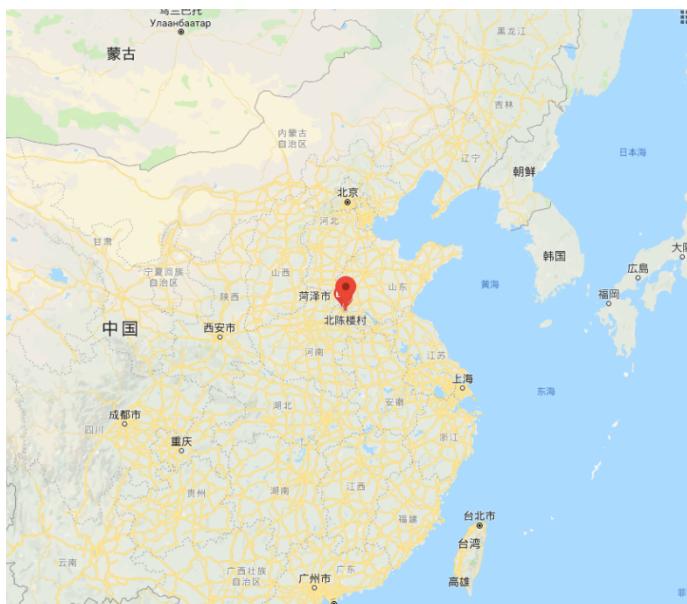


Figure 8 The Location of Chenlou Village in China

The two chosen villages differ in that Tugou is a highly urbanised village, while Chenlou is relatively less developed. They represent two types of village development modes in current China: the former, as a village situated in suburban Beijing, enjoys the favourable conditions in the industrial development of the megalopolis' economic circle, and thus demonstrates a higher degree of modernisation; whereas the latter, Chenlou, sits in a traditional agricultural region and has a population lacking entrepreneurship and innovation spirit (Chung, 1997, p. 131). By inviting participants in these two villages, this study attempts to include views from both modern and traditional villages in China. In Chenlou, 72 participants filled out the questionnaire; and 23 participated in in-depth interviews. In Tugou, 68 questionnaires were collected (of which 14 were deleted from the pool because they were not filled out by local residents) and 20 peasants joined in

interviews. Interviewees were invited either by referrals or by convenience sampling. As mentioned in Chapter 3, in this study, participants' names have been anonymised in order to reduce the risk of any consequences this research might have on their lives.

Section 7.2 of this chapter discusses what motivates the peasants to watch these New Countryside TV dramas. As the Chinese TV drama market becomes increasingly commercialised, more TV drama products on the market are made to cater to the urban audience's taste. These urban-centric dramas also are attractive to the peasants, as they depict a more modern lifestyle that the peasants wish to live. But the fieldwork data of this study shows that no matter how developed a village is, New Countryside TV dramas still can attract considerable attention from the peasant audience. This section will examine why peasants still watch New Countryside dramas, and how these dramas give excitement to peasants in both modern and traditional villages.

Following this, Sections 7.3 and 7.4 focus on how the peasants perceive New Countryside dramas' depictions of rural development. As introduced in Chapter 2, neoliberalism as a governmentality aims to produce 'governable subjects', that are 'both entrepreneurial in the economic sense and reasonable, law-abiding, tolerant, and autonomous in the political sense' (Kipnis, 2007, p. 386). As New Countryside dramas incorporated the Chinese state's SNCC agenda, their contents should also serve two aims: cultivating entrepreneurship in peasants, and shaping them into reasonable, law-abiding, tolerant,

politically governable subjects. Thus Section 7.3 will compare the effects of New Countryside dramas on respondents from an economic perspective. Section 7.4 then focuses on how these dramas have changed peasants' political awareness in different ways. Through these comparisons we highlight the importance of examining media effects in the context of local cultural history.

It is also interesting to note that, in Section 7.3, peasants interpret the economy-related drama plots from a compliance position. As Stuart Hall (1973) argues, TV audiences subjectively interpret media texts and fit them into their respective sociocultural positions. Major New Countryside TV dramas are appreciated in both the villages. However, local audiences in Chenlou and Tugou associate these New Countryside dramas with their respective cultural memory. While peasants in Chenlou link these dramas to self-reflect on their own status in current society, the Tugou audience seems to make stronger reference to memories of the past and the imagination of an ideal, idyllic countryside. Whether in Chenlou or in Tugou, New Countryside dramas articulate particular aspects of the peasant identity in audiences.

As pointed out by Hall (1973), besides hegemonic reading, audiences can decode media text in an oppositional way. When watching New Countryside TV dramas, although peasants overall enjoy the light-tone storyline, they may disagree with some portrayals of rural politics in New Countryside dramas in some ways. The discussions in Section 7.4

also highlight audiences' resistance against New Countryside dramas. In particular, as the New Countryside dramas, whether intentionally or unintentionally, endorse the state's New Countryside campaign, peasants are invited into stories that speak highly of the state and its policies. This creates tensions in audiences' mind, because in reality, conflicts between the state and 'land-lost peasants' frequently break out and have become an issue threatening social stability. Therefore, confrontational reading occurs. Such resistance reveals the degree to which the peasants identify with the state's ideological justification of the New Countryside campaign. Therefore, this section will examine peasants' confrontational interpretation of the image of the state and that of the peasants constructed in New Countryside dramas.

Based on the above discussions, the last section of this chapter will discuss whether New Countryside dramas are effective tools to promote rural development. In recent years, 'countryside revitalisation' has become the top priority in the Chinese government's agenda. Under the state-capitalist media production scheme, the state has been encouraging cultural workers to produce more quality works portraying peasants' successful 'rural revitalisation' practices, in order to achieve good propaganda, cultural effects and commercial effects at one stroke. However, it remains to be seen if peasant audiences can really learn something from New Countryside dramas, if they will imitate the successful 'rural revitalisation' mode shown on TV dramas, and whether New Countryside TV dramas can promote effective 'development communication' in the Chinese countryside. This chapter will conclude by addressing these problems.

7.2 Becoming Audiences of New Countryside Dramas

7.2.1 Different Viewing Habits in Chenlou and Tugou

Questionnaire survey results show that in both villages, the TV set is peasants' favourite medium for watching rural topic dramas. As can be seen from Figure 9, over 74% of Tugou's audience usually watches rural dramas on television. This number is slightly lower in Chenlou, but still exceeds 60% of the interviewed population. This proves the popularity of TV in China's rural areas. In both villages, the mobile phone and the computer are the second and third most favoured medium for watching rural dramas. However, there is a significant difference in the percentages of the audience watching rural dramas via mobile phones between the two places. According to the questionnaire results, in Chenlou, the mobile phone is frequently utilised by over 50% of its population to watch TV dramas. In Tugou, as a contrast, this number is only about half of its Chenlou counterpart. With regards to the third most frequently used channels, approximately 35% of Chenlou's audience usually watches rural dramas on their computers. This percentage is slightly higher than that of Tugou.

The difference in audiences' media preferences could be caused by multiple reasons. One possible reason is that TV sets owned by Chenlou's audience perform worse in terms of sound and visual effects. Chenlou peasants have less disposable income compared to Tugou. During my stay in Chenlou, it was common to see rather out-dated TV sets at Chenlou family homes. Therefore, as proved by questionnaire survey results, the Chenlou

audience prefers to watch rural dramas on a mobile phone. The reason might be that mobile phones can help them gain a better visual and audio experience.

Another possible reason is that the Chenlou audience has fewer chances to sit in front of the TV in their living room. During the fieldwork, it has been noticed that every Chenlou participant was very busy with farming and domestic work. Some peasants also run small businesses or work part-time in nearby companies/factories. In this village everyone seems to be striving for better living. However, as most Tugou peasants have given up running their farmlands (but they profit from contracting out their rights of using the lands) and picked up jobs in secondary or tertiary industries, they have less pressure in life. Though the young Tugou audience is less interested in rural dramas, older retired generations seem to have more free time to watch TV at home. In contrast, it is more difficult for Chenlou peasants to take that time off, sitting in front of their TV sets enjoying several episodes of dramas. They spend most of their time outside of the living room. Consequently, Chenlou peasants tend to use fragmented time – when the business is not busy, while waiting for someone, during a work break, when the child is asleep, and whatever other occasions when they are free - to watch short clips of rural dramas. This watching habit also indicates that peasants in poorer areas would be more likely to be fascinated by short and simple drama stories (e.g. rural sitcoms) which do not require a long time commitment to understand what is going on.

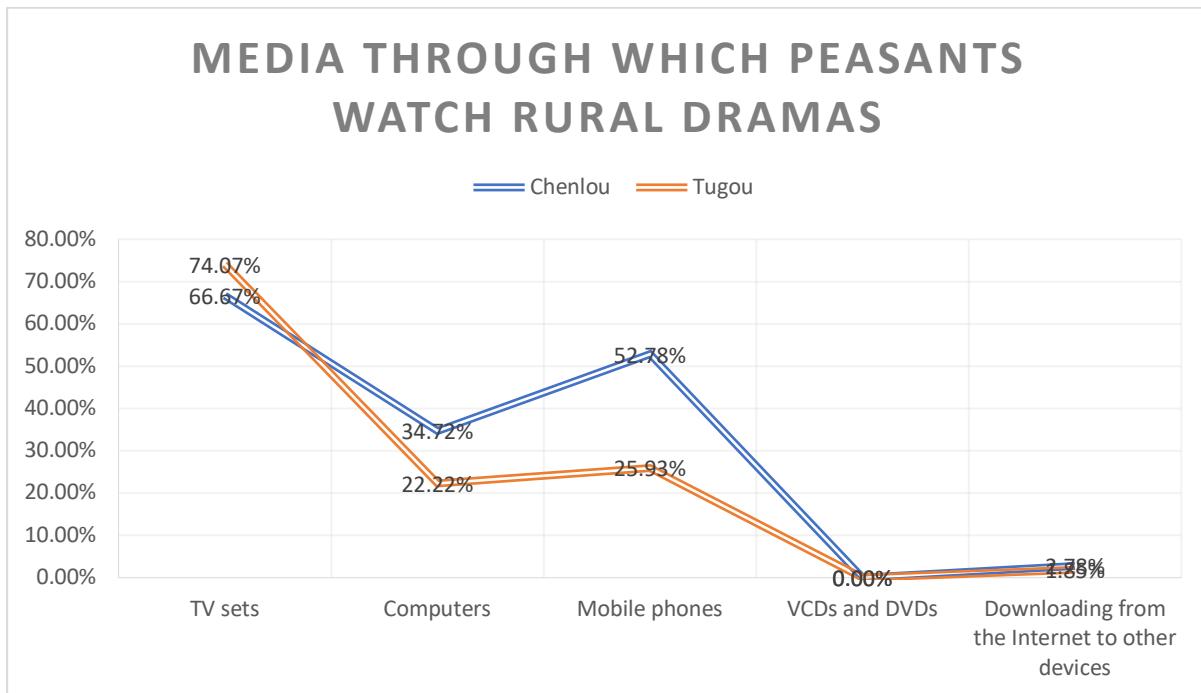


Figure 9 Media Through Which Peasants Watch Rural Dramas

7.2.2 Chenlou Peasants: Finding Entertainment in Drama-Reality Similarities

The difference between the two villages is that while Chenlou interviewees are attracted by the similarities between dramas and their own life, Tugou interviewees are fascinated mainly by the gaps between the drama and their reality. Chenlou interviewees, such as E and A, claim that they like New Countryside dramas mainly because the rural topic is close

to the peasants' life. For these peasants who still live in the traditional villages²⁶, New Countryside dramas integrate elements that they are familiar with in life (e.g. traditional space arrangement in a village, major activities of the peasants, the power structure in a village, personal relationships in traditional villages, etc.). Thus, they can easily understand each character's situations, their respective feelings and what behaviours are inappropriate on different occasions. It is the similarity between the drama and their life that contributes to the entertaining value that Chenlou peasants find in New Countryside dramas. As interviewee 24 comments:

