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59. Lu Jinbo, "Han Han."

60. Xu Zhiyuan, "Han Han shou tuichong shi yongzhong de shengli" (The adulation of Han Han shows the mediocrity of the public), <http://yule.sohu.com/20100511/n272049331.shtml> (accessed February 23, 2012).

61. <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Special/hhgou/Index.html> and <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/view/201104/227484.html> (accessed September 30, 2011).

62. "Wo de 2011" (My 2011), January 8, 2012, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4701280b0102dzqy.html (accessed February 23, 2012).

63. Wang Lijun, head of the Chongqing police, entered the US consulate on February 6, 2012 in Chengdu, Sichuan, asking for protection even as he leaked word that the wife of his boss, the ambitious "princeling" Bo Xilai, Party secretary of Chongqing and a member of the Political Bureau, was responsible for the murder of a British citizen. Shortly thereafter, Bo Xilai fell from power.

SIX

Are You the One?

The Competing Public Voices of China's Post-1980s Generation

Shuyu Kong

Ma Nuo did not expect to become notorious, even though she was bold enough to take part in *Are You the One?* (*Feicheng wurao*), a TV dating program recently launched by Jiangsu Satellite Television (JSTV). With its unusual format of twenty-four young women standing behind a string of podiums trying to decide, based on the performance of a single male contestant, whether they want to become his "girlfriend," the program quickly became the most talked about show in China.

During the January 17, 2010, episode, the highly attractive Ma was identified by Zhao Chen, a twenty-three-year-old freelance fashion magazine writer, as his favorite girl. When Zhao asked, "Are you willing to go out riding bicycles with me?" Ma, obviously unimpressed by this shy and slightly eccentric guy, giggled as she blurted out her cutting reply: "I would rather sit crying in a BMW!" Ma's offhand comment and shockingly materialistic attitude touched a raw nerve with younger male viewers, and she immediately became the most controversial figure on the show.

In March 2010, when Liu Yunchao, a typical "second-generation rich kid" (*fu erdai*), presented himself to the twenty-four female contestants, the enormous sum of 6 million yuan was flashed on a big screen as an estimate of his personal fortune. Liu set his sights on the infamous Ma Nuo, casually mentioning that he had three luxury racing cars and was currently customizing a BMW. He invited Ma to "cry in my BMW!" His

shameless flaunting of his wealth caused another firestorm of debate among netizens and reopened the wound caused by Ma's caustic BMW remark.

The Ma Nuo controversy came to a head on April 3, when a tough-looking male contestant from Shanghai, Luo Lei, took the stage. His main attack came soon after the screening of his second self-introductory video clip and was aimed directly at Ma Nuo:

I am here for those netizens who go online everyday just to write a couple of lines of criticism despite the fact that they are exhausted after a full day's work. Have you ever thought of them? Now I have some words for you, Ma Nuo. You shouldn't stay on this show any longer because nobody can satisfy your picky demands. This program is for women who are sincere about coming here to find a boyfriend. You should leave so there is more space for people who are sincere about looking for their other half. . . . The program that really suits you is a beauty pageant where all the new millionaires will be present. You won't need to worry about crying in a BMW; you could even have a runny nose in a Porsche!

"I am not that kind of person," Ma Nuo blurted out in a trembling voice, then turned away from the podium and stumbled off the stage.

This most dramatic episode of *Are You the One?* went viral and was especially popular among the young netizens whom Luo claimed to represent. On Baidu's *Are You the One?* chat room in the following days, comments were posted at a rate of 500 per minute, reaching over 40,000 posts each day. A single thread, "Do you support Luo Lei or sympathize with Ma Nuo," attracted 26,111 posts. But on the Ma Nuo net bar, a post titled "The man who made Ma Nuo cry and leave is not a real man!" received 103,404 hits and had 1,600 followers (data collected on November 12, 2011).¹ There was a range of opinion: some claimed that Ma deserved what she got for being so contemptuous and materialistic, while others felt that she was at least honest and that her materialistic attitude only reflected the dominant values of society.² Some blamed Luo Lei for being self-righteous and misogynist, while others praised him as a hero avenging all males for their humiliations at the hands of these demanding women. Some claimed that it was all just a joke, a cynical way for Luo to stage a show to promote his own career, while still others suspected that it was a scripted drama staged by the TV producers just to boost the show's ratings.

