

The Talk Show Phenomenon in China

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Abstract—The paper aims to offer a quick snapshot of talk show phenomenon in China at the turn of the 21st century, that the institutional interactions took place face to face on TV. Three typical and representative programs of that time are introduced briefly. It seems that the Chinese talk-show video “Tell It Like It Is”, (Shi Hua Shi Shuo) is a pilot successful program of the three ones. “A Date With Luyu,” and “Qiangqiang San Ren Xing” also play their own significant roles in public mind. One feature of the broadcast talk in talk shows is its most controversial TV genre. It is apparent in changing news formats, as well as in audience participation. Meanwhile a systematic method of sociolinguistics [1], conversation analysis (CA) [2] is employed to make a survey on Chinese talk shows.

Index Terms—Conversation analysis, format, genre, talk show.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, talk shows became the most popular genre on American TV, citing in particularity of Oprah Winfrey. Driven by the search for diversified programming, Chinese TV stations are resorting to cloning, or the selective coping of TV formats, whereby the Chinese attempt to localize successful overseas programs. One startling example is the program “Tell It Like It Is”, (Shi Hua Shi Shuo-in Chinese pronunciation) on China Central Television Station-Channel 1(CCTV- 1). This program has a talk show format similar to the “The Oprah Winfrey Show”. Another typical example is the program hosted by Chen Luyu. Chen Luyu is an unlikely revolutionary. Known as “China’s Oprah”, at that time the 35-year-old mainland-born TV star’s live-audience talk show, “A Date with Luyu”, is pushing the envelope of the Chinese small screen. Featured on the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite Television channel, Chen’s program brings the lives of ordinary people and celebrities into the living rooms of Chinese city dwellers, and has revolutionized China’s once stodgy TV scene in the process.

There are times when you would like to quit talking or reading, and just sit back and listen to what people say so you can just shoot them sly smiles, laugh at them, or even scream at ridiculous opinions. If those are the moments you enjoy, then “Qiangqiang San Ren Xing” is the show for you.

In a word, the paper aims to offer a quick snapshot of talk show phenomenon at that time in China. The appearance of the talk show phenomenon in China, and its impact, origins of its saga will be studied in this paper. It’s beyond doubt that CCTV, Phoenix’s flagship Chinese Channel ranks

second only in popularity to CCTV-1, and ahead of all the other CCTV channels as well as, all of them empathize with but which have a fresh and distinctive flavor to talk-shows. The three representative talk show programs and their anchors mentioned above have become a household story. Talk show culture was enormously popular with Chinese of all ages and economic backgrounds, partly as an entertaining freak show and partly because it represented a release from cultural restraints. Some talk shows purported to offer a populist, and political culture in China at the turn of the 21st century was shaped in part by media talk shows. As long as people turn on a TV set, they can watch talk show without any difficulty. Besides, it would seem that some city dwellers are entertaining themselves with inter-net talk shows. Internet chat rooms provided an instant, global conversation with unpredictable partners and outcomes. Killing time in an internet chat room for most web fans has become an indispensable hobby since they share the same interests with internet pals to make themselves relaxed from the life pressure. Talk show producers claimed they were performing a public service by offering a cathartic release and national platform for hitherto unexplored social issues; critics claimed the producers were mainstreaming hatred and pornography in China public life.

By investigating the talk show phenomenon, the author is trying to make some contribution to it’s academic analysis. Talk show formats, or its sub-genres should be included in talk show definition. The methodology employed in the paper is to focus on particular shows, which presents three empirical case studies. Apart from some previous articles, this is also the study to offer a sociolinguistics perspective since the data takes the form of transcripts of broadcast talk, but these clearly not reproductions of original recordings.

