Disciplining Desiring Subjects through the Remodeling of Masculinity: A Case Study of a Chinese Reality Dating Show

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Abstract
If You Are the One, the most watched dating show in China, caused a heated public debate following its debut in 2010, resulting in two government notices being issued regarding the regulation of dating shows. Using textual and intertextual analysis of the show and the public debate surrounding it, this article scrutinizes the transformation, following government regulation, of the construction of masculinity on the show. Drawing on Lisa Rofel’s narrative of “desiring China” and Robert P. Weller’s concept of “responsive authoritarianism,” this article shows how the tension between the market logic of the Chinese media and their political ownership is played out through the negotiation and mobilization of the meaning of gender. This article therefore also sheds light on larger political, economic, and sociocultural configurations in contemporary China.

Keywords
masculinity, desiring China, responsive authoritarianism, reality dating show

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Accompanied by a light show and stirring music, a male candidate, hoping to secure a date, is introduced to a panel of 24 single women. He introduces himself with several previously prepared video clips about himself and then takes questions from the women. During this introduction, the women on stage decide if he is “date worthy” with the help of a self-proclaimed psychologist named Le Jia.¹ If they are not interested, they turn off the light in front of them. There are another two rounds of interaction and if any lights are still on for the candidate after the third round, he can choose a woman for a date. If not, he has to leave the stage, accompanied by the sorrowful song, “Sadly, It Is Not You” 可惜不是你.

This is the basic format of the dating show If You Are the One 非诚勿扰 (hereinafter referred to as IYAO),² which airs on Jiangsu Provincial TV. Inspired by the British show Take Me Out, it first appeared on Chinese television screens in early 2010 and quickly became the most watched entertainment program nationwide (CSM Media Research, 2011). As a lucrative staple of the primetime landscape, IYAO gave birth to dozens of TV shows with similar formats, launching “the era of the TV dating show” in the Chinese television industry (Sohu.com, 2011). From the 368 episodes of IYAO aired between January 2010 and September 2012 (the period under consideration in this article), approximately 800 out of 1,840 male participants succeeded in going on a date with one of the women contestants. While there has been no follow-up study of these couples, in an article in Henan shangbao 河南商报, the production team claimed that about thirty of these couples eventually married, which, according to the article, is not impressive for a Chinese dating show. With “an alleged success rate of only 3.7 percent” (Henan shangbao, 2013), the popularity of the show obviously did not lie in its success as a matchmaking service. Rather, it was its ability to instigate public debate that attracted viewers. The controversy it raised led to a general tightening of censorship of Chinese dating shows. On July 9, 2010, a “Notice on Further Regulating TV Programs about Marriage, Love, and Friendship” and a “Notice on Enhancing the Management of TV Programs on Intimacy and Romance” were released by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), which resulted in substantial changes to the show both in format and content.

Building on Lisa Rofel’s (2007) narrative of “desiring China” and Daniela Stockmann’s (2012) development of Robert P. Weller’s (2008) concept of “responsive authoritarianism,” this article explores the significance of government regulation and its impact on the show by juxtaposing the masculinities constructed in the show before and after regulation. In the following sections, I begin with a discussion of “desiring China” under a regime of “responsive authoritarianism,” and then provide a brief background on IYAO.
After that, I scrutinize the transformation of masculinities on the show before and after regulation. By demonstrating how anxieties surrounding desire were initially commodified by media practitioners to help contribute to the program’s ratings, and then negotiated to cater to the needs of the party-state through a reworking of the meaning of manhood, this article concludes that Chinese commercialized media have relative autonomy in the national project of “desiring China.”

Reflexive Construction of Desiring Subjects in Chinese Media

A huge ratings hit, as well as a source of controversy, IYAO has led to an explosion of relevant domestic research. Among the more than 200 journal articles on the show as of 2013, nearly half explore its popularity by focusing on its novel format (e.g., Zhao and Zhang, 2011; Han, 2011), while others largely take the controversy surrounding the show as a point of departure for discussing media censorship (Yu, 2011; Zhan, 2010). At the same time, academic attention abroad has been burgeoning. There have been a couple of introductory notes on the show’s format and the dating show phenomenon in general (Li, 2010; Wang, 2011), but Wu Jing (2012) offers a more substantial and insightful investigation into how female individualization is mediated through the interplay between freedom and constraint in a rapidly changing China. Additionally, by examining how women are represented in the show, Li Luzhou (2015) examines the gender politics of contemporary Chinese society. Focusing less on gender, Shuyu Kong (2013) points out that the show has created a public space for the communication of “lifestyle politics” among urban Chinese youth. Sun Wanning (2014) argues that the show’s popularity reflects a palpable anxiety about marriage and romance, particularly among China’s emerging middle class. Song Geng and Derek Hird (2014: 255) note that the performance of manhood in IYAO is regulated by the accumulation of economic, social, and/or cultural capital.