After it was launched in January 2010, *Are You the One?* soon became the most controversial reality TV show in China, thanks to episodes that featured Ma Nuo. With its ranks of fashionably dressed, attractive female contestants; the intrusive and ego-deflating questions thrown at the male contestants; and, most of all, the heated debates on various social topics that it stimulated, both onstage and online, it remained for some time at

the top of national TV ratings and inspired a string of copycat shows by other provincial satellite TV channels.³ Enthusiastic contestants from all over China and even a few foreigners tried their luck at finding a date on the show. In four months, the number of applications to compete on the show eclipsed 170,000, and JSTV had to set up five offices in different cities to process all the enthusiastic candidates.

But after JSTV successfully fought off its competitors and began to sell space to major advertisers, exploiting the market value of its enormous audience, the bright flame of *Are You the One?* just as quickly appeared to burn itself out. In mid-June 2010, it was one of the main targets of the State Administration for Film, Radio, and Television (SARFT), which criticized the show for promoting immoral characters and unhealthy ideas. Its very existence was threatened. Chinese Central Television (CCTV) twice criticized the program and similar dating shows on its News Network (*Xinwen lianbo*, June 12) and on the current affairs program *Focus* (*Jiudian fangtan*, June 11) with Ma Nuo's escapades repeatedly shown on-screen as negative examples. Only a quick and strategic response from JSTV, coupled with the show's enormous popularity, ultimately saved the day, and the program—in modified form—remains one of China's most popular TV spectacles.

Why is this TV show so popular? Why does SARFT regard an entertainment program as so "harmful"? What makes it stand out from numerous other dating and entertainment shows on TV screens? What does it tell us about China's post-1980s generation of restless young adults and their ways of dealing with "the critical problem of existential anxiety about meaning, identity and moral relativism"⁴ at a time of dramatic political, economic, and cultural transformation? And how does this TV show and its associated Internet sites and fan clubs create a public space where individual expressions of personal dreams and private emotions are turned into the competing public voices of the post-1980s generation?

In this chapter, I examine the controversy surrounding *Are You the One?* and locate it within the larger context of China's new media culture and its changing formats and functions in a society where social values are in transition and hotly debated. By analyzing the issues confronted on the stage and in emotional online audience responses among various Internet fan communities, I provide evidence of a new form of civic engagement that has been largely overlooked by scholars of Chinese society and politics, that is, the communication of "lifestyle politics" in public space, especially among the well-networked urban Chinese youth who were born into a globalized communication environment.⁵

By "public space," I mean a real or virtual space where social issues and concerns can be publicly presented and discussed and where a range of social groups and actors can interact.⁶ In previous studies of Chinese society and culture, the problem of public discourse and public sphere has been limited generally to discussions of elite cultural production,

such as investigative reports, independent films and documentaries, and Internet-based intellectual debates. Few researchers have paid attention to the public space constructed by popular media shows or the interaction between entertainment programs (including TV reality shows) and Internet/social media communities. Examining the public space created by *Are You the One?*—between the rock of commercialization and the hard place of political censorship—provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate how a popular entertainment show and its new media correlates can unexpectedly give expression to the voices of the post-1980s generation of viewers and provide a platform that this generation can use to articulate its own “lifestyle politics” through self-representations and self-expression in a globalizing society.

THE LOCALIZATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL DATING SHOW FOR CHINA'S POST-1980S GENERATION

Global TV audiences will recognize that *Are You the One?* is an international appropriation of the dating show *Take Me Out*. Developed by Fremantle Media based in London, this pacesetting dating game show had already been licensed to stations in half a dozen countries by early 2010, when JSTV and Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV) began competing to purchase the Chinese license. Ironically, even though HSTV was the successful bidder and soon launched its officially licensed clone *Let's Date!* (*Women yuehui ba*), it was JSTV's slightly adapted, unlicensed version *Are You the One?* that won the biggest audience share and transformed the show into a phenomenally popular indigenous brand.