I watch rural dramas only when I have time. I actually do not have any particular intentions for watching dramas. The reason why I watch this rural drama could simply be that I am interested in this topic, or could be that I am fascinated by a certain plot. Once I decide to watch a rural drama, I will examine whether its story can happen in that particular time and regional setting [based on my experience of living in the countryside]...Current rural topic dramas are close to the rural life. Although the specific issues peasants deal with in those dramas may not be quite the same as in reality, the peasant characters' attitudes towards life are very close to ours.

²⁶ A village is a clustered human settlement with agricultural resources and a population practising agriculture. In the Chinese mainland, the village (村, cun) is a division under the administrative unit of townships (镇, zhen). There are two patterns of villages in China. One is termed natural village (自然村, zirancun), which means a village community formed naturally. A village of this type usually consists of one or several clans. The other pattern is termed administrative village (建制村, jianzhicun). They are villages defined by the state for the purpose of proper governing. An administrative village can include several natural villages. More importantly, it usually establishes its own party branch. In this sense, a natural village is just a unit for people to live and work, whereas the latter is the Chinese government's basic administrative unit in rural areas. For the ease of comparison, the two fieldwork sites of this research, Chenlou and Tugou, are both administrative villages.

In Chenlou, interviewees who love *Rural Love Stories*, such as interviewees 19, 25 and 29, find some characters' exaggeratedly funny behaviours rather entertaining. Interviewee 25 comments that:

It does not matter [whether the peasants in *Rural Love Stories* are the same as the reality or not]. The major selling point of this drama is 'its entertaining atmosphere'. Do you remember Zhao Si and Liu Neng? (Two main peasant characters in *Rural Love Stories*, one with mouth spasms and the other is a stutterer.) They are created just to amuse the audience. The older peasant generations, they watch whatever TV programmes can make them laugh. For the young peasants, whether something is funny or not is also part of their considerations.

As interviewee 25 comments, older audiences in Chenlou watch rural dramas just to see the fun. More than one older interviewee in Chenlou, (such as interviewees 26 and 23) says that when they watch those dramas, they are merely watching 'renao' (热闹). In Chinese, the word 'renao' literally means something bustling with noise and excitement. Chinese peasants love to seek for 'renao', because something 'renao' usually reminds them of liveliness and prosperity. Watching 'renao' scenes can make peasants feel everything is thriving, and further strengthen their passion for life. Something with 'renao' does not need to be educational or relevant to their own life. As long as a scenario can bring them laughter, peasants, particularly older generations with poor education, would not inquire closely about its meanings, nor would they care whether it defames certain social groups (as mentioned earlier, the images of Zhao Si and Liu Neng in *Rural Love Stories* show a tendency of discriminating against peasants with physical imperfections). To seek for 'renao', they are interested in watching drama stories that are exaggeratedly

ridiculous or even stupid. Because watching other people's awkward, funny or dramatic experiences not only makes them less bored, but also can make peasants feel good about themselves. Interviewee 23 finds that the story of the wife's and the husband's family always fighting with each other over some meaningless tiny life issues in *Rural Love Stories* is really interesting, and this always makes her 'long for the next episodes':

When watching these rural dramas, I always think I will only watch them for a little while. I just treat them as fictional dramas, have not thought about why the story is presented in this way. After watching one episode, I always want to know how the story will develop.

However, young peasants in Chenlou watch these dramas not just for 'Renao'. As a part-time pancake seller usually doing business in nearby markets, interviewee 25 is excited about everything 'fresh' in the TV programme. He finds the language in *Rural Love Stories* particularly interesting. He even picked up a few new phrases from this drama, e.g. 'turning down your voices', to make himself more humorous. This suggests his affection for the amusing style of this drama and willingness to learn from the drama characters to improve his personal image.

For interviewee 19, who works in the city as a migrant worker for most of the time, the fun peasant stories constructed in *Rural Love Stories* are quite relaxing:

The story is simple, joyful and optimistic. Everyone in it is very cheerful and extrovert. I feel this drama is close to life, very down-to-earth, very meaningful.

When asked about his motivations for watching this drama, interviewee 19 emphasised the relaxing effects of the drama's light and funny story tone, saying that he watches this drama 'just for fun, to seek for happiness'. Although he finds the lifestyle of the peasants in this drama is not quite the same as his own, he feels he and they are the same in that they are all 'modest' in nature. 'It is not like in the city, because people in the city fight with each other with a hidden agenda. In rural TV dramas, people are all simple and straightforward. They genuinely talk with you, instead of for a purpose.'

7.2.3 Tugou Peasants: Finding Entertainment in Drama-Reality Differences

Interviewees from Tugou, on the other hand, pay special attention to the differences between New Countryside dramas and their real life. As interviewee 47 comments:

TV dramas, represented by *Rural Love Stories*, constructed a countryside which is different from our village. They made up the story just to make people laugh...The villages in those dramas are relatively less developed, because people in those dramas still grow corn for a living [but we no longer do this]. In reality, we already have tall buildings, have moved into modern housing estates, and we can have everything we want. To put it simply, the village represented in New Countryside dramas looks like Tugou in the 1980s-1990s.

Though Tugou is far more urbanised than most of the villages in New Countryside dramas, watching these dramas can remind Tugou's audience of the past and trigger feelings of nostalgia. For older peasants living in developed villages, the village setting in dramas always brings back their memories of struggles in the past. Older generations are not just

interested in New Countryside dramas. On the whole they show strong affection for all rural-related topics in general. Interviewees 48, 51, 56 and 61 often talk about how difficult it is for them to earn in their current life. As interviewee 61 says:

In the past (1950-60s), we usually got up when it was still dark to take care of the vegetables in fields. When the moon and stars appeared in the sky, we were still working in the farm fields. We did not feel tired during that time at all. Instead, we were quite happy. But how little did we earn at that time? Current younger generations do little but always complain. But they earn much more than we did. Besides, the food at that time was not as good as now. Life is so different now.

For these older generations, the less urbanised rural setting reminds them of their younger days. Back then the life was hard, but they felt fulfilled and could always enjoy themselves despite of the poverty. Peasant characters who can find joy amid various kinds of setbacks resemble their past experiences. Thus, it is the affectionate feeling for the difficult but fulfilling past that New Countryside dramas arouse that contributes to the pleasure that older generations of urbanised peasants find appealing in those dramas.

Interviewee 47 emphasises the fictionality of New Countryside dramas, which is the reason why he would not live according to these dramas but instead would see them as an entertainment project constructed by directors and scriptwriters to make people laugh. He compares watching *Rural Love Stories* with listening to ‘crosstalk’, a traditional dialogue comedy performed by two or more performers on stage. Crosstalk is famous for using humourous and satirical language to comment on contemporary social issues. By

making this comparison, interviewee 47 points out New Countryside dramas' strong comedic feature: like crosstalk, they consist of many short, satirical sketches of life, using excessive witty language. This means that these dramas are not a direct representation of life; *Rural Love Stories* could be seen as a collection of short comedic performances. Interviewee 47 also explains that the reason why he watches this drama is just because, unlike the tiring reality, the drama is delightful and refreshing. Thus he watches it just to make hims happy: 'I watch it just because I have got some free time. After a whole day's hard work, I like to watch some of this drama.' He adds: 'There is nothing worrying or annoying in this drama, unlike the real peasant life filled with tiny troublesome issues.' It is the pure light-hearted narrative and the relaxing atmosphere it creates that add to *Rural Love Stories'* entertaining value.

Younger generations in Tugou are not as interested in current rural dramas as their seniors. Their attention for the rural topic is more like a rebellion against the mainstream urban culture. Technical Secondary School student, interviewee 49 finds *Rural Love Stories* very entertaining: 'Young people's lives in *Rural Love Stories* are far different from mine. Their lives seem very interesting. Mine is rather ordinary.' Interviewee 49 believes that 'an interesting life' is differentiating his peers in rural dramas from him. Watching these dramas is his way of expressing discontentment with the current condition. Thus for young peasants in urbanised villages who have realised their mediocrity in society, it is the dramatic narrative of the fate of young peasants that contributes to the production of 'entertainment' in New Countryside dramas. Attracted by various elements of

entertainment, peasants in Chenlou and Tugou become an audience of New Countryside dramas.

7.3 Cultivating Entrepreneurship and Peasants' Compliance Reading

7.3.1 'Becoming Rich' Discourses and the Identity of 'Advancing Peasants' in Chenlou

Chenlou is located in the southwest of the Shandong Province. Basically, the whole south-western area of Shandong is known to be populous, agrarian, poor and backward. New Countryside dramas have brought Chenlou's interviewees shared feelings and imaginations in their social role as 'peasants who once lagged behind but are now striving to catch up with those who got rich first'. Various New Countryside dramas have introduced ways of helping poor villages get rich. They are meant to be encouraging peasants in less-developed areas to work hard and strive for a better life. The way Chenlou peasants interpret these stories reveal their perseverance, hard-working attitude, and down-to-earth philosophy in life.

Interviewee 15 likes the drama *Women in Charge* (*Nuren Dangguan*, 女人当官) because she finds it very inspiring. Interviewee 15's impression of the main female character in this drama is that she is very independent and has strong opinions. This lady was elected to be the village head, but at the very beginning, she was not supported by the villagers or by her husband. But she insisted to prove herself with various village development

programmes that help the migrant-workers in their village to find jobs in village enterprises.