As pivotal as these findings are, no study has yet explored the significance and influence of government regulation of dating shows. As an entertainment program with no political pretentions, IYAO enjoys a certain degree of editorial, personal, and financial independence even under China’s strict regime of ideological control. This relative operational autonomy, or “semi-independent” space (Huang, 2000), tends to destabilize media practices in a system where the media are still subject to state control (Xu, 2013). As I shall show in the following sections, the transformation that IYAO underwent under government regulation exemplifies the power interplay between media commercialization and political censorship in the Chinese media industry.
I argue that masculinities constructed in the show not only represented the lived experience of China’s people, but also became part of an organized political discourse shaped by state power. In postsocialist China, media control is an important mechanism of what Weller (2008) terms “responsive authoritarianism.” According to Weller (2008: 128), to maintain one-party rule, the Chinese party-state has developed a number of innovative techniques to present the government as being responsive to public opinion. The mechanism to accommodate popular demands into policy-making is shaped by governmental responses of tolerance, responsiveness, persuasion, and repression (Chin, 2012; Reilly, 2012; Cairns, 2013). Because the key issue in this dynamic is how to receive and respond to public demand, media control becomes a crucial part of the responsive authoritarian regime (Nathan, 2003). In her investigation of media marketization in China, Stockmann notes that market-based media in China help the government strike a balance between tolerance and control in maintaining regime stability. The Chinese media enhance the state’s responsiveness not only by functioning as the party’s eyes and ears to help communicate public opinion to the party, but also by serving as a mouthpiece for the party to disseminate information aimed at changing people’s political beliefs (Stockmann, 2012: 6). Moreover, the media’s perceived disassociation from the state and their relative autonomy enhances a marketized media’s persuasiveness in shaping people’s opinions in favor of the official line (Stockmann, 2012: 20).

The rise of media responsiveness in contemporary Chinese society coincides with the national project that Rofel has termed “desiring China” (Rofel, 2007). According to Rofel, to overcome China’s socialist past, as well as to facilitate its capitalist modernization, both the state and its people in the post-Mao era have been engaged in “the construction of citizen-subjects operating through sexual, material and affective self-interest” (Rofel, 2007: 11). Since the creation of postsocialist subjects requires not just the emancipation but also the regulation of desire, desire becomes the key site where both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world (Rofel, 2007). By Rofel’s definition, desire is “a historically, socially, and culturally produced field of practices” (14) that includes, but is not confined to, the category of sexual desire. As the cultural practice of desire in China is primarily about public narratives and the postsocialist reality they have constructed, public culture plays the most prominent role in justifying and encouraging the longing for material and affective desires (Rofel, 2007). At the same time, with both the domination and opposition it encompasses, public culture also functions to curb any excess and to discipline “desiring subjects” by meaningfully defining, negotiating, and denying various embodiments of desire (21).
The narrative of “desiring China” can be regarded as an extended description of the mechanism of governmentality. Defined as “an art of government” that conditions concrete “acts of government” (Dean, 1999: 28), governmentality encompasses the institutionalized mentalities, calculations, and technologies that circumscribe our collective understanding of how to govern and be governed (Torfing, 2012: 66). Thus, as Mitchell Dean points out, to analyze government is to “analyse those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (Dean, 1999: 12). Aspirations, interests, and beliefs are not only produced by promoting desire at various sites but also disciplined through the repressive capacity of the state (Bell, 2006). In the Chinese context, where the search for a cosmopolitan humanity becomes a national project mainly conducted through the remaking of public culture (Rofel, 2007), media as an institutional site become not only a venue where hegemonic knowledge about desire is reproduced and reinforced but also an arena where resistance and challenge to this normative knowledge can occur. Effectively problematizing the relation of culture and power, Foucault’s theory of governmentality is useful for exploring the power dynamics of public culture. Developed under the umbrella of governmentality with a clear delineation of the political, social, and cultural transformation before and after China’s economic reform, the narrative of “desiring China” is tailored specifically to the Chinese context and is therefore a suitable interpretative tool for this case study.

In post-Mao China, particularly with the deepening of globalization and consumerism, male-manifested desire for fame, women, and wealth is not only legitimized, but is also rendered into a connection between masculinity and modernity (Zhong, 2000; Zhang, 2010). The literature on the representation of Chinese masculinities in various media sites, such as men’s magazines (Song and Lee, 2010, 2012; Chen, 2014), TV dramas (Lü, 2009; Song, 2010), TV reports on male athletes (Zhang, 2014), and web romance (Feng, 2013), explicates how men are projected as desiring and desired subjects in postsocialist China, mainly with features such as being romantic and materially successful, and how this projection serves as a societal force to create needs, longings, and aspirations. However, how the meaning of manhood is employed in disciplining desire in contemporary China remains largely underexplored. As a dating show, IYAO draws heavily on the discourse of romance, which, according to Jan Teurlings (2004: 240), is “a technology of gender” that creates norms of masculinity and femininity. Since the gender politics of the show are usually packaged within the rhetoric of romantic preferences, expressions of longing, aspiration, and interest become a focus of the televisual discourse. Correspondingly, the dating show can also be regarded as a venue in
which cultural struggles over legitimate and illegitimate desires are communicated to—and largely manipulated by—the government through a (re)working of the meaning of manhood and womanhood. Sexual desire is one of the motivations to participate in a dating show. However, since the government had no intention or reason to intervene insofar as there have been no erotic scenes on *IYAO*, the government regulation that I refer to had little to do with sexual desire. Therefore, my study focuses on material desire that, interestingly, was the primary type of desire targeted by government regulation.

My study is primarily concerned with an analysis of the images and texts of *IYAO*. Based on tapes and transcripts of the show from its beginning in 2010 until October 2012, I have conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the discursive construction of masculinity. My study also includes various discursive practices circulating around the texts themselves, such as media reports, online discussions, comments from opinion makers, and government discourse, to help illustrate how the meaning of the televisual discourse is mediated at different cultural sites.

**The Spectacular Rise of a Dating Show**

Debuting on January 15, 2010, *IYAO* took only a couple of weeks to earn one of the highest ratings nationwide (CSM Media Research, 2011). In the first half of 2010, the show broke ratings records with some 50 million people watching every episode, an audience second only to the Evening News Broadcast of China Central Television (CCTV) (Wong, 2011).