Popular and political culture in China at the turn of 21st century was shaped greatly by media talk shows, which often were designed for entertainment value rather than for public enlightenment. Talk shows can be defined: a television or radio show in which noted people, such as authorities in a particular field, participate in discussions or are interviewed and often answer questions from viewers or listeners. Besides, according to ABN Amro (2001) [3], China has 80-90 million cable TV homes. The figure of cable TV homes indicates that most Chinese have access to getting the information from different TV channels. Talk show has become the most popular genre on Chinese TV except soap operas and drama series. Of course, we have to admit that soap operas and drama series, still command the highest ratings. The Chinese audiences spend most of their spare time watching TV or talking to each other in their own different internet chat room. The internet chat can be considered another typical example of talk shows except TV programs. We assess the significance, the contribution of

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talk shows to the public sphere cannot be determined by considering particular programs, or even the genre as a whole. The public sphere is not located in a particular place, and it is by no means restricted to television. Rather it is a circulation of public discourses through a range of sites, institutions, and other forms of publication in which talk shows might play a very marginal role.

II. THE MIXING OF GENRES OF TALK SHOWS IN NEW HYBRID FORMS

Now the question becomes: Why do talk shows become so influential? The reasons can be analyzed from the history background and costs of production, genre, contents of the TV talk shows. It is around the turn of 20th and 21st that a talk show program appears overnight on China Central Television Station. As a public broadcaster, CCTV regards it a social responsibility to contribute to the campaign against many social issues and injustices. CCTV has produced many programs on the subject, using the medium of television to its best advantage. CCTV has made and broadcast news programs, feature programs, TV dramas, and public service announcements to educate the public. In a sharp contrast, talk shows with audience participation can not meet the requirement of news format. The genre of talk shows is hybrid between ordinary conversation and talk at work [4]. Although the broadcast talk in talk shows occur in a very formal setting - CCTV, the topic can involve daily life problems instead of academic debates. Thus, it seems that ordinary people are allowed to take a turn of talking spontaneously on such a great and rigid occasion. As people know that, it is almost 30 years since the Culture Revolution is over. Some lucky audience are honored to conduct a conversation with some celebrities who in most cases are symbolizing the power. Owing to the hybrid genre of talk shows, its suitable birthday, talk shows step on our stage like a welcome lovely baby.

Secondly, the costs to produce TV talk show programs in the modern media economy still stay low. In China, shooting a half-hour episode of a TV serial is incredibly cheap: it's only 0.5% to 3% the cost of making a show in the US, roughly US\$5,000 to 30,000. The low cost of TV program production ensure its strong and firm competitive capacity. In addition, by investigating the talk of talk shows from sociolinguistics, we are making a new contribution to their academic analysis. As it is noted, the talk show has been the focus for some previous academic commentary, but most work ignores that the hybrid genre of talk shows makes the talk popular. In Munson's argument [5], there is a blurring of boundaries, but here Munson is not referring to general cultural categories, for example, reality-fiction, information-entertainment. It is the organization of the set, the camerawork, and the movement from the stage to the studio audience that technically construct the "co-presence" of this experience. Two further significant points are made: first, that this is a genre that prefers particular ways of speaking, defined as anecdotal story telling; and second, that the composition of the studio audience and indeed the target market for the show is overwhelmingly academic staff. At the same time, there is a blurring of boundaries in the genre between program host and TV audience. This changes the

news formats, as well as in audience participation programs. Thus talk shows deliver a new kind of public forum that allows a diversity of voices to be heard. More generally, these are voices of ordinary people who are permitted, in this genre, to present a challenge to the status of expertise. Let's look at some examples.