Finally she won the villagers' respect. She identifies with this drama's feminist idea, claiming that female peasants can not only be the leader of a family, which has been the case in many Chenlou families in reality, but can also be a good village leader and lead the people to become rich. She also agrees with the value of persistence, struggle and solidarity that this drama endorses:

Although things are always difficult at the beginning, through hard work, we achieved everything we wanted, didn't we? We peasants now want nothing but get rich. We do not care how rich the officials are, or how much effort we have to make. We have only one demand: unite as one in order to get rich [like in Woman in Charge], if the villagers do not unite, how can they achieve success? At first these villagers were fighting with each other.[But now they all work together.]

Interviewee 29 just had her third baby. Her husband's family has been running a two-storey cloth shop in Chenlou village for years. Since she married into this family, her life has been taken up by kids, domestic and farm work as well as some small issues in the family business. Recently she wanted to have her own career. So she refurbished the ground floor of the clothes shop and started to sell baby products in a corner. She is eager to have a successful business of her own, and peasants' career stories in a number of New Countryside TV dramas further strengthens this desire to succeed. Thus, she finds a strong identification with the young peasant entrepreneurs in New Countryside dramas. In her understanding, peasants working hard can gain everything great in life, and their success motivates her to try hard so that she will not lag behind:

I like watching dramas depicting peasants' career struggles...they are very exciting. You witness how they start off, how the business gradually takes off... I particularly love watching the process of them starting up their own business, including how they develop their career, every step they take... After seeing [other people have already succeeded and got the life they want], I feel that I also must carefully run my business, and I also have to make it better and better.

Interviewee 22's family runs a big grocery store in Chenlou village. But he always wants to take up something else as a career. Like interviewee 28, he is eager to succeed. In his opinion, career success directly manifests as 'business running well'. However, he is upset for lacking career opportunities. Interviewee 22 wants to succeed so much that he has carefully considered the business ideas depicted in many New Countryside dramas, e.g. running a tofu factory or an animal farm, village tourism, etc. However, he thinks those ideas are not applicable in Chenlou, either because of a shortage of resources or lacking support. He is held back also by the fear of failure and the responsibility of supporting the whole family. Thus, he decided to be practical for the time being:

What I have learned from these dramas is that I should try to find a career that suits my own conditions... My current plan is to find a job and work hard. When a better chance comes ahead, I will try to catch it [to start up another business]. With no capital and no opportunity, you cannot give up everything and use a bank loan to start up a personal business. What if you fail? The entire family is depending on your money.

Interviewee 22 expressed a feeling of anxiety during the interview, as he wants to be successful but cannot afford the risk of failure. During this dilemma, he developed an

interest in New Countryside TV dramas, as the stories of successful peasants give him hope. He identifies himself with the 'peasant with no capability or capital':

'The village in these dramas is very beautiful, very much unlike the reality. In dramas everything develops positively...every aspect is great, career, life...the dramas usually come with a very happy ending, and present you with the life of your dreams, making you feel motivated.'

The entrepreneur stories in the first season of *Rural Love Stories* have left supermarket saleswomen 26, 27 and 28 with a deep impression. They remember that the female character runs a tofu factory, and her lover, a university graduate, gives up the city job to run an orchid farm in their village. The male character was not successful at the beginning, but he overcomes the difficulties and sticks to his original aim. Therefore, they all think of this couple as very encouraging, 'having a strong desire to advance'. In the interview, one of these saleswomen talks about her admiration of this couple, saying she also wants to have her own business, so she could buy anything she likes and gain respect in society. To her, 'Every time upon seeing people in those dramas making a big fortune, I feel the urgency of making money in real life. In those dramas, it is so easy to make money'. In this sense, it is these dramas that give her motivation to make money. But she also expresses a feeling of a lack of confidence, as she does not have a good educational background or family support. Thus she chooses to work in the supermarket near her home during the day, earning some extra money which, though not much, is enough to cover the daily expenditure of the family. This indicates that although peasants identify

with this couple's upward spirit, they are still pragmatic in their career, hoping to get rich by working hard in their current positions. As interviewee 18 comments,

I am an ordinary woman. I do not want to take the lead, nor do I want to lag behind. I want to advance myself. If there is anything I want to learn, I will learn it wholeheartedly...At work, I do my duty, and if I fail to do it very well, I will feel very disappointed with myself. I have great enthusiasm and confidence for things that I want to do well.

The eagerness to advance, and the persistent, practical and hardworking identity is the typical perception of the peasant entrepreneur stories in New Countryside dramas among Chenlou peasants. Getting rich, struggle and persistence characterise the cultural memory of the peasants in Chenlou village.

7.3.2 Imagining a New 'Peasant Identity' in Tugou with Representations of the Peasant Community

Tugou village is located in the suburban area of the Changping district, Beijing. As the capital city of China, Beijing is seeking to move some of its over-crowded population and over-intensive industries to the outskirt areas of the city. This promotes the rapid urbanisation of suburban villages near Beijing. As a result, suburban villages in Beijing are usually more developed than those in other provinces. Tugou is one of these urbanised villages.

Several years ago, a village relocation project was launched in Tugou. As a result of this project, Tugou peasants now all live in a modern estate close to their old home, which is named 'Tugou Xincun (Tugou New Village)'. Although most of the stories in New Countryside dramas are designed to take place in traditional, less urbanised villages, some peasants living in Tugou New Village also enjoy watching them, as these dramas have helped them reconstruct an imagination of the peasant identity in an urbanised environment.

Tugou peasants' imagination of the 'peasant' identity is linked with the community atmosphere represented in dramas. Interviewee 44, a 30 year old lady in Tugou, says that the peasant community in *Rural Love Stories* always reminds her of her own childhood, when she could always feel the good neighbourliness and friendliness within the village:

The village in these TV dramas often has a harmonious atmosphere...Before we moved into the new flat, people all got along well with each other. But nowadays we hardly know each other. There is less and less communication between us.

The close and warm village atmosphere represented in *Rural Love Stories* is highly appreciated by interviewee 44. It brings back her memories of the past, and thus pulls her closer to the drama story. People's lives in Tugou New Village now are highly urbanised. As interviewee 44 says, young residents in Tugou New Village nowadays prefer urban themed dramas over the rural ones. However, she still watched several seasons of *Rural*

Love Stories, because they showed her the harmonious relationships within the community, which is exactly what she longs for but could not find in reality:

I feel the people [in this drama] are very simple and honest, different from Beijing people...In terms of their life philosophies, they are sincere to friends, more reliable than Beijing people...Some time ago I found the pipe of my flat was leaking water. At first I wanted to ask my downstairs neighbour to help checking it out, so I knocked on their door. But no one answered. They should be in though, because they left their shoes outside. Nowadays neighbours are less warm-hearted than before.

Like *Rural Love Stories*, many New Countryside dramas emphasise peasants' good qualities of being warm-hearted, simple and honest. Similar to interviewee 44, interviewee 52 also identifies these specific qualities as representing the peasant identity which is rare to find in city people:

Peasants in dramas can be very united...When one peasant is in trouble, others are always willing to help. But in society, who would come to your rescue if they cannot benefit from helping you, and why should they? It is not other people's duty to take care of you, even if you are blood brothers...

Tugou peasants' interpretation of the depictions of rural development also showed a connection to cultural memory. To many middle-aged and even older interviewees, the most impressive New Countryside dramas are those played by north-eastern comedians such as Benshan Zhao, Changjiang Pan, and Hong Huang.

For instance, of all the seasons of *Rural Love Stories*, interviewee 56, a 54 year old Tugou lady, likes the first season the most. She says she likes it because when it was broadcast on the TV in 2005, Benshan Zhao was very popular in China. At that time, she liked the short comedy plays Zhao and his team performed on each year's CCTV New Year's Gala.

During the 1980s-2000s, some north-eastern comedians performed many short comedic plays on the CCTV New Year's Gala every New Year's Eve. Their plays usually focused on the culture shock that peasants experienced since China's rural reform, depicting the interesting cultural conflicts between peasants and citizens in everyday life. This was a rather exciting topic in an era when the 'urban-rural dual track' system just got cancelled and the Chinese urban and rural societies started to confront each other. People love their performance also because the north-eastern culture stresses the art of dialogue, so humour and irony are common elements in north-eastern people's conversation. These actors' short plays have contributed to the golden era of the north-eastern-style rural topic comedies, a time when both the city and the rural people enjoyed watching stories of the witty, down-to-earth and lovely peasants living in north-eastern villages. Their influence has been so huge that even in recent years, when the CCTV New Year's Gala no longer depended on north-eastern comedians to attract an audience, these comedians' rural topic works still can get a stable market share. But nowadays these comedians pay more attention to the field of dramas and films.

Among these north-eastern comedians, Benshan Zhao is probably the most successful. He is the main investor and also one of the main characters in *Rural Love Stories*. Benshan Zhao has created many classic comedic grassroots images on the CCTV New Year's Gala. Most of these figures are simple, honest and humorous peasants. Though most of the characters he constructed were poorly-educated and a bit more out-dated than the city characters, the basic theme of his earlier comedy was to sing chants for the ordinary yet lovely peasants. Therefore, before 2005, his image was very positive across the country.

The fact that interviewee 56 watched *Rural Love Stories* because of Zhao's popularity indicates that Zhao's short comedy plays had left her with a good impression. This also shows that peasants can identify somewhat with the peasant image Zhao and his team created in their short plays and earlier dramas. To her and many peasants who have gone through the rural social changes during the 1980s-2000s, these north-eastern comedians has revived her cultural memory of the old times, when the image of Benshan Zhao looked so much like them, when the exciting, lovely or even embarrassing stories of the 'Zhao-style' peasants reflected their own experiences, when the 'Zhao-style' peasants showed the same values and life philosophies as theirs when confronted with the urban culture.

However, since 2008, Benshan Zhao's team has received increasing criticism for having uglified the peasants. Some people claim that some of Benshan Zhao's performances are

making fun of the poor peasants with body imperfections. Since then, Zhao gradually fell out of public favour. The market that they used to dominate has been taken up by other styles of comedians very quickly. Most typically, Kaixin Mahua, a younger, Beijing-based, and more elitist-inclined comedy team, has won more and more Beijing peasants' hearts. This, on the one hand, is caused by the rapid urbanisation of Beijing villages. On the other hand, it is because Kaixin Mahua embodies local culture. Nowadays, Tugou peasants show more identification with 'Beijing culture' rather than with the north-eastern culture.

Interviewee 56's interpretation is,

Now I do not like Benshan Zhao and his team's work anymore. I prefer Kaixin Mahua's performance... Xiaobao Song's (a member of Benshan Zhao's team) accent in his short comedies is a bit different from mine...it is not the Beijing accent [but Kaixin Mahua's accent is].