As an emerging rating contender, *IYAO* inspired copycat shows. In the first half of 2010, twelve new dating shows were launched by Chinese provincial satellite TV stations, with similar, though not identical formats. For instance, on *Love to Love* 爱情连连看 on Zhejiang Provincial TV, female contestants were selected on the spot by computer screening; on *Marriage Battle* 婚姻保卫战, another dating show produced by Zhejiang Provincial TV, all the female participants recruited were divorcées; in *Bed of Roses* 称心如意 on Hunan Provincial TV, contestants’ mothers were invited to join the show to help their sons or daughters pick dates. Having become a primetime programming staple, reality dating shows dominated the ratings in many of the most coveted time slots in 2010 (Han, 2011).

Not surprisingly, the runaway success of *IYAO* also generated its own publicity. There were shows about its behind-the-scenes production, newspaper columns offering updates, and online fans clubs devoted to following every word or whisper about the participants on the show. Several contestants have been categorized as celebrities by Baidu Encyclopedia because of the fame they achieved via the show.
The popularity of IYAO was not unexpected. With the palpable sense of concern pervading the so-called unmarried crisis in recent years, an entire industry providing a plethora of products and services to help people solve dating and marital problems has sprung up (Gaetano, 2010). Against this background, IYAO not only drove the second wave of Chinese TV dating shows, but also received more public attention than any of its predecessors. Literally translated as “if you are not sincere, please do not bother to come,” with an interesting tongue-in-cheek effect, the name Feichengwurao was borrowed from Chinese movie director Feng Xiaogang’s box office success of 2008 and its sequel in early 2010. A vivid account of the romance between an unlikely couple coming together through a tortuous yet hilarious series of blind dates, these two romantic comedies were well received by the public. Building on the success of these namesake movies, IYAO attracted much public attention, spurring an upsurge of interest in the burgeoning dating industry.

However, accompanied by intense media hype and fandom, IYAO was paradoxically criticized for “being insincere” in quite a few media reports. Some participants were uncovered as actors and actresses hired by the show, hence diminishing its claim to authenticity. It was also revealed that some successful dates were just for show and that a few newly formed couples split up right after they went off the stage (Henan shangbao, 2013). Furthermore, some opinion makers and moral guardians, including well-known columnists, educators, media commentators, and government officials, raised their voices against the prevailing materialism exhibited in a show that allegedly aimed to promote “sincere romance” (Shengming shibao, 2010). For example, in the third episode of the show, a female contestant by the name of Ma Nuo rejected the offer of a bicycle ride from an unemployed suitor by overtly claiming, “I’d rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bicycle.” Shocked by her undisguised materialistic attitude, many netizens, especially young males, put up plenty of online posts excoriating Ma Nuo and the gold-digger image she represented on the show. Three months later, when the sensation Ma unleashed had barely faded away, another contestant, by the name of Zhu Zhenfang, also found herself the target of scorn when she refused to shake hands with a male contestant, explaining that her basic criterion for a future boyfriend was that he must earn at least 200,000 yuan (approximately US$32,700) a month, which the man apparently did not. Such examples of blatant materialism exhibited on the show aroused heated debates in online forums, newspapers, and TV reports, eventually culminating in new governmental regulations for dating shows issued in July 2010.
Before Regulation: Materialist Discourse on Masculinities

With the commercial evolution of China’s media over the past two-and-a-half decades, the rhetoric and practices of market competition, commercialism, and populism have been introduced into this industry (Latham, 2000; Barmé, 1999; Shirk, 2010). To help compete with CCTV, the government television station, which retains a dominant position in broadcasting news, many provincial television stations have concentrated on entertainment programs (Jian and Liu, 2009). Drawing on popular genres such as soap operas, game shows, and documentaries, and performing well in a competitive, multichannel environment (Hill, 2005), reality shows have become a genre favored by many networks in China since the 2000s (Lü, 2011).

As noted by Richard M. Huff (2006: 32), two characteristics that make a popular reality show are “good storytelling and an interesting cast.” In addition, casting plays a decisive role in creating the conflicts that drive the drama in a show. The phenomenal success of IYAO confirms this. While IYAO is presented to the audience in the form of studio talk, the production team’s meticulous effort in obtaining and shaping identifiable characters begins as early as with the recruitment of the participants. The production team has been candid about its intention to select particularly expressive and assertive participants. Li Zheng, the producer of the show, explained in a news report that participating in a TV dating show differs from making friends via dating websites, first of all because the participants have to face a camera (Su and Mei, 2010). Therefore, having the courage and ability to express oneself were the paramount criteria in selecting the participants. Li also revealed that to make the show more intriguing, at least one of the five male participants selected for each episode was supposed to be “daring enough to express certain values” (Su and Mei, 2010). Thus, Li implicitly acknowledged that values were consciously employed to attract an audience. The participants’ professions were also taken into account when selecting them. For instance, the seat for female participant number 11, which occupies the central position onstage, was always reserved for a model. As the show became a mega hit, being a participant became a viable option for star wannabes to get exposure on primetime television, so their behavior was more likely to be molded with a “strong identity” to get more media exposure.