To understand what makes the program so successful, one has to understand matchmaking in the social context of the emergence of so-called leftover unmarried women and men (*shengnan/shengnü*) who are the product of an accelerated pace of life in China. Intense career pressure, heightened social mobility, and loosened social bonds have caused China's urban generation to experience a trend that one finds in other contemporary international urban environments. Many young people have little time to find a partner, and contemporary urban life patterns have generated few convenient channels for meeting suitable people. Further, given the fact that China's younger generation is a product of both economic reform and the one-child policy, their marriages have become matters of great import and urgency to their families and to society more broadly. According to Tian Fanjiang, the head of a match-making website that has developed a partner relationship with *Are You the One?*, “There are 180 million single people in China. . . . They and their parents are worried about the marriage problem.”⁷ Thus, part of the immense appeal of *Are You the One?* lies in its professed goal of helping contestants meet the right person. And compared with its Western

counterparts, where a more casual and flirtatious atmosphere of “just dating” prevails, the show adopts a much more serious and pragmatic approach to matchmaking. One male contestant put it bluntly: “This is the most efficient way to compare twenty-four women at one time and choose the most suitable life partner, and unlike one-on-one dating, you don't even need to pay for dinner when you meet them!” The program's enormous viewership ensures that even those male contestants who are rejected by all the females on the show will generally be deluged with online offers of dates from female viewers who watched and then contacted them using the dedicated e-mail address posted at the end of each episode.

Yet from the perspective of the TV station, the show has an additional agenda. According to Wang Gang, the producer of *Are You the One?*, when the show was first conceived, it was intended “not to be a pure dating or entertainment program, but to concern itself with various hot button topics, including housing issues, children, in-law relationships, income, careers, and DINKs [double income no kids], all the social issues that emerge during the dating process.”⁸ In other words, rather than simply provide a chance for people to find a life partner, one aim of the producers was to make the show into a platform for exploring the issues that most deeply concern its most important demographic population of contestants and viewers,⁹ namely, young people of the post-1980s generation. Wang also noted that when his team carried out initial research for the proposed program, it found that “there was no vehicle offered in the mainstream media for the new generation to freely express its ideas about love, family, and marriage.” One could say that *Are You the One?* is framed as a post-1980s generation coming-of-age ritual. In other words, by opening up space for these young people to express themselves in front of a broad national public, the show not only acts as a practical way for contestants to find a partner and proclaim their adulthood but also provides a symbolic stage for them to express their personal values and beliefs and to debate these values with others of their generation and other generations.

Representing some 200 million Chinese born between 1980 and 1989, the post-1980s generation is the new face of postsocialist China, the direct product of China's one-child policy, as well as the beneficiary of Deng Xiaoping's vision of economic reform and opening to the world. They grew up in a period when politics were no longer primary and material needs were placed first, and they have felt pressure to vie with their peers in an increasingly competitive, market-based society and to avoid being left behind in the rat race. At the same time, they are also the first generation to experience China's reemergence in the world economic and political order, and (through modern technology and increasing contact with the outside world as immigrants, foreign students, and media consumers) they have a more cosmopolitan appearance and have received a lot

more material benefits from globalization compared to previous generations. They differ from their parents, most of whom were born in the 1950s and early 1960s and experienced the bitter persecutions of the Cultural Revolution. They also differ from people in their late thirties and forties who still remember the privations of their childhood and the brief period of enlightenment and idealism before 1989. Because of this generation gap, they not only find that they have little to inherit spiritually from their parents and grandparents¹⁰ but also have to search for new values and moral meanings through "competing and conflicting influences" in an increasingly pluralized society.¹¹ Older generations typically view the post-1980s generation as self-centered, overly pragmatic and materialistic, and ignorant of social responsibility and political issues. Yet diverse international influences and the increasing pluralization of Chinese society in recent decades reveal that this judgment is an oversimplification. This generation is not monolithic. There are plenty of younger people who engage in serious reflection on the problems associated with their generation and who are willing to take on social responsibilities in their own unique ways.