III. THE ANALYSIS OF THE THREE REPRESENTATIVE TALK SHOW PROGRAMS

From the very first week of his Conversation Piece television show in November 1967 [7], Phil Donahue offered what would become a much-imitated talk show formula: He used controversial, naughty material to prompt a "public-service" discussion. After launching his first show with celebrated atheist Madlyn Murray O'Hair [8] he wound up the first week by asking viewers whether they thought children's dolls should include genitals, as some sexual revolution activists were advocating. The genre of talk shows did serve a valuable purpose by airing serious topics that were difficult to talk about in public. Thus, in the 1990s, talk shows became the most popular genre on American TV, citing in particularity of Oprah Winfrey. Driven by the search for diversified programming, Chinese TV stations are resorting to cloning, or the selective coping of TV formats, whereby the Chinese attempt to localize successful overseas programs. One startling example is the program 'Tell It Like It Is', (Shi Hua Shi Shuo) on CCTV-1. Along with TV commercials, this talk show is a telling window on the attitudes and mindsets of a country's culture. CCTV's regular slot 'Tell It Like It Is' is a show that certainly presents most TV audience a good view on what the ordinary folk are talking about in present day China. The director of the program claims 'Tell It Like It Is' is inspired by the U.S. talk show *The Oprah Winfrey Show* [9]. He says that he wants to create a show that would be light relief for the viewing public, broadcasting debates between the studio audience of 100 people, along with a host and special guests. The program hit the air in March 1996, and since then, the show has covered topics including divorce, care of the elderly, life in Tibet, test tube babies, pandas, AIDS, and drug use in China. The subjects are chosen after careful market research by an in-house team of reporters who try and closely follow what is preoccupying the Chinese public. The production team understands that their primary goal is to explore subjects and life experiences on the basis of the development of the discussion of social issues. Two episodes saw a Beijing woman Liu Meiling talk about her work lobbying for ordinary people, and her letter-writing campaign to government departments, and an appearance by Yang Maobing, a consultant on substance abuse in Yunnan who has helped many heavy drug users quit over the last five years. The citizen's friend Liu told the audience that she felt a compelling sense of civic responsibility that led her to give her advice to various city units to encourage them to

give better service, and help them learn about the thoughts of the citizens in their care. She said she believed society would benefit more if citizens spoke up about their needs and ideas. Drug consultant Yang told stories about studies he conducted in the U.S. that revolutionized his thinking in the treatment of drug addicts, and his decision to adopt group behavior correction methods in his treatment in Yunnan Province. The studio audience was encouraged to ask questions and give opinions on the attitudes they were listening to. Through "Tell It Like It Is", a variety of voices can be heard, airing different opinions. It comes in an honest, tolerant, and understanding way, with host Mr. Cui Yongyuan's excellent skills building the show into one of the most successful on the airwaves. His intelligence and humor adds a strong sense of social responsibility and trust to the show - and it lacks the mud slinging of the original *Oprah*.

And this program has a talk show format similar to the "The Oprah Winfrey Show". "Tell It Like It Is", (Shi Hua Shi Shuo) on CCTV-1 does have an impact. It affects the way people view the relationship between state and society by addressing critical issues which don't make the system look good. This is partly a reflection of a culture and a rapidly bring about "regime change". This is also partly a reflection of the Party's awareness of the necessity of allowing the masses to vent their dissatisfaction with social ills, like petty corruption, through such shows. These shows will never be a "60 Minutes" type of investigative reporting. Those who put these shows out know they can only go so far-call it "pushing the envelope with Chinese characteristics". If no one in the central government is explicitly saying it can not be done, Chinese producers will confidently keep taking small liberating steps forward. If they go too far, their show gets pulled off the air. This show has people speaking their minds on topics once considered too touchy and taboo to be publicly to be publicly discussed, like "Should parents beat their children?" The genre of talk shows plays a crucial role in the performance of talk because it creates an effect of "fluid spectatorship". (Munson, 1993) [6]. The hybrid genre of talk shows permits the TV audience to play different roles between hosts and audience. At the same time, the genre that prefers particular ways of speaking, defined as anecdotal story telling have the TV audience make some remarks on controversial social issues without hesitation.

Another typical example is the program hosted by Chen Luyu. Chen Luyu is an unlikely revolutionary. Known as "China's Oprah," the 35-year-old mainland-born TV star's live-audience talk show at that time, "A Date With Luyu," is pushing the envelope of the Chinese small screen. Featured on the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite Television Channel, Chen's program brings the lives of ordinary people and celebrities into the living rooms of Chinese city dwellers, and has revolutionized China's once stodgy TV scene in

the process. So both Chinese and western audience are fascinated to see celebrities telling very human stories. Talk shows present a genre of blurring of boundaries. Then television talk shows create an ersatz community without any of the social and personal responsibilities that are attached to real life.