In addition to featuring a group of caustic and daring participants, a well-orchestrated production also exploited the show’s potential for controversy. For example, to make the self-representations of the male participants more “watchable,” the three video clips were meticulously edited to bring out the extreme or the spectacular. Kept in the dark before the studio talk about the
final version of their clips, male participants were often surprised or even outraged when they saw themselves being portrayed in such a reductionist way. “I was surprised to know I could be invited, for an ordinary person like me would not arouse audience interest. However, later on I found out I had been turned into a part of a freak show,” said participant Yan Heng (2011) on his personal blog, angrily accusing the production team of depicting him as an “arrogant and rude member of the ‘second-generation rich’” 富二代.8

During the studio shootings, the production team also tried to make the show even more watchable. For instance, a director was put in charge of helping the nervous male participants relax during the studio shootings so that they could be more confident about “speaking of their own convictions” (Su and Mei, 2010) onstage. In addition to the host, Meng Fei, the show also included a “guest expert” named Le Jia. Bearing an authoritative air as the founder of the Color Personality Center of China and the first Chinese color psychologist,9 he was famous for his sharp, sarcastic, and outspoken manner, which sometimes led to on-the-spot arguing on the show. Through the collective effort of the participants, the color psychologist, and the production team, IYAO became a site where controversies were deliberately generated by audacious performances and the parading and confronting of various values and norms. Among the diverse and contested voices, materialism, as exemplified by a growing focus on cars, houses, wealth, and income, began to play a crucial role in the discursive construction of masculinity. In the following section, I analyze in more detail the materialistic discourse on masculinity on the show before government regulation.

**Cars and a House Matter**

Before presenting themselves in the television studio, male participants were required to make three video clips covering their personal profile, romantic biography, and interviews with friends and family. Since most male participants failed to survive long enough to have all their video clips viewed, the first video, with the participants’ personal profile, was regarded as crucial in shaping the female participants’ impression of them. Hence, this part was usually guided by the male participants’ own idealized versions of themselves. In contemporary Chinese society, courtship and marriage are regarded as important avenues for upward mobility, and women are expected to marry up into a better financial situation (Farrer, 2002; Osburg, 2013; Luo and Sun, 2014). Consequently, wealthy men often have more choices in the marriage market, and affluence becomes a very favorable quality in a man. This was reflected in the videos. Accompanied by the voice-over of the male participants, their self-presentations were displayed through captions on the screen,
and their name, occupation, and age were briefly introduced at the beginning of the video clip, with their houses and cars in particular constituting a conspicuous part in this section. Those who saw their residence as one of their advantageous traits chose to stage themselves in their lavishly decorated, spacious living rooms, while others exhibited themselves driving a car with the car’s logo prominently displayed on the steering wheel. Male participants who had neither a house nor a car to present usually delineated their plan to purchase such things in an almost apologetic tone, stressing the feasibility of achieving that goal by the time they got married so as to provide their future families with an adequate material base, as several participants put it. Occupying a central place in the self-presentation of the male contestants, cars and houses functioned as the primary topic for the discussions that followed, and in some cases led to impassioned debates in the studio.

One such case occurred in the April 17, 2010, episode when a 24-year-old lawyer named Liu Weidong fervidly elaborated on his plan to purchase a car and a house within three years. Facing criticism from a female participant for “being too vulgar and boring,” he defended himself by stating that “a good girl deserves the right to ask her man for cars and houses, and that is what a man is for.” His response received thunderous applause from the studio audience. In most of the male participants’ presentations of themselves, cars and houses were normalized as not only a prerequisite to establishing a family, but also as a man’s duty to his beloved and a justified request from a decent girl. Some female participants overtly expressed their desire for a luxurious lifestyle containing cars and houses. For example, in addition to refusing a friendly handshake with a prospective suitor, Zhu Zhenfang was also notorious for repeatedly articulating her aim to “marry a man who owns a mansion.” Female participants also sometimes openly asked the male participants if their car brands started with the letter B (for Benz or BMW). Quite often, this caused a stir among the studio audience. By depicting their ideal lifestyles, participants thus constructed the possession of houses and cars as an important criterion for measuring a man’s desirability.

Money Talks

Level of income was another favorite topic in the first video presentations of male participants, with the figures brazenly displayed on the screen, sparking a series of discussions on masculinity. A case in point would be Li Zhifeng, a real estate developer who appeared in the June 6, 2010, episode. While expressing a strong antipathy to what he called gold diggers 拜金女, he nevertheless paraded his seven-million RMB annual income along with his extensive travel experience and a large collection of branded perfumes. In
defense of his seemingly paradoxical behavior, he stated that he wanted to be admired by his future spouse as a capable man, and that his income was “one of the most direct ways to demonstrate his own capability.” He added that “in times of war, soldiers go to the battlefield with the medals they have won; in peacetime, a man’s income is his medal.”

Thus, like soldiers’ medals, a substantial income was endowed with the symbolic meaning of victory and honor with reference to the masculine qualities of power, intelligence, and bravery. Accordingly, those who failed to make a good income were deemed losers in the battle of love. A striking example occurred in the February 26, 2010, episode, when Li Baobao, a 21-year-old estate agent, presented his life as a “Beijing drifter.” Having earned very little in the last two months, he resided in a five-square-meter basement and survived on only one meal a day. Several female participants expressed their admiration for his courage and perseverance after watching his video clip, among them, the female participant who previously criticized him for “his lack of a gentle disposition.” She apologized on the spot, and Li readily accepted her apology. For a while it looked as if warmth and gratitude were going to replace the previous sourness until the expert Le Jia chimed in with a nerve-wracking question: “Why do you think she is apologizing to you?” “I suppose she thinks I have a strong will,” Li hesitantly replied. “No, that’s not the reason. Let’s face cruel reality. If you were strong, she would never apologize to you. She apologizes just because you’re weak—very weak indeed. She feels sorry for hurting the weak, and that’s why she apologizes.” With a close-up showing the female participant’s tittering to hide her embarrassment, Le’s assertion seemed to be confirmed. Although the male contestant attempted to establish a strong self-image by demonstrating his iron determination, his effort was in vain because of his meager income.

In a fluid and competitive labor market, many young Chinese men are under pressure to “succeed.” Failing to become economically capable thus threatens their sense of masculinity and adulthood in very real ways (Kong, 2013). 