Nowadays, interviewee 52 says she still likes watching rural dramas which portray peasants living in poorer villages, because she thinks their life is more 'miserable' than hers. Interviewee 37, a 38 year old restaurant owner, also finds that life in Tugou is 20 years ahead of that in some New Countryside dramas:

In the past, we all lived of farming. But now villagers all have jobs in companies, no one works in the field anymore. Farmlands have all been contracted out to others...Peasants no longer grow grain, because that is not profitable. Now people plant cherry trees on their farmland. Do you know what people grow in current rural dramas? What those in *Rural Love Stories* grow? When I was a kid, that was in the 1980s, my family grew corn, wheat and beans all year round... Now many state-owned companies and the Future Science Centre (a science industrial park) have moved to this area, including the State Grid Corporation, Shenhua Corporation, etc... Some young people in our village work in those companies, some more capable

villagers run their own businesses... anyway, they definitely will not work in the fields.

Interviewee 47 pays attention to what kinds of plants are planted in the fields during different time periods. The drama depictions remind him of his rural roots, which pulls together Liu and the drama and strengthens his identification with the identity of 'peasant'. However, a sense of superiority is observed when he mentions: 'Anyway, they definitely will not work in the fields'. In his imagination, the new peasant identity in Tugou is linked with the circulation of lands (contracting out the usage right of the land), state-owned companies, big corporations, industrial parks, self-employed businesses, etc. To interviewees 56 and 47, the drama depictions of some villages' development did not just remind them of the happiness and hardships they experienced in the past and thus strengthened their peasant identity, but also facilitated their imagination of a 'Beijing peasant' identity by creating a sense of superiority.

For some younger people in Tugou, however, their imagination of their identity as a new generation Beijing peasant has nothing to do with the past, but is tied with their creative usage of the New Countryside dramas. Interviewee 43 recalls that he was left with the deepest impression of the death of 'Changgui' (the village head) in *Rural Love Stories*. He talks about his favour towards this plot in a way that sounds as if he is admitting he has a weird taste for dramas. Although he has not explained why he loves this plot, many similar

comments from young netizens (mostly 15-30) on the death of Changgui have been found in an online forum. These comments could help us understand Interviewee 43's motivation.

Like interviewee 43's words, these online comments also discuss this plot with an absurd undertone. For instance, one post reads that 'the passing away of Changgui means the end of the era of the 'Xiangyashan Village Five Tigers'...'. The writer created the phrase 'Xiangyashan Village Five Tigers' to refer to the five main peasant characters in the drama. Since 'Five Tigers' is a typical way of addressing high-ranking gangsters in Hong Kong gang movies, it just feels ridiculous and absurd to give five ordinary peasants such a heroic title. Under this comment another comment reads 'Can you show an even worse taste'. This proves that in these young audiences' minds, *Rural Love Stories* is actually a sign of bad taste. These posts reveal that young generations are using rural dramas to exert their nonconformity with the urban-centric mainstream values. In an urban-centric society, the city is always associated with the high-end, the magnificent and the classy. The rural, however, is considered to be lame and vulgar. Like these young netizens, interviewee 43 is also deliberately using his pity for Changgui's death to construct a rebellious identity – he is proud to love something that is considered indecent by the mainstream. In this sense, though young peasants in Tugou do not love New Countryside dramas, some of them have created their own meaning of New Countryside dramas by establishing an association between these rural dramas and the rebellious spirits.

7.4 Making Politically Governable Subjects and Peasants' Oppositional Reading

Most New Countryside dramas construct a narrative of peasants getting rich with the help of the government. The basic storyline is the development process of a village, and the dramatised narrative is the conflicts and negotiations between different interest groups in and out of the village (i.e. the county-level government, party cadres inside the village, village seniors, ordinary peasants, city people, etc.) It is these tensions between different interest groups that attract the audience to keep up with the drama narration. As the drama story unfolds, the peasant audience also develops their own understanding of the dramatised power relationships inside the village. While peasants in both villages think the representations of government officials differ hugely from the reality, Chenlou peasants view peasants as 'the bullied' and express stronger resistance consciousness against the local government in reality, whereas more peasants in Tugou are willing to see this difference as a drama technique. Such different attitudes reveal the two groups of peasants' different interpretations of the peasant identities.

7.4.1 The Imagination of 'Oppressed Peasants' in Chenlou

Most New Countryside dramas involve the depiction of state and village leaders, as the development project following the central state agenda needs to be implemented by these leaders. Usually these characters are portrayed positively in dramas. When interpreting New Countryside dramas' depictions of these leaders, Chenlou interviewees often make

an association with their everyday life encounters with leaders in their own village. Because many Chenlou peasants have bad impressions of the leaders in their lives, they tend to interpret the dramas with an antagonistic imagination of the peasant-leader relationship, and thus feel that these dramas' characterisations of the leaders are fake, simply propaganda, or just not convincing enough. Therefore, these dramas usually will not make them feel better about the government and the policies released under the 'New Countryside Construction' campaign. At this level of interpretation, Chenlou peasants' view on the role of leaders also demonstrates the understanding of the peasant identity as 'the oppressed'; - a population was taken advantage of by the rich and powerful.

The first facet of the 'antagonistic peasant-leader' imagination relates to audience interpretation of village leaders. Many interviewees point out that in New Countryside TV dramas, village leaders are always depicted as selfless public servants, but this is not what they saw in reality. For instance, interviewee 29 describes his impressions of a village cadre in *Rural Love Stories*:

He seems to be a person of integrity. He is a university graduate. Although he has some relatives in the village, he does not rely on personal connections to get that position...He is selfless, just and fair.

During the interview, interviewee 18 recalls the disappointment when she saw village leaders' irresponsible attitudes in a road construction project in her own village. In that project, their village leaders only cared about collecting money from the peasants, and

after they received the money, they seemed to have put this project behind them. This made interviewee 18 realise that New Countryside TV dramas are making one-sided portrayals:

Village leaders in TV dramas all serve the peasants' heart and soul. But TV dramas only portray the positive side... Like most of the talks in our village radio broadcast, what the dramas present is just the positive part. But in real life, I do not think the village cadres have ever done any substantial work for the peasants...

In interviewee 18's interpretation, the positive portrayal of rural cadres in New Countryside dramas reminds her of the CPC's other forms of political propaganda (in this case, she remembers the village radio broadcast). This also proves that Chenlou peasants know that the CPC's rural communication has a 'positive coverage' style, and that they are tired of the CPC's political preaching. Thus, she took a resistant perspective to interpret New Countryside dramas. In interviewee 18's mind, peasants are a population who are treated perfunctorily by village cadres in real life. This imagination makes her interpret New Countryside dramas' portrayals of the close peasant-cadres relationship as unconvincing. Thus, interviewee 18 says that the biased portrayals of village leaders in dramas make her disappointed at cadres' performance in real life, so these dramas cannot improve her attitudes towards village leaders:

[So after watching the dramas,] I am not very happy with village cadres in real life... Being a rural cadre but not doing your job, I will never give that kind of cadre any respect however high a position he has.

Besides village cadres, New Countryside dramas also consist of many positive portrayals of higher-level government management (e.g. county government officials, province government officials, state policies, etc.). Chenlou peasants show divided views on these depictions. Some say that the more New Countryside dramas portray the government in this way, the less positive feelings they will have towards the government. According to Interviewee 18, this is because the portrayals are too good, so that they can directly recognise that these depictions are not real, so they resist thinking in the way that the dramas want them to. Some others, however, say that they are not unhappy with the central state's policies, and drama depictions will make them feel good about the central state and higher level government as well as their policies. But drama depictions would make them disappointed at local level government. Interviewee 18 explains that:

The policies higher level governments released all have good wishes for the countryside. But after being carried out hierarchically, the policies 'go bad'...I am satisfied with the higher level government...In these dramas, all levels of leaders are of one mind. This is too different from real life. After watching the dramas I feel quite good about the Party and the state, feeling that life should be as good as the drama depictions. But gradually, after seeing [how the policies are implemented by local level government] in real life, you would feel disappointed.

The second facet of the 'oppressed peasants' imagination is about peasants' interpretation of village corruption. Some Chenlou peasants (like interviewees 19, 22 and 29) relate drama depictions of the rural cadres to village corruption in real life. They point out that the positive portrayals of village leaders in dramas cannot increase their trust in all levels of governments. This is because, as they claim, when village corruption is so

obvious, the fact that most New Countryside dramas turn a blind eye to this problem only makes peasants doubt whether Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign can be implemented effectively in the village. For instance, interviewee 29 says:

I have never heard of any village leader in real life who serves the peasants like the drama characters. Which village leader is not corruptive? ...Some netizens say that Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign only punishes 'big tigers' (high-ranking officials who committed corruption) but neglects 'small flies' (grassroots level officials who committed corruption). Who can regulate these small flies? Some corruptive village leaders usually have personal connections with county or higher level government officials. So no one dares to punish these cadres...

Interviewee 29's words again prove that Chenlou people identify with the peasants as a weak, powerless and oppressed group. In Chenlou peasants' imagination, peasants are the victims of village cadres' corruptions. But since bureaucrats shield one another, though peasants want to punish corruptive cadres, it would be very difficult for them to make the appeal. They feel even more disappointed to see TV dramas choosing to neglect the rural corruption issue and even trying to beautify the cadres and government officials. At this level of interpretation, Chenlou peasants would not feel that TV dramas side with them. As a result, they tend to interpret dramas with a resistant position, suspecting that these dramas are the governments' tools to cover up for corruptive village cadres. The ultimate aim of doing so is to avoid peasant resistance and thereby maintain social stability.

In fact, Chenlou peasants have already realised that New Countryside dramas are not just some entertainment products, but also are dramas supervised by the Party. They know

that drama narratives will not be able to be really critical of the government. As interviewee 25 puts it:

Most of the images of party secretaries in a village in dramas are positive...but dramas always only show the positive side, or they will be considered as insulting the Communist Party. In addition, the negative portrayals of village party secretaries will not be allowed to be broadcast on television. How can you [TV stations] speak ill of the Party when you [TV stations] are working under their supervision?

Viewing New Countryside dramas with an imagination of 'oppressed peasants', the drama depictions are no longer simply entertainment products. but a tool for political propaganda. With this understanding, peasants from Chenlou are more inclined to take a resistant position to interpreting the policy-related portrayals in dramas.

7.4.2 The Fragmented Perception of Rural Policies and Rural Leadership in Tugou

While many Chenlou peasants believe the leaders and the government policies in New Countryside dramas are fake propaganda, Tugou peasants' perceptions of rural leadership are more fragmented. Generally, although Tugou peasants identified some similar problems with New Countryside dramas, these dramas do not affect their feelings towards the village cadres and state policies as much as in Chenlou. Besides, they are more inclined to view the drama-reality contrast as a drama technique rather than a propaganda strategy.