However, there are times when you would like to quit talking or reading, and just sit back and listen to what people say so you can just shoot them sly smiles, laugh at them, or even scream at ridiculous opinions. If those are the moments you enjoy, then 'Qiangqiang San Ren Xing' is the show for you. As the name might suggest, *Qiangqiang San Ren Xing* is a show of three people. Hosted by a famous talk show host Dou Wentao, each episode features two guests - famous people from different walks of life who share the common quality of eloquence. Every weekday they spend 30 minutes hanging out, talking about hot news and topics. They are always eager to give their personal opinions, all the while managing to avoid falling into the category of mainstream criticism. With random storytelling, topics move from dimension to dimension stirring the imaginations of the participants and the audience. Under Dou's sensitive and sometimes sarcastic leadership, the guests share bold personal opinions with the audience, and together build an open and easy environment for expressing views and opinions. The show is for relaxing, for laughs, and to provide interesting information through normal points of view.

Launched in April 1998, the show has never had pretensions about delving deeply into topics, or trying to reach a definite conclusion. Instead, it just works to entertain through the breadth of topics, the excitement of the audience, and the chemistry between Dou Wentao and his guests. Thanks to the hard work by the production team, this show has become one of the most popular on Phoenix TV.

The range of subjects covered by each 30-minute show is staggering, to say the least. For example, the July 8th installment discussed, among other things: a recently released movie where two strangers have vivid dreams of each other; illegal drugs and their effects on people's minds; a police sting led by the Taipei mayor on urban entertainment venues; Bill Clinton's recent invitation to open a Chinese apartment block; and the unveiling of a new rhyme that reveals what people think of maintaining relationships with officials.

In spite of the dizzying range of subjects, the host managed to lead his two guests from topic to topic and thought to thought smoothly. The well-selected guests and the host usually make a great team, offering different backgrounds, viewpoints, with humor and emotion - all crammed together into a show that lets you sit back and enjoy the ride. Unfortunately, this long-running talk show presented by Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV has been canceled on September 13rd, 2017, after nearly 20 years.

IV. CONCLUSION

The appearance of the talk show phenomenon arouse some scholars' attention. They started to make some research on the features of talk show. According to Andrew Tolson [10], [11], talk show has three defining features. First, this talk has some affinities with the patterns of verbal interaction normally found in everyday conversation. Second, however, unlike ordinary conversation, this talk must be understood as "institutional;" that is, talk produce in an institutional setting. Third, unlike any other kind of institutional talk, this talk is produced for, and oriented toward, an "overhearing audience" that is, whatever else might be happening in the studio, there is always a wider audience which is not co-present, invisible and usually unheard.

Verbal interaction can be fallen into two types of talk, institutional talk and ordinary conversation. Institutional talk has been previously been studied in a variety of contexts such as classrooms, courtrooms, and clinical interviews. But talk shows can be regarded as one form of institutional talk while bearing the features of ordinary conversation.

The paper aims to offer a quick snapshot of talk show phenomenon at that time in China. The appearance of the talk show phenomenon, and its impact, origins of its saga will be studied in this paper. It's beyond doubt that CCTV, Phoenix's flagship Chinese Channel ranks second only in popularity to CCTV-1, and ahead of all the other CCTV channels as well as, all of them empathize with but which have a fresh and distinctive flavor to talk-shows. The three representative talk show programs and their anchors mentioned above have become a household story. Talk show culture was enormously popular with Chinese of all ages and economic backgrounds, partly as an entertaining freak show and partly because it represented a release from cultural restraints. Some talk shows purported to offer a populist and political culture in China at the turn of the 21st century was shaped in part by media talk shows. As long as people turn on a TV set, they can watch talk show without any difficulty. Besides, it would seem that some city dwellers are entertaining themselves with inter-net talk shows. Internet chat rooms provided an instant, global conversation with unpredictable partners and outcomes. Killing time in an internet chat room for most web fans has

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