Talent and Hobbies Suck

Before government regulation, a man’s dating value on IYAO was primarily based on his potential to provide for his family. Therefore, having a talent or hobby that was not an avenue to wealth was largely regarded as unfavorable on IYAO, in sharp contrast to most of its foreign counterparts such as The Bachelor, Blind Date, and Streetmate (Teurlings, 2004; Ferris et al., 2007). The question of talent was rarely brought up in IYAO, and male
participants who tried to display their talents were usually kicked off the show in no time.

Some male participants even became a target of vilification and ridicule when presenting their talents. Wang Xiang, a participant in the second episode, on January 16, 2010, appeared on stage singing a song. His awkward performance got him a quick blackout, making him the first participant to last not even long enough to get his first video clip shown. He and Wang Qiaogeng, an alleged poet who knocked off a few doggerel lines of verse to demonstrate his literary talent, were rated among the top twelve “weirdos” 奇葩 in IYAO’s history according to Jiangsu TV’s official website (Jiangsu.com, 2010). In an interview, the show’s producer cautioned prospective participants against any display of talent: “If you are not a hundred percent confident of your performance, do not touch the ticking bomb” (Chongqing shibao, 2010).

IYAO ostensibly discouraged the display of talent because of the clumsy, amateurish performances of some of the participants. On closer inspection, the disdain for talent as a dilution of ambition and a distraction from success was quite palpable in the show. In the April 10, 2010, episode, Qi Zonghai showed up on the stage with a guitar on his back. Right after introducing himself as a 35-year-old man who looked like Guo Feng, a famous Chinese musician, Qi was attacked by the women. While one scornfully replied “Oh my goodness” when asked to comment on him, another female participant struck him down with a torrent of criticism: “I don’t like the way you dress yourself, and you don’t look like Guo Feng at all. As a 35-year-old man, why don’t you find something else to do rather than playing the guitar? You’ll have absolutely no future, and the woman with you will be doomed to suffer.”

Perceived as a potential hazard to their spouses’ well-being, having talent was even blamed for male participants’ failed relationships. In the April 4, 2010, episode, Wang Xingchen recounted a disappointing love affair, ascribing the unhappy outcome to the objection of his ex-girlfriend’s parents because of the disparity in wealth between the two families. His story struck a chord with Le Jia, the guest expert who himself had had a similar experience and who was eager to offer his insight “as a man who has gone through it all.” However, Le’s advice to the young man was primarily directed at his hobby of seal cutting:

Your hobby could make you feel like a civilized man, but it won’t help you find a girlfriend. Only when you have enough money can you be courageous enough to confront the girl’s parents. If you’re engrossed in seal cutting and don’t try your best to make money, you’re going to stay poor and end up being miserable.

In this way, IYAO reinforced the equation of an unprofitable hobby with leading an idle and irresponsible life of self-abandonment, and making money as the only way to pursue personal happiness and find a girlfriend.
The Call for Regulation

The rampant materialism exhibited on the show generated a variety of responses among the public. The controversy triggered by the show in the first half of 2010 can best be epitomized by the vehement public reaction to the female participants, Ma Nuo and Zhu Zhenfang in particular. Millions of enraged Chinese netizens not only nicknamed Ma and Zhu as the “BMW lady” and the “Mansion lady” respectively, but also conducted extensive Internet searches for their private information. Photos of Ma before her plastic surgery were spread all over the Internet, and Zhu faced losing her job because her employer believed that the revelation of her place of employment could potentially harm the company.12 Succumbing to tremendous public pressure, both of them ended up ignominiously quitting the show.

Contradictory opinions were also expressed. Supporters of Ma and Zhu argued that they became a target of public censure simply because they spoke the unspeakable: “How wrong could Ma Nuo be? She is just too candid, unlike those who are slick and sly,” commented one of the 184,000 registered members of Ma Nuo’s online fan club (Weiaimanuo.com, 2011).

Other opinions about the show’s materialistic values were also voiced. At the China TV Host Summit at the Sixteenth Shanghai Television Festival, Cao Kefan, a renowned host with Shanghai Dragon TV, expressed some of the fiercest opposition to the show. He criticized the show for hiring aspiring models and actors/actresses to put on staged discussions. Claiming that the show “goes against the mainstream values of Chinese society” (Dongfang zaobao, 2010), he concluded that the craze for the show would vanish before long. Similarly, Wang Xiaoaya, a famous hostess on CCTV, accused the show of “magnifying unconventional values” (Dongfang zaobao, 2010).

Others had completely different opinions. Acknowledging the existence of identity fraud in the show, Ma Ka Fai, a news commentator from Hong Kong Phoenix TV, contended that the values exhibited in the program were not only authentic but also prevalent in society. Gu Jun, a professor at Shanghai University, seconded Ma’s opinion, stating cynically that “this show is a reflection of social reality; nowadays, how many girls would like to sit on the back of a bicycle after all?” (Dongfang zaobao, 2010).

Triggering heated public debate, IYAO put China’s media authority on alert and incurred state intervention. Two government notices were released in July 2010 with the aim of regulating dating programs. IYAO specifically was criticized for “deviating from the socialist core value system and damaging the image of the broadcast media” (People’s Daily, 2010b). Several major media outlets of the party-state, such as People’s Daily and CCTV, joined in the chorus of criticism, denouncing the show’s vulgarity and negative values. Obliged to meet the censorship and propaganda demands of the government,
Jiangsu Provincial TV promptly issued a response on the official website of People’s Daily on June 10, announcing its strong support for the guidelines set out by SARFT and expressing its resolution to raise the quality of \textit{IYAO} accordingly (People’s Daily, 2010a). Since then, extensive changes have been made in both the format and content of the show, albeit gradually.