Like Chenlou peasants, Tugou interviewees also feel that village cadres in New Countryside dramas seem more responsible and trustworthy than those in their own village. Interviewee 44 says that unlike drama depictions, cadres in real life are usually more impatient with peasants:

In dramas they are all very good. But in reality, cadres do not do substantial work for peasants. They are very arrogant. If you ask them too many questions, they will get annoyed. Particularly, when you report some problems to the village committee, they usually turn a cold shoulder to you. But if you find them via some personal connections, they will treat you better.

Interviewee 44 recalls that the village head in *Rural Love Stories*, Changgui, 'seems to have committed few mistakes'. In reality, village leaders are not so perfect. But she then adds that drama portrayals cannot influence her attitude towards village leaders: 'I do not have much contact with them...TV dramas have no influence on my attitude towards them.' To her and many other young peasants whose work and life have been deeply urbanised, the importance of village leaders in their lives has declined. It is the reduced importance of village leaders that makes her not care about dramas' depictions of village leaders.

The indifferent attitude to village leaders is also about interviewees' interpretation of village leaders' power abuse. In watching *Rural Love Stories*, interviewee 56 feels many of the village leaders in this drama got their position via nepotism:

Some grassroots level leaders seem to have used some private connections to get their place, right? Some are likely to have given higher level officials presents...The husband of Xie Yongqiang's

sister is a headmaster of a school [and that is the reason why Xie got a city job]...

While interviewee 56 realises that many village cadres and government officials in this drama have abused their power, she does not seem angry or disappointed at these kinds of misconduct. Rather, she accepts these as normal dealings in village politics. She adds: 'In real life, without firm private connections, you cannot get a high position [in the village committee or in any grassroots level government] either.' In this sense, power abuse in village politics is not uncommon in real life, and it is for this reason that interviewee 56 does not strongly turn against this drama. She does not support the bribes and black box operations in village politics, but she chooses to understand these as the hidden rules in rural politics. This actually proves that Tugou peasants do not have absolute confidence in the rural democracy. When the 'New Countryside Construction' project claims to construct villages with a 'democratic administration', the Tugou peasants' view shows that they do not really believe that it is possible. So the villagers in Tugou are more realistic, they understand that corruption often is a reality.

Interviewee 47 finds that the dramas' depiction of village leadership is not the same as in Tugou. In his understanding, most New Countryside dramas are about stories in less-developed villages. The economic and social structure in those villages as well as the peasants' work and life environments are all different from those in Tugou. He adds that

Rural Love Stories presents a village which resembles Tugou in the 1980s-1990s.

Therefore, he does not think it a good idea to imitate characters in the dramas.

Similarly, interviewee 52, a 45 year old private bus driver, argues that he will never live in the way that drama characters do:

Laogen Liu (*Laogen Liu*, 刘老根) is a drama supporting the Party and the state's policies. In this drama the main character built up a vacation village to develop tourism. This village also brings benefits to the nearby area, because like the main character, they also let the villagers earn money. It is a typical drama that explains the Party's policies of leading the masses to be well-off... However, I will not live like them. They have their way of living, and I have mine. If I live like them, can I even survive in this society? You will get ripped off by others!

In his interpretation, the lives that New Countryside dramas construct for peasants are too idealistic. These dramas construct a rural utopia, a world where peasants genuinely support the Party and the government, a place where some peasants get rich first and then help the others to get rich, and a village where everyone can succeed if they really try. However, the complexity of the modern world has been neglected. According to Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 70), whilst traditional societies would provide individuals with clearly defined roles, in the modern world, people have to work out what to do, how to act, and who to be for themselves. He also points out that the micro aspects of society (individual perception of self-identity) and the big macro aspects (state, capitalism and globalisation) are intrinsically linked with each other. So in modern China, peasants do

not necessarily perform the role as shown in dramas' representations, despite the fact that both capitalism and the state would prefer the peasants to have stable and successful businesses. Rather, their choice of not completely complying with the state policy is associated with the decline of authoritarianism and the rise of rationality. Peasants' resistance grows out of their dissatisfactions with the party-state in everyday life, which is influenced by the peasant-unfriendly financial environment, corruption at the grassroots level, increasing risks in the market, continuously enlarging the rich-poor gap, etc. So peasants choose not to completely trust the policies, whether displayed in official documents or delivered via dramas, as they used to do in Mao's era.

Interviewee 52 does not disapprove of this representation, as he knows the hardworking attitude and the spirit of subordinating oneself to unified state led matches with the shared values that are rooted deeply in the Chinese people's worldview. Besides, this representation is needed in order to maintain social order. But he believes this lifestyle as silly. While he expresses he will not live in this way, he indicates that this idealistic lifestyle cannot meet his practical needs. Thus, his attitudes towards these dramas show a rejection of the values endorsed by the Party and the Communist State. More importantly, interviewee 42's understanding also indicates that, in many cases, the dramas' representations of the stable social order, and the harmonious party-peasant relationship, are not specifically targeted at the peasants. They sometimes are something that the party wants the officials to aspire to.

In watching these rural dramas, many Tugou peasants feel that these dramas are not portraying their life. As a restaurant owner, interviewee 47 does not identify with the peasant entrepreneurs in New Countryside dramas much. He thinks that their career path is too simple, but in reality, no one will be so lucky to always get support from the officials or accidentally-met investors. He has to be tough, smart, and independent enough to deal with many complicated issues. Besides, a new career choice also means new troubles. If in the dramas, poverty and physical tiredness are the major troubles of the peasant, in Tugou, modern peasants face many more challenges that wear out both the mind and the body:

'The peasants in those dramas are different from me. I feel like no one in those dramas can be more tired than me. In dramas, it seems they have nothing to worry about and nothing to be annoyed at...Unlike my life, peasants in dramas do not suffer from those tiny little troubles.'

As a result, interviewee 47 believes that the drama cannot be used to guide his life, because they are simply a construction by some artists, and have used many drama techniques to shape characters. To some extent, whether a cadre in a drama is trustworthy or not depends on how the writer wants to construct the story. So he thinks dramas' representation cannot be trusted:

The drama is made by the scriptwriters and the directors... In reality, things in the village will never develop in the dramatised way. Dramas are made up. The writers write whatever they like.

Interviewee 47's view challenges the effects of New Countryside dramas, because he does not identify with the happy, light-hearted and carefree lifestyle that these dramas construct for peasants. He deliberately treats these dramas only as dramas to show his resistance against the beautification of every aspect of rural life in New Countryside dramas.

7.5 Conclusion

New Countryside dramas are perceived by audiences in Chenlou and Tugou villages as a successful format of entertainment. To audiences in both villages, the utilisation of entertaining elements enables these dramas to achieve a positive impact on society, for they are made interesting and understandable to peasants. The audiences' satisfaction towards New Countryside dramas is enhanced by the rich cultural resources related to peasants and the village that enrich their cultural imagination as well as the dramatised excitement of identity politics in the process of watching the dramas. In other words, New Countryside dramas help peasants to recall the specific cultural memory in a local region, and help them to construct their unique peasant identity.

The entertainment value is the main factor that drives peasants in both villages to watch these dramas. The entertaining value of these dramas can be seen from a variety of drama techniques: the amusing dialogues, the interesting story, the delightful tone, etc. While peasants in less-developed villages, represented by Chenlou, can find entertainment from the similarities between the dramas and their lives, those in urbanised villages, represented by Tugou, also find these dramas entertaining as the differences between the traditional village life and theirs fulfilled their imagination of a really relaxing and carefree lifestyle. In this sense, the entertainment value is the main feature that attracts audiences' attention in different Chinese villages and distinguishes New Countryside dramas from other types of rural television programmes.

After attracting audiences' attention, New Countryside dramas try to deliver policy information to the peasants, and also aim to construct good images of the Party and the government. In Chenlou, the stories touch the peasants for their diligence and persistence as an underprivileged group in current China. They make the peasants more motivated to make money, by ways of taking up a second job or starting up a private business. However, peasants do not necessarily pick up the exact careers suggested in dramas, the jobs that the Party and the state encourage peasants to do in the countryside. This is because peasants feel there is a lack of substantial support from the government. Besides, New Countryside dramas cannot increase the favourable opinions of village cadres. This proves that New Countryside dramas can deliver policy information to the rural society,

but they are not effective tools to increase peasants' identification with the Party and the state.

For Tugou peasants, however, the policy information that the dramas deliver is no longer closely linked to their life. This is because Tugou has already been urbanised, so many methods of getting rich (e.g. running a tofu factory) in these dramas are no longer applicable in Tugou's environment. These dramas are also not effective tools to improve the state's image, as many Tugou peasants interpret the positive images of cadres as a need for the drama storyline. Their views towards the village leaders, the Party and the state will not be influenced by dramas.

On the whole, New Countryside dramas provide an effective channel to capture peasants' attention. The stories depicting how peasants construct their villages articulates peasants' cultural memory of different villages. In less-developed villages like Tugou, the story of peasants getting rich echoes people's identification with hardworking and down-to-earth peasants. Whereas in urbanised villages, the depiction of the harmonious village atmosphere recalls people's cultural memory of a united peasant community. In addition, young peasants in Tugou find it amusing to use the characters and plots in these dramas to show their rebellious spirits against the mainstream value of young people fighting for high ambitions. However, these dramas are also interpreted by peasants in both villages as a dramatic format of propaganda. Peasants in Chenlou relate these dramas to their

own encounters with village cadres in real life, and take a resistant position to understand the dramas' characterisation of them. Those in Tugou, however, feel less concerned about the dramas' depictions of village cadres. As a result, audiences in different villages are not persuaded into respecting and trusting village cadres more after watching these New Countryside dramas.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSIONS: MEDIATING CHINA'S NEOLIBERALISATION VIA NEW COUNTRYSIDE TV DRAMAS

This research has examined three different aspects of New Countryside-themed TV dramas: the institutional and administrative background of these dramas, the industrial process of producing and distributing these dramas and the audience reception of the dramas. Although the methods adopted in each chapter vary, throughout this research, the central concern has always been to explore the interactions between the media and Chinese society. In particular, this research aims to reveal how New Countryside TV dramas, as a state-encouraged type of programming, are jointly constructed by market and state forces, and how they intervene in peasants' imagination of their peasant identity and their understanding of rural development.

As has been discussed in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, New Countryside dramas are shaped by China's specific televisual culture and the unique political-economic structure in the media sector. While these dramas all seek to convey the Party and the state's ideologies and rural development policies to peasant society, those made by state institutions, such as *Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside*, prioritise the Party's propaganda needs and use entertainment elements, e.g., popular stars, comic style, etc., to attract audiences' attention. However, those initiated by private institutions, such as *Rural Love Stories*, focus on peasants' daily life and incorporate Party-endorsed policies to win broadcasting opportunities. These two types of New Countryside drama productions are developed in

the context of China's strong state supervision and the marketisation of the Chinese media industry. As shown in Chapters 5 and 6, the state maintains strong influence on New Countryside dramas, not only by using administrative and economic means to encourage their production, but also by ideologically influencing drama professionals so as to encourage the incorporation of more elements related with the 'New Countryside Construction' project.