JSTV's effort to take *Are You the One?* beyond superficial entertainment and engage with deeper "hot button" social issues is reflected in its choice of cohosts. In contrast to "Paddy" McGuinness of the British show *Take Me Out*, a comedian whose joking around encourages lighthearted banter among the contestants, the two initial cohosts of the Chinese program, Meng Fei and Le Jia, were specifically chosen for their weighty professional backgrounds. Bald, warmhearted "brother Meng" established his reputation as an anchor and reporter for *Ground Zero Nanjing*, a local news and current affairs program on Jiangsu TV. He proved himself to be a knowledgeable commentator and a serious journalist of moral integrity. In *Are You the One?*, he encourages the contestants to discuss social issues linked to their self-presentations, while his frequently inserted personal opinions add social relevance to seemingly trivial topics. At the same time, his self-deprecating humor and mature, balanced tone help the contestants relax and defuse some of the tense arguments that break out among them. Meng is backed up by his equally bald cohost Le Jia, a psychology consultant who is supposed to give character analysis and advice to contestants about how to handle their emotional problems. During his initial appearances, Le seemed sharp and ruthless, never afraid to give the more outspoken contestants a good dressing-down for their ridiculous prejudices. But over time, Le proved to be a sensitive judge of character, able to release his private emotions and share his own difficult personal experiences with contestants. These two hosts, who clearly have real affection and respect for each other, create a complementary environment of compassionate, paternalistic concern and psychological/moral guidance for the contestants and, by extension, for the viewers. At the same time, they are quick to spot opportunities to

shift the focus to broader social controversies that often surface during the show.

One final feature that helped *Are You the One?* rise to the top of the ratings, as demonstrated in the Ma Nuo controversy, is the enormous communicative network that developed around the show, mainly via social media and Internet fan sites. In the past decade, China has seen explosive growth in Internet usage, and the Internet has transformed the cultural lives and social communication of people in a profound way. By early 2012, China had 513 million Internet users and 900 million mobile phone users, including 355 million who go online via cell phones. Among them, 325 million people went online to consume digital video products.¹² At the outset, *Are You the One?* set up an online registration function and formed alliances with several online matchmaking websites, including Shiji Jiayuan wang (Shijijiayuan.com) and Baihe wang (baihe.com), to solicit contestants and assist in promotional efforts. Its producers also exploited the huge potential online viewership by making every episode of the program available in archives on the official website of JSTV or on You Ku, China's largest digital video storage site. This made it very easy for viewers to share the shows with their virtual friends through instant messaging and social network services. And through Twitter feeds and personal blogs, viewer comments about the show were immediately distributed to hundreds, even thousands, of potential viewers. This kind of interactive viewing of TV shows (including soap operas) is particularly common among students and young professionals, who make up the two largest groups of the 124 million users of social network services in China, constituting 50.3 and 31.1 percent of the total, respectively.¹³ The interactive features provided by the Internet have resulted in an enormous proliferation of fan websites, discussion blogs, and personal blogs for various shows and have created new forms of social interaction about and around media texts in a way (instant and multidirected) not seen in conventional print and electronic media.

Several unofficial virtual communities were set up by *Are You the One?* enthusiasts on such popular search engines as Baidu and Tengxun, but the show's producers also actively cultivated online debates, social media, and mobile communications to keep viewers involved and engaged between episodes. The show reached out to online audiences by setting up its own official website listing the personal information of the contestants, providing contact information and video clips of them, and creating a discussion forum for visitors to express their opinions about issues raised on the show. The show's hosts regularly participated. In addition to social issues, popular topics for comments on these various official and unofficial online sites include positive and negative opinions about the participants, analysis of the reasons for male contestant failure or success, and speculation about ways to be invited to the show. It is clear that for many netizens, the virtual community surrounding the pro-

gram functions as an invaluable classroom for learning about how