\textbf{After Regulation: Ideal Masculinity in the Remaking}

According to the SARFT regulations, the following points should be adhered to by television companies when producing and broadcasting dating shows: (1) the participants should be carefully vetted; identity fraud should be strictly prohibited; (2) instead of focusing on “the second-generation rich,” or actors/actresses and models, participants should encompass a wider range of the population; morally provocative participants should not be invited on the show; (3) dating shows should be strictly censored before broadcasting and rebroadcasting; live broadcasting is not allowed; (4) vulgar topics involving sex, materialism, and unhealthy, incorrect viewpoints on marriage should be avoided; and (5) moral guidance should be provided to the participants; the host/hostess should be carefully chosen (SARFT, 2010).

The \textit{IYAO} production team introduced several modifications to the show in order to comply with these provisions, including airing special episodes devoted to rural migrant workers and including the economically disadvantaged or socially marginalized among the participants (Sun, 2014). Of all the formal changes to the show, the introduction of a new, politically correct guest expert was the most visible. Huang Han, a female professor from the Jiangsu Provincial Party School, joined Le Jia to provide advice from “a woman’s perspective,” as the production team claimed. Making her debut in the June 27, 2010, episode, she prefaced her remarks by introducing her mission as “bringing romance to a happy ending” 成人之美. Huang’s opening remarks portended \textit{IYAO}’s transformation from melodramatic entertainment full of emotional conflicts and sarcastic comments to a functional dating setting, one instilled with soft sentiments and a romantic undertone. As we shall see in the following section, the shift in theme, together with the modification in production and casting, resulted in a drastic change in the construction of masculinities on the show.

\textit{Diversifying Role Models}

First of all, cars and income were not only removed from male participants’ self-representations after the imposition of regulations, but also largely avoided in talk in the studio. A delineation of the male participants’
individual characteristics, experiences, and talents filled this newly created vacuum. While having an unprofitable hobby or talent had been despised in the past, and even cautioned against, they now marked the male participants as someone with a romantic outlook and a positive attitude toward life. *IYAO* began to promote these subjects and they became a regular part of the show in October 2012. Male participants whose performance fell apart were no longer ridiculed. Instead, they could expect comforting remarks from the amused guest experts. Putting on a skillful performance became an important way to display one’s masculine charm, winning not only enthusiastic applause from the audience but also praise from the host. In some cases, performances even became a “secret weapon” to sweep a girl off her feet. For example, in the June 10, 2012, episode, a treasury analyst by the name of Pu Shunfei won the heart of a girl well-known for her haughtiness by composing a song and dedicating it to her right on the spot. Following his success, which became something of a legend, the serenade became a template of courtship in *IYAO*.

Apart from talent and hobbies, the emphasis on a participant’s individual experience also gave rise to discussions of topics that were only distantly related to dating. The case of Lu Hongyi in the October 2, 2010, episode is a typical example. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Lu gave up his well-paying job as a lawyer in the United States and became a volunteer in a Chinese environmental organization. As an environmental activist, Lu expressed his determination to implement a low-carbon lifestyle by living without a car. He also announced his plan to adopt orphans instead of fathering his own children in a bid to help conserve energy. While not all the female participants were completely convinced by his plans for a family, they unanimously expressed admiration when Lu said that “a capable man should not forget to contribute to his country.” A similar belief was echoed by An Tian, another Harvard alumnus, who appeared in the March 26, 2011, episode. Having survived three rounds of interactions, An was about to pick one of the final two female participants when he posed his final question: “What would you do if you won $10 million in the lottery?” While one girl wanted to give her mother a better life, the other showed no intention of changing her lifestyle. Apparently neither of the replies satisfied An, and he decided to take neither of them out. “With such a large amount of money, you should either set up a private foundation or take care of orphans. You must have the spirit of ‘serving the people’,,” he explained, solemnly citing Mao Zedong. The two Harvard graduates’ glittering academic background lent weight to their articulation of values and worldviews, which, according to several media reports, led to a public reflection on self-interest and social responsibility (Shidai kuaibao, 2011; Luzhong chenbao, 2011).
Topics related to income and wealth were now handled cautiously, and the show was made more interesting by enriching the characterization of its participants in more nuanced ways. By providing a stage for individual expression and performance, masculinity was displayed through the male participants’ versatile talents, romantic inclinations, or strong sense of social responsibility. In this way, the regulated dating show toned down its previous materialist construction of masculinity.

Reworking Aspirations

Whereas before the government imposed regulations the show linked aspirationalism with masculinity, it now sought to downplay the materialistic overtones by reworking the notions of “dreams” and “success.” While previous expressions of materialist aspirations had been uncritically endorsed, they were questioned for the first time in the November 6, 2010, episode when a male participant announced that his ultimate goal in life was to “have so much money that he would never be able to spend it all.” In response to his statement, Professor Huang raised the question about how much money would be adequate for one to spend in his life, which apparently baffled the participant. Huang went on to expound on her question by stating that “financial worries could be best dispelled by curbing one’s desire for consumption,” thereby subtly implying her disapproval of his unrestrained materialism.

Whereas success had earlier referred exclusively to one’s career and material achievements, it was redefined to include personal happiness. This change was highlighted in the case of contestant Cao Yun in the September 12, 2010, episode. Explaining his reluctance to take on the pressure of starting his own business, Cao expressed his willingness to become a professional manager in the future. However, his career goal was apparently not acceptable to the female participants. Some women rebuked him for “not being enterprising” while others encouraged him to “restore his faith in himself.” Bewildered and annoyed, Cao was quickly rescued by the host, Meng, who claimed that he would have made the same choice. In support of Cao and Meng, Professor Huang argued that avoiding pressure did not necessarily mean one was weak and irresponsible; instead, under certain circumstances, it could be an indication of a man’s wisdom. The other “expert,” Le, joined the chorus by saying that the definition of “success” should be expanded to include the ability to live the way one wants and to take pleasure in it: “A billionaire’s life does not suit everyone,” he said. He concluded by declaring that “blindly seeking wealth could be suicidal.”