When New Countryside dramas are perceived by peasants, identity plays an important role in how they interpret the drama content. As shown in Chapter 7, this research interviewed peasants in two villages, one less developed and the other enjoying a higher development level. This study seeks to use these two villages to represent China's two types of villages: those located in less developed area with a population living on farming and/or part-time working in the city, and those located in developed suburban areas with a population no longer working in agriculture. In both traditional and more urbanised villages, New Countryside dramas speak to peasants' understandings of their own identity and mediates between the state and peasant society. On the whole, data collected in the two representational villages demonstrated that in the context of China's rural development, the diverse formats, themes and genres of New Countryside dramas can attract considerable audience attention in different types of villages. Although the production of these dramas reveals the convergence of commercial and governmental logics and that of regulatory regimes with free-market structures, based on the interview data, it was found that peasants' interpretations of drama content usually deviate from the

state's original intention. New Countryside dramas have become a platform where some of the sharp tensions in the current Chinese society can be studied: authoritarianism versus free-market capitalism, collective cultural memory versus individual imagination, dominant and emergent culture versus residential culture, etc.

8.1 Reflections on Methodology – A Political Economy of Culture

As discussed in Chapter 4, although the Political Economy approach of Media Studies and the Cultural Studies approach have shared concerns of issues related to power, equity and ideology, the two paradigms each go their own way, with the former trapped in economic essentialism, functionalism and determinism and the latter relying too much on the hegemony model, thus trying to explain everything by audience subjectivity. An important attempt of this study is to reconcile the two paradigms. As shown in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, this research tries to balance the attention given to the political economy aspect and the audience reception aspect of New Countryside TV dramas. This approach underlines a strategy that Nicholas Garnham calls 'the political economy of culture': taking into consideration economic determinations in the theorisation of power in relation to culture, or in other words, developing 'a political economy of mass-communication phenomenon within the wider framework as the analysis of an important, but historically specific mode of the wider process of cultural production and reproduction' (Garnham, 1979, p. 123). Following this approach, this thesis endeavours to balance our understanding of audience (in this research, the peasants) subjectivity with close attention

to the effects of political and economic structures and processes. These processes include, at the level of ideology, the communist state's propaganda appeals and their influence on the media industry, the influences of 'media professionalism with a consideration of the market' on industrial practice, the impact of indigenous cultural values on media production, and the responses of the Chinese peasant audience as a transforming social class consisting of different semi-groups marked by varying development levels.

In Chapters 5 and 6, this study was interested in exploring the extent to which the New Countryside TV dramas in China can be linked to the political and economic development demands of a communist state within a global capitalist economy. Meanwhile, in Chapter 7, this research also examined how different development levels have created distinct mediated relations between Chinese urban-rural politics and Chinese peasant identities. Garnham's definition of 'the political economy of culture' emphasises the inseparable relation between 'large scale capitalist economic activity' and 'cultural production' (1979, p. 123). In formulating this both theoretical and methodological strategy, Garnham's wording, 'capitalist economic activity', indicates that he has not limited the applicability of this idea to a conventional capitalist society. In an era when the global capitalist market is starting to make a growing impact on each country's specific cultural field, such an approach must take into consideration the importance of understanding mass communication phenomena in non-capitalist settings. Therefore, this research tries to discuss the applicability of Garnham's strategy, 'the political economy of culture', in China, a country with a communist-led state that is however undergoing tremendous social,

economic and political transformation. This will not only show how a study of Garnham's approach can be conducted, but also shed light on how the Chinese case is distinct from examples in other typical capitalist countries in Western Europe and North America. However, the point of starting to do so is not to highlight the otherness of Chinese TV culture from global media cultures. The aim of drawing attention to China is to highlight the context dependence of all examples, and thus help us to understand that nowadays TV, as well as even other formats of media, has been networked across countries and cultures to deliver globally popular appeals to consumerism, entrepreneurship and individualism.

8.2 Reflections on Chinese Neoliberalisation

Neoliberalism is usually associated with reduced state intervention in social affairs, the free market economy and a self-organising civil society (Jessop, 2002, p. 454). As was discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberalism is not only 'a type of economic policy', but also 'a cultural structure, a set of particular attitudes towards individual responsibility, entrepreneurship and self-improvement' (Yu, 2011, p. 38), as well as 'a type of governmentality' (Foucault, 2008, p. 218). Neoliberal projects attempt to promote political democracy, free market economy, individual entrepreneurship, self-responsibility and consumer-citizenship in society.

Although neoliberal projects are more frequently observed in advanced capitalist democracy societies (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 257), this research shows that New Countryside TV dramas in the Chinese context also demonstrate some neoliberal features. This is reflected in two aspects. Firstly, the way New Countryside dramas are manufactured reveals that the Chinese media industry now increasingly presents a neoliberal nature. China's current media landscape is dominated by two forces. While the market force drives the media and communication industries to produce cultural products that satisfy people's demands, the state force on the top regulates how these media are managed. Although state intervention is a unique feature of the Chinese mediascape, over the years, direct administrative instructions from the Chinese state have significantly decreased. Instead, as Chapters 5 and 6 show, the state has introduced a number of economic methods to guide the production orientations of media companies as well as encourage the growth of the private media sector. The most evident fact about the Chinese media industry's neoliberal nature is that the production of the majority of New Countryside dramas depends on funds from China's private sector and the professional team in private drama production institutions.

Secondly, the neoliberal economic structure has actually promoted the production of New Countryside dramas. After being produced, these dramas themselves become new tools to promote the neoliberal structure in China's social life. Specifically, the stories of New Countryside dramas try to advance the development of private ownership in the countryside, and also seek to enact self-improvement, self-responsibility and individual

entrepreneurship in Chinese rural society. From audience interviews, it could be seen that this content has an effect on society, as some peasants expressed that they agree with the entrepreneurship spirit conveyed by New Countryside dramas, and some were even motivated to start up their own business. In other words, as the product of a neoliberal way of media production, New Countryside dramas further seek to 'reproduce' this kind of neoliberal sociocultural structure in Chinese rural society. In this way, Chinese peasant society also presents more neoliberal features.

By using the concept of 'China's neoliberalisation', this research tries to emphasise the uniqueness of the neoliberal project in China compared to those in other countries. Neoliberalism has no fixed policy regime, ideological form or regulatory framework (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 349). Instead, a number of scholars have pointed out that neoliberalism is more accurately considered as a developing process rather than a set of fixed conditions (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, Peck and Tickell, 2002, Tickell and Peck, 2003, Peck, 2004). As a process, neoliberalisation can 'take many different routes with varying results' (Yu, 2011, p. 38) based on different 'national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices and political struggles' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 349). The focus of this research, then, is to illustrate how the Chinese neoliberal transformation project is being carried out via the mediation of the country's media sector. By examining the Chinese case, this research has highlighted the complexity, plurality and socially embedded nature of neoliberalism.

Aihwa Ong (2006, pp. 1-30) points out that the Chinese state has been deploying ‘the twin modalities of the neoliberal governmentality’ to supervise the media: ‘neoliberalism as exception’ and ‘exceptions to neoliberalism’. While the former notion refers to efforts to subject certain populations, places and socioeconomic domains to neoliberal calculations in order to boost the free market economy and facilitate interactions with the global capitalist market, the latter strategy is usually adopted to exclude certain populations and places from neoliberal calculations in order to maintain social order. As shown in earlier chapters, in the case of New Countryside dramas, the establishment of a market-oriented drama industry demonstrates the deployment of a ‘neoliberalism as exception’ strategy. On the other hand, the state’s ban on rural drama projects without the state’s approval is an application of ‘exceptions to neoliberalism’.

Scholars have divided opinions on whether China’s development follows a neoliberal track or not. Some claim that China is of a neoliberal nature. Harvey argues that China’s rapid economic growth should give the credit to marketisation and privatisation (Harvey, 2005). However, others argue that China’s development is not neoliberal at all because China does not completely obey the laws of the market, and that interventions from the Chinese Government too often upset the operation of the market (Wang, 2003, Wu, 2010). The controversy in the literature reminds us that it is not easy to classify China’s massive and rapidly changing political economy under one clearly defined label (Weber, 2018, p. 220). However, this research tries to highlight that although the Chinese government refuses some key structures (i.e., law of the market) and practices (i.e., enough protection of

private ownership) of neoliberalism in the economic field, many of the cultural projects it launches are highly congruent with neoliberal thinking, for that they promote individual entrepreneurship, self-improvement and an urban middle-class lifestyle in order to serve China's rural urbanisation project. Therefore, Chinese neoliberalism is defined by a dual nature of continuity and discontinuity: the continuity 'of state socialism in the political (and ideological) trajectory' with the Maoist era and discontinuity of 'state socialism in economic development' with the pre-reform era (Harvey, 2005, p. 120). In other words, Chinese neoliberalism features a hybridity of 'a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements' and 'authoritarian centralised control' (*ibid.*).

By analysing the production process of New Countryside dramas, this thesis argues that China's neoliberalisation is a state-led, media-mediated process. The state plays a dual role, making the macro development plan for the country and guiding the mass media to endorse the policies it releases in order to win broad social support. The state influences the activities of the marketised mass media sector in two ways. Firstly, it has developed a complicated set of administrative strategies, which combine institutional regulation, financial subsidies, tax policies, market monopoly, party endorsement, etc., to encourage the media industry to produce more products that are consistent with the Socialist New Countryside Construction policy. Secondly, the state uses media reform to form new drama production organisations, and thereby change the work routines that media professionals follow. The two new patterns of drama production make media professionals

more willing to put more New Countryside Construction Policy-related elements into drama narratives.

8.3 Reflections on the State Television Apparatus

This study also shows that New Countryside TV dramas can be used by the state as a tool to influence peasants' lives. In most West European and North American countries, neoliberal cultural projects often mean free market competition, no state intervention and growing social participation. However, this is not the same with Chinese neoliberalism cultural projects, as the state still plays a special role in the design and execution of neoliberal projects.

Like many socialist authoritarian states, China in the Maoist era also had a tradition of directly intervening in people's private lives via a set of institutional mechanisms. In Mao's China, the state participated in every aspect of people's lives in order to create 'the new socialist man' needed in the country's socialist construction (Cheng, 2009, p. 48). Thus, every aspect of social life, including people's entertainment, work, family size, commercial activities and so forth, seems to be organised and supervised by the state. Since the reform and opening-up in the 1980s, the post-socialist state has withdrawn from people's private lives but still maintains powerful control of the country's politics and economy. The retreat of the state from people's everyday lives has allowed more freedom for personal

development. However, China's neoliberalisation is still a state-directed project (Rofel, 2007, Bakken, 2000). Many neoliberal cultural projects are centrally planned and carried out nationwide through the state media. The New Countryside dramas are typical cases.

Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside, a drama produced by the state media production body Shandong Film and TV Media Group, is a typical example. This drama was broadcast on CCTV. In addition, it is also one of the SAPPRFT-endorsed dramas which are highly recommended by the state regulators to local TV stations. There are some highly political plots which have interpreted abstract rural policy in concrete story contexts in this drama. These stories further provide guidance for local peasants' everyday choices (e.g. persuading peasants to trust the urban-to-village 'Major Secretaries' and support the cadres' work). There are no differences between this Chinese drama and the typical North American commercial dramas in terms of their funding sources, production mode, content and style. However, the greatest difference between the American style ones and this one is that while in America, the state rarely intervenes in drama production, this drama speaks as the mouthpiece of the Chinese party-state. As revealed in Chapters 5 and 6, it was proposed by a local government propaganda department and given to a state-owned organ as a propaganda task. In this case, the neoliberal features of this New Countryside drama are mainly manifested in the increased marketisation level in financing and project execution. In this sense, this drama is far from just a commercial TV programme that can bring the state media system economic benefits. If in the Maoist era, the state directly regulated and organised citizens' lives, then in this case, this drama has

helped the state to ‘guide’ citizens’ lives and thus realised its political imperatives in a subtle way.

Rural Love Stories, a highly commercialised rural drama produced by the private institution Benshan Media, is another example. In watching this drama, pressure has been placed on peasant audiences to push them to learn from the successful role models (either in career or marriage) in the drama. Whether intentional or unintentional, this drama creates desires in the peasant audiences, and thus can motivate them to be more successful in career and marriage. In this sense, the socialist state’s intention to regulate and shape individuals has never disappeared in China.

In the current Chinese neoliberal environment, the commercialised media industries have replaced the Maoist state’s regulatory role in disciplining individuals. In this sense, using New Countryside dramas as an example, this research reveals the new role of television in the current Chinese context: New Countryside dramas speak on behalf of the Chinese party-state. They are not simply commercial cultural products, but more like a governmental project. Similarly to how Lewis, Martin and Sun’s (2016, p. 261) comment on lifestyle TV programmes in Asia, New Countryside dramas could be seen as ‘a cultural implementation of the state’s governmental imperatives’.

This research also sheds light on how we should understand China's contemporary media and cultural industries and their relationships with China's socialist legacies. In the Maoist era, the media and cultural industries were owned by the state. They followed the state's centralised control. Taking television as an example, as discussed in Chapter 3, before the market-oriented reform in the media was carried out in the 1980s, Chinese television served as the mouthpiece of the state, and played an important role in producing highly propagandist programmes to support the state's rural development policies. However, since the 2000s, the Chinese TV industry has introduced a number of marketisation mechanisms. As a result, Chinese TV has taken on dual roles of both an official political organ and unit of capital accumulation. In this sense, the role of the state-television apparatus has changed from solely a political mouthpiece to a political mouthpiece and unit of capital accumulation. Although this transformation is obvious, it is also gradual and uneven. Therefore, TV programme projects show different level of privatisation. As revealed in Chapters 5 and 6, some TV dramas (such as *Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside*) are co-productions of the state and the private sector; others, on the other hand, are completely produced by private institutions according to commercial rules.

Although this transformation has started, on the whole, the Chinese TV drama industry now still operates within the socialist logic of centralised state control and socialist ideologies. This is achieved through the party-state's monopoly of TV broadcasting channels, the TV drama censorship system and the management of the party-state's TV regulation organs – SAPPRFT and the Party Propaganda Department system. This mode

of TV governance is different from those of most North American and West European countries, nor is it the same as those in most former socialist countries before the 1990s, as analysed by Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable (2018) in their book, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television*. In comparison, the media-state apparatus that supports the production of New Countryside TV dramas is not completely authoritarian, nor is it completely commercialised. It presents logics of centralised statehood and the active involvement of commercial forces.

8.4 Reflections on Peasant Identity in China

Another key concept that this research focuses on is class. Most West European and North American studies on TV dramas choose to examine those programmes' effects on audience from the perspective of identity (Carson and Llewellyn-Jones, 2000, Bednarek, 2010). Clearly, as these countryside-themed dramas are produced to support the state's rural revitalisation project, the peasant identity is what we must understand in order to interpret the influence of New Countryside TV dramas. Although China has been an agrarian country for thousands of years, in China, the concept of 'peasant' remains ambiguously defined.

Two questions must be taken into consideration: first, although peasants can be treated as a group of population dwelling in rural villages, since China has a wide range of villages

with uneven development, there are huge cultural differences between peasants from less and more developed villages. So while the New Countryside dramas are made to promote rural development in a wide region or even across different regions, it is worth considering who it is that constitutes the peasants in areas of different degrees of development, the differences between them, and whether these dramas will be effective in all of these villages. Second, as huge transformations have taken place in Chinese rural society, it is worth considering whether the peasants' understanding of their identity has changed over the years and, if a 'new' peasant identity has emerged, how members of this social group might be positioned in Chinese social and political structures.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, although peasants in different villages can be hugely different, there are some shared characteristics and cultural memories regarding peasants across the country. In this research, these shared sociocultural positions, cultural experience and features are articulated through New Countryside dramas in distinct ways to construct an imagined 'peasant identity'. Their representations are then received by the peasants and interpreted in their own way. This process involves negotiations between global capitalism, and national and localised imaginations of peasants. In New Countryside dramas, a typical image that has been given to the peasants is that they are poor, less-educated, kindhearted, hardworking and lack entrepreneurship. Peasants in less developed villages identify with this identity. They often complain about their own powerlessness in reality. However, those in more developed villages show less identification with this identity. Many of the people from more developed villages live a

more urbanised lifestyle. Although they at times also watch New Countryside dramas, they no longer live off farming. Instead, many of them have become rich by giving up their original house and land and starting to work in other industries. In China, evidence shows that there is a gap between poor peasants and those living in more-developed areas.

Despite the internal complexities within the peasant population, what is known for sure is that the Chinese state attaches great importance to its relationships with this population, as the leadership needs to help these peasants to get rich in order to strengthen the Party's ruling legitimacy, and that the leadership is also afraid that discontentment from this huge social group will lead to large-scale social instability.

The leadership's concerns about losing peasants' support has been reflected in many New Countryside dramas. These dramas usually construct a storyline of peasants starting up village enterprises with the support of village cadres and the government and finally getting rich. According to the interview data, while peasant interviewees in the less-developed village often complain about the differences between the dedicated village cadres depicted in those dramas and the cold and corrupt village cadres they encounter in real life, those in the more urbanised village appeared to be less critical of drama depictions of cadres and government officials. In addition, peasants in the more urbanised village show more willingness to play along with the state in its management of the urban-rural gap, because they are beneficiaries of the state's previous rural development

projects. This finding shows that the peasant identity manifests as two versions in the current Chinese context: peasants living in less-developed villages show greater democratising potential, and those in more urbanised villages appear to be politically less democratising but economically dependent on the state's stability.

8.5 Reflections on Media and Development

Fifth and last, this research on New Countryside dramas in the background of China's rural revitalisation campaign has raised questions regarding the relations between development, the media and peasant identity. This research has shown that New Countryside dramas may be used by the state to assist with some rural development projects. As Chapter 7 shows, in the drama *Xiangyang Ma's Journey to the Countryside*, the state's policy of sending city officials out to serve the countryside has been made into a light-toned drama story. With this drama's simple language and vivid representation, peasants can easily understand the aim of this project, the duty the city official will take in the countryside and the most recent policies regarding rural development. In their aim, content and style, New Countryside dramas look very much like dramas in some entertainment education projects discussed in Chapter 2, as they can both educate the audience on social issues through mass media products. Yet New Countryside dramas are very different from Western-style entertainment educational dramas. There are two main differences.

The first difference centres on the fundamental question of who decides a certain message is pro-social, or in other words, worthy of being portrayed in a drama. In Western-style entertainment education projects, the message that mass media delivers usually has been of unquestionable value, such as disease prevention, family planning, etc. However, in the Chinese case, the information that dramas carry is usually of a highly political nature. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether the information these dramas are carrying is ethical or not. Therefore, although the two types of TV dramas seek to foster social change, they are still different in nature.

The second difference lies in the drama production process. Most entertainment-education dramas are designed on the basis of various theories of behavioural change. The roles in these dramas represent different characters in society. However, the settings, roles and plots in China's New Countryside dramas are not rigorous. This shows that New Countryside dramas cannot be used to guide peasants how to think and learn. Therefore, while the entertainment education dramas can effectively enact behavioural change, New Countryside dramas today have less educational but more entertainment importance to peasants.

This research also demonstrates that not only can television teach peasants about new knowledge and broaden peasants' horizons, but it can also create tensions vis-à-vis state-market-citizen relations and highlight the growing inequalities inside rural areas as well as

urban-rural gaps. As shown in Chapter 7, some peasants in the less-developed village complained about the discrepancies between their own life and the life shown on television. Some peasants expressed that the huge differences between the images of rural cadres and the cadres in reality leads to more distrust between them and cadres in local government. In this sense, a central contradiction of New Countryside dramas as a tool to promote village development is that while they were given a public service role to help propagandise the state's political and economic policies to shape peasants into more entrepreneurial peasants, they also promote aspirations that are hard to achieve in ordinary peasants' real lives, thus intensifying the antagonism between the peasants and the government-endorsed development route.

The primary aim of this research has been to question how New Countryside dramas reproduce the state agenda and how peasants perceive them. As the research shows, these dramas should be seen as a cultural implementation of China's neoliberal project. The Chinese state has deployed twin modalities of neoliberalism to develop its media industry. While China's market-oriented reform in the 1990s and early 2000s, as 'neoliberalism as exception', has made the Chinese media in many ways like a capitalist media sector, China's socialist legacies and ongoing re-articulations of socialist ideologies, as 'exceptions of neoliberalism', make China's development a highly contested and unfinished project. Although neoliberalist projects are more frequently observed in advanced capitalist societies, this research shows that New Countryside TV dramas in the Chinese context also demonstrate some neoliberalist features. New Countryside TV

dramas, on the one hand, are produced in China's unique neoliberal structure. On the other hand, they also serve as tools for reproducing the neoliberal cultural structure and production relationship in Chinese rural society. Although China's neoliberal development lacks a well-organised civil society, New Countryside dramas show that neoliberalism in China is enjoying rapid development, and is seeking to integrate peasants into China's enlarging market economy. It is clear that China's state transformation has reached a critical point. It remains to be seen how it will continue to address these internal tensions in the future.