In some cases, personal happiness was promoted as an alternative life choice that supersedes material success. For instance, in the April 17,
2011, episode, a sales manager by the name of Li Qingchi professed that in doing business he was following his heart rather than weighing the material gains and losses. His viewpoint was challenged by Le with a quote from Bill Gates: “The world won’t care about your feelings until you become successful.”

Reminiscent of *IYAO*’s pragmatic or, in some sense, cynical style before regulation, this dynamic was altered when Meng quickly expressed his reservations about the quotation. Functioning as the bearer of the official discourse, Meng managed to veer the discussion away from pragmatism by modifying the quotation: “I’d say, those who love you care more about your feelings than your success.”

Aided by the host and guest expert, the obsession with material success was constructed not only as excessive desire but also as a threat to a sense of well-being. Instead, a pursuit of personal happiness was legitimated as a life choice associated with personal autonomy and individualism.

**Remolding Femininity**

Because femininity and masculinity are relational and interactional, the agency of women and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics need to be fully recognized to understand the meaning of manhood (Kimmel, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In the case of *IYAO*, the changing image of women has played a central role in reshaping masculinity.

The transformation of the representation and subjectivity of the female participants was first and foremost accomplished through the enhanced moral guidance of the host and guest experts. Whereas women’s obsession with material interests in a relationship had been taken for granted in *IYAO*’s discourse as part of the harsh reality of the market economy, it has been downplayed since regulation. In the episode of October 30, 2010, when asked to recount his failed romance, contestant Yuan Hengfang accused his girlfriend of cheating on him with a richer man, something that had become a cliché among several male participants in the show. However, both the host and the two guest experts argued against constructing women as unfaithful. As Le Jia said, “many men tend to conceal the flaws of their own personality by stressing their financial deficiencies, whereas women do not necessarily select men according to their financial situation.” In the October 7, 2012, episode, Meng, a host well-known as calm and poised, reacted with indignation when a female contestant by the name of Zhang Jing claimed that demanding material benefits from a boyfriend was a way to entice him to work harder. Meng criticized her for “being too pragmatic” 太实际. Considering the tongue-in-cheek joke he made when talking to, for example, Ma Nuo or Zhu Zhenfang in preregulation shows,
Meng’s outburst is significant. While his jokes in the earlier episodes had been morally ambiguous, the aim of his harsh comments postregulation was to chastise participants and deter them from making indiscreet remarks on materialism.

Additionally, the lineup of participants underwent significant changes. Once occupied by models and actresses, the center stage was now given to women from a wider range of career paths, although most were either well educated or financially well off. This shift has dramatically changed the representation of females in terms of fashion, tastes, personalities, and social values. Whereas *IYAO* had been used as a platform not only for romantic encounters but also for extravagant costumes, rude manners, and blatant materialism, it has now largely turned into “a site to educate women through upholding the opposite examples of female virtues” (Wu, 2012: 232).

The change in women’s images before and after regulation is epitomized by a twist on a quotation from Ma Nuo. To distance themselves from the former negative image of being gold diggers, many more recent female participants have repeatedly expressed a wish to “laugh on the back of a bicycle rather than cry in a BMW.” Among them, the most notable figure is Shen Si, who appeared in the September 11, 2011, episode. A pretty and intelligent 30-year-old woman who has a master’s degree from Stanford University and runs an IT company, Shen seemed to be too good to be marriageable in a Chinese society where women’s sexual choices are subject to the market logic of “marrying up” (Farrer, 2002: 52). When asked about her opinion of men who were financially mismatched with her, she claimed that she would stop her own BMW to get on the bicycle of her beloved. While getting out of her own BMW as a condescending gesture implies women’s self-reliance and self-dependence, a bicycle ride with a lover embodies the desire for a romantic relationship, which is particularly prevalent among higher-status women in China (Farrer, 2002: 216).

Whereas before regulation women were mostly depicted as enthusiastic about bargaining for a man with the best possible financial prospects, after regulation their desire for a caring, respectful, and romantic man was made into a prevalent theme by the collective effort of participants, guest experts, and the host. Arguments that potentially sabotage the moral discourse on the value of romantic love might occasionally occur, but the host’s remarks always help to contain and remedy these aberrant viewpoints. As femininity and masculinity are relational constructs, the transformation of the images of females in the setting of a dating show has led to a considerable change in the meaning of manhood.
Conclusion

Before government regulation, *IYAO* accentuated men’s material affluence as being paramount in the dating market. Male participants’ varied experiences on the show, which to a large extent hinged on their financial status, triggered a heated public debate and quite a few media reports. Drawing a large audience, *IYAO* has become a huge commercial success. Instigating public discussions on materialistic gender configurations informed by social inequality, the show caused uneasiness in the government, which has been increasingly responsive to the media. Regarding *IYAO* as a prospective breeding ground for discontent, media authorities eventually stepped in to identify and fix purported potential social problems before they led to social unrest. Complying with government regulations, *IYAO* was modified by reworking the meaning of manhood and its associated gender politics and moral standards.