One shortcoming of this research is that, due to time and budget constraints, the number of interviewees was limited. In addition, the research conducted audience interviews in only two villages. Although the two chosen villages have different features (one represents traditional villages in less-developed areas, the other represents more-developed villages), they cannot fully present the rich diversity of villages across China. Most typically, this research only conducted interviews in North Chinese villages. How the peasants in the southern part of the country will receive the New Countryside TV dramas, whether New Countryside dramas will have a different influence on northern and southern peasants, and how urban audiences and rural peasants perceive these dramas respectively, could be topics for future research. In addition, China offers other developing countries an option different from the Western model of neoliberalisation. This research just offers a discussion on it from the communication perspective. There is still much room to explore

in terms of the features, mechanisms and effects of 'the Chinese model of neoliberalisation'.

APPENDIX I:
DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUNDS OF THE INTERVIEWEES

NO.	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education Background	Place of the Interview	Time of the Interview
1	Male	N/A	Director	N/A	Beijing	October 2016
2	Male	N/A	Staff at a Municipal State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television	N/A	Beijing	October, 2016
3	Male	N/A	Scriptwriter	N/A	Beijing	October 2016
4	Male	N/A	Producer	N/A	Beijing	October 2016
5	Male	N/A	Party official, a member of the TV drama censoring committee	N/A	Beijing	November 2016
6	Male	N/A	Director at CCTV 7 Rural Channel	N/A	Beijing	October 2016
7	Male	N/A	A member of the TV drama censoring committee	N/A	Beijing	October 2016
8	Male	N/A	Producer, scriptwriter	N/A	Beijing	November 2016
9	Male	N/A	Scriptwriter	N/A	Beijing	November 2016
10	Male	N/A	Independent documentary director	N/A	Beijing	November 2016

11	Male	N/A	Scriptwriter	N/A	Telephone interview	September 2018
12	Male	N/A	Actor	N/A	Telephone interview	October 2018
13	Male	N/A	Editor at CCTV 7 Rural Channel	N/A	Telephone interview	June 2019
14	Male	N/A	Actor	N/A	Telephone interview	October 2018
15	Female	40	Peasant	Primary School	Chenlou	May 2017
16	Female	50	Peasant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
17	Female	52	Peasant	Below Primary School	Chenlou	May 2017
18	Female	38	Peasant/Part-time worker in a clothing factory	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
19	Male	27	Peasant/Part-time worker in the city	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
20	Female	28	Peasant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
21	Female	30	Peasant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
22	Male	29	Peasant/Shop Owner	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017
23	Female	57	Peasant	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017
24	Female	42	Peasant	University	Chenlou	May 2017
25	Male	32	Peasant/Part-time pancake seller	N/A	Chenlou	May 2017
26	Male	53	Peasant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
27	Female	28	Peasant	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017

28	Female	36	Peasant/Shop owner	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
29	Male	28	Peasant/Barber	University	Chenlou	May 2017
30	Female	39	Peasant/Shop Assistant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
31	Female	35	Peasant/Shop Assistant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
32	Female	20	Peasant/Shop Assistant	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017
33	Female	48	Peasant/Shop owner	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
34	Female	28	Peasant/Shop assistant	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017
35	Female	50	Peasant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
36	Male	43	Peasant/Bare foot doctor	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017
37	Male	60	Peasant/Bare foot doctor	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
38	Male	54	Peasant	Senior High	Chenlou	May 2017
39	Male	68	Peasant	Junior High	Chenlou	May 2017
40	Male	38	Peasant	University	Chenlou	May 2017
41	Male	28	Staff in China Post	University	Chenlou	May 2017
42	Male	26	Staff in China Post	University	Chenlou	May 2017
43	Male	21	Student	Undergraduate	Tugou	May 2017
44	Female	30	Online Seller	University	Tugou	May 2017
45	Male	42	Peasant	Senior High	Tugou	May 2017
46	Female	30	N/A	University	Tugou	May 2017

47	Male	38	Restaurant Owner	Senior High	Tugou	May 2017
48	Female	65	N/A	Primary School	Tugou	May 2017
49	Male	21	Student	Junior High	Tugou	May 2017
50	Male	28	White Collar	Master	Tugou	May 2017
51	Female	71	Peasant	Junior High	Tugou	May 2017
52	Male	30-50	Private Taxi Driver	N/A	Tugou	May 2017
53	Female	>50	N/A	N/A	Tugou	May 2017
54	Female	>50	N/A	N/A	Tugou	May 2017
55	Female	>50	N/A	N/A	Tugou	May 2017
56	Female	54	Peasant	Primary School	Tugou	May 2017
57	Female	30	N/A	Master	Tugou	May 2017
58	Female	47	Shop Owner	Junior High	Tugou	May 2017
59	Female	39		Junior High	Tugou	May 2017
60	Male	23	Student	Master	Tugou	May 2017
61	Female	68	Peasant	N/A	Tugou	May 2017

APPENDIX II: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title

Mediated Neoliberalisation: the Production and Reception of New Countryside Dramas in China

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research study on the production and reception of New Countryside TV Dramas in China. The research will be conducted by Ran Yan, a PhD student from University of Birmingham, under the supervision of Dr. Gëzim Alpion and Dr. Julie Gilson. During the research, please provide information as accurately as possible.

What Will Happen

(For staff at media regulation departments, media production institutions and frontline media practitioners)

In this study, you will be interviewed by the investigator on how the New Countryside themed television series are produced. The project will focus on what factors may influence the TV drama production procedures you are responsible for.

(For peasants participating in the questionnaire survey)

In this study, you will first be invited to participate in a questionnaire survey. The aim of the survey is to explore how New Countryside themed television series influence Chinese villagers' lives. After the survey, you will be invited to join in an interview, where you can discuss more details of New Countryside themed teleplays' impacts on you. The interview will be carried out on a voluntary basis.

Time Commitment

The interview will take about 1 hour.

Participants' Rights

You have the right to refuse to answer any question that is asked to you.

You can decide to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation.

You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

Risks

This research will bring no physical harm to participants. To avoid any pressure this research may cause in your career or your daily life, your identity will be kept confidential.

Cost, Reimbursement and Compensation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not get financial or non-financial compensation for the participation.

Confidentiality

Your data will be treated as confidential. No one except the PhD researcher could access your information. The data you provide will be used in this PhD thesis only with your permission.

For Further Information

PhD researcher Ran Yan will be glad to answer your questions about this study. You may contact her at +44 (0)7596488360.

APPENDIX III: CONSENT FORM

I , the undersigned, confirm that:

(1) I have read and understood the information about the research project, as provided in the Participation Information Sheet.

(2) I have been told the aim, value and possible risks about the research, and I voluntarily agree to participate in it.

(3) I understand that I can withdraw at any time with no consequences on myself without having to explain for my leaving. I understand that no matter I withdraw from the research or not, I should not leak any information about other participants' identity.

(4) I understand that I should be responsible for my words, and I should not fabricate or provide fake information to the research.

(5) I have been given a choice to choose whether my answer during the research could be recorded by the researcher or not.

Personally I choose:

A. Yes, it can be recorded. B. No, it cannot be recorded.

(6) The principles of using my data has been explained to me. I know that all the data will be kept confidential and no one except the investigator can get access to my data.

(7) I have been given the chance to ask questions about this research and my participation before each interview.

Participant:.....Date:.....

APPENDIX IV: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

For staff at media regulation departments and media production institutions:

How many procedures are there in the production of New Countryside themed television series? Who may be involved in these sub-processes?

What influence might the state insert on each production procedure? To what extent does such influence affect the content of the drama?

Who is responsible for the censorship of the countryside themed television series? What are the main criteria of the censorship?

What rules or regulations must be followed during your work? Who made the rules and why?

Do you have any personal preferences on how to represent the New Countryside while you are producing a drama? Why?

What other factors have influenced you while you are working on rural themed teleplays?

How do you measure the popularity and effect of the New Countryside themed television series?

For peasants:

How often would you watch New Countryside themed television series?

Which New Countryside themed television series do you usually watch and why?

In what aspects have these series changed you?

Which plots do you agree and disagree with most? Why?

Do you agree with the portrayal of the peasants, the countryside and the rural life in New Countryside themed television series and why?

APPENDIX V: QUESTIONNAIRE

We would like to invite you to answer the following questions in a survey conducted by Ran Yan, a PhD researcher from the University of Birmingham, for her PhD research. The aim of this survey is to understand the influences of the Chinese New Countryside themed television series on the peasants. There are no right or wrong answers to each question, so please feel free to fill in your choices. The results of the survey will be used for this research only with your permission. Your data will be treated as confidential. You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time with no consequences. Thank you for your cooperation!

Part I

Please provide the following information by ticking in corresponding boxes.

1. How often do you watch ‘new rural’ themed television series?

- A. Everyday B. Every week C. Every month D. I watch them only occasionally

2. What do you think is the most important that you have gained from New Countryside themed television series?

- A. Entertainment. B. Knowledge, experience and insights. C. Production skills.
 D. Lifestyles. E. Others (Please specify) _____

3. Via which media do you usually watch New Countryside themed television series?

- A. TV sets. B. Computer. C. Cellphone.
 D. VCD/DVD. E. Downloading from the Internet to other devices (Please specify)

4. What do New Countryside themed television series mean to you?

- A. Nothing, just entertainment programmes.

- B. They are the representation of the real rural life, reflecting what is happening around us.
- C. They are constructed, so they cannot be believed.
- D. They are a special kind of propaganda.
- E. Others (Please identify) _____

5. Generally, how much do you agree with the depictions of rural life and peasants in New Countryside themed television series?

- A. Strongly disagree. They are totally fabricated.
- B. Disagree. There are many inaccuracies.
- C. I maintain the neutral attitude. I think they are fine.
- D. Agree. They are good representations.
- E. Strongly agree. They perfectly resemble the reality.

6. In what aspects have New Countryside themed television series affected you?

- A. They have changed many of my previous ideas (in gender, public engagement, etc.)
- B. They have provided me with motivations to work hard.
- C. They have made me feel more positive about our government.
- D. They have made me feel unsatisfied with my own life. I wish I could live my life like the main characters.
- E. No I have not been influenced by them.
- F. Others (Please identify) _____

Part II

Please give the following information by ticking in the box or writing your answer in the space.

7. Participant's gender

- Male
- Female

8. Your age _____

9. What is your highest education qualification?

- I have never received school education. Primary school Junior high school
 Senior high school Bachelor Postgraduate and higher

10. Could you please leave your name and contact in case we need to supplement some information?

Name_____

Contact_____

11. We would also very much appreciate it if you could let us know if you would agree to participate in a focus-group discussion. The discussion will take about 1 to 1.5 hours. The information you provide will be used in this research with your permission, and your identity will be kept confidential.

- Yes, I would like to participate in the focus group discussion.
 No, I do not want to be contacted again.

Thank you for your help!

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