The evolution of *IYAO* exemplifies the media’s restrained role in the national project of “desiring China.” Ever since China’s economic reform, aspirations and desires have been justified as part of universal human nature, and the mass media have imbued the public with longings for an idealized life that includes wealth, beauty, and success (Rofel, 2007). However, the apparent proliferation of options with regard to consumption and lifestyle is not equally accessible to all individuals due to China’s profound social stratification (Sun, 2004; Xiang and Shen, 2009). The sharp contrast between the aspirationalism endorsed by the political authorities and the unequal opportunities for upward mobility for each individual has led to much uncertainty, insecurity, and ambivalence. For instance, the inferior status of women in employment and wage structures has been exacerbated by China’s market capitalization (Wang Zheng, 2001; Latham, Thompson, and Klein, 2006; Shirk, 2010: 161). Under such disadvantaged circumstances, women are encouraged to view intimacy and marriage as a chance to improve their short-term and long-term material standing (Peletz, 2007: 58; Farrer, 2002: 193). Men are also under pressure in a social context in which a disadvantaged family background is directly linked to both financial inequality and sexual frustration (Kong, 2013: 138). While fierce market competition heightens career and financial uncertainty, it simultaneously intensifies both men’s and women’s hunger for intimacy in a society with changing moral practices and ethical discourses (Yan, 2003; Kleinman, 2011). The shift toward individualization in the domestic sphere and conjugal relationships intensifies the tensions, confusions, and conflicts in contemporary China, where a single version of collective ethics no longer dominates (Yan, 2009; Xiao, 2010; Hansen and Pang, 2008).
The unsettled context of “desiring China” endowed IYAO with a certain degree of agency. To help cope with—and strategize about—these sociocultural changes in the course of media commercialization, IYAO commodified general anxieties surrounding desire by engaging in materialistic discourses on masculinity. However, under the regime of responsive authoritarianism, Chinese media have had to evade and, in some cases, distract the public’s attention from the negative effects brought about by China’s capitalist turn, although prevalent materialism and deepening social stratification have aroused a growing concern among the public. With government intervention, IYAO had to modify its gendered rhetoric to contain and dissolve the collective anxiety in a desiring China. Continuing to work on drama and characterization as it always has, IYAO remains the most popular reality dating show in China. However, its effort to dilute a materialistic ideology by opening up room for different forms of masculinities has come at the expense of its popularity. Ever since government regulation, and with it decreasing public debates, the IYAO fad has gradually faded and since 2012 IYAO’s ratings have been trounced by new nondating reality shows. Since IYAO is no longer the center of attention, the restrictions on the show have gradually been loosened, and recently it has witnessed a resurgence of wealth fetishism and the commodification of human relationships in its construction of masculinity.

Through an examination of the transformation of masculinities on IYAO and the related public debates, this article offers insight into the complex power interplay between the media industry, the government, and the people of contemporary China, as well as the articulation of gender and social stratification. Discourse analysis has been the major method used in this study, but future research on audience reception of the show is needed to explore how the emotional engagement with the TV program influences the constitution and practice of masculinity in everyday lives.

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Notes
1. It was later discovered that Le had never received any formal training in psychology. The MBA he claimed to hold was granted by Armstrong University, a notorious American diploma mill.
2. Transcripts of IYAO have been translated by the author of this article.
3. Whether or not China is a postsocialist state has been heatedly debated in academia. For example, Frank Pieke (2009) has suggested it is “neosocialist.” However, since this article employs Rofel’s narrative of desiring China, I use the same term she does in her theorization.
4. This is when changes to its format were about to be made, aimed at reversing the dropping ratings after government regulation.
5. Following the initial rush in the wake of the success of IYAO, the number of dating shows dwindled a bit after 2011. While some programs, including Marriage Battle and Bed of Roses, have been cancelled because of unsatisfactory ratings, others such as IYAO and Love to Love have become reliable and staple items in the primetime lineup.
6. A web-based encyclopedia provided by Baidu, the largest Chinese-language search engine.
7. Driven by the hit show A Date with the Rose 玫瑰之约 by Hunan Television, more than twenty TV dating shows were aired in China from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This has been described as “the first wave of Chinese TV dating shows” (Jiang, 2011).
8. This term refers to the sons and daughters of the Chinese nouveau riche of the early years of China’s economic reform.
9. The Color Personality Center is a self-proclaimed research and training institution which offers courses on “four-color personality analysis,” derived from Hippocrates’ theory of the “four temperaments.”
10. A term referring to migrant workers, new college graduates, or artists from other parts of the country who do not have a registered permanent residence in Beijing, but reside in the city to pursue their dreams.
11. A traditional form of art originating in China, seal cutting 篆刻 refers to chiseling a pattern into the bottom of a seal, following a diagram of calligraphy or painting already drawn on it.
12. What happened to Ma Nuo and Zhu Zhenfang is part of a growing phenomenon known as a “human-flesh search engine” 人肉搜索, a widespread online hunt for and exposé of previously obscure, anonymous personal data about controversial figures.
13. The original words by Bill Gates are: “The world won’t care about your self-esteem. The world will expect you to accomplish something before you feel
good about yourself,” which could be rendered differently from Le’s Chinese version: “在你成功之前，这个世界没人在乎你的感受。”

14. Meng Fei’s original words were “我认为，爱你的人更在乎你的感受而不是 你的成功。”

15. According to CSM Media Research, *The Voice of China* 中国好声音 replaced *IYAO* as the most-watched Chinese entertainment program with a 6.76% rating, whereas the latter dropped to 1.63% in September 2012. One month later, modifications to the format of *IYAO* were implemented. However, this attempt to secure its ratings did not work. As new formats such as *I Am a Singer* 我是歌手 and *Where Are We Going, Dad?* 爸爸去哪儿 came out, *IYAO* never managed to top the ratings list again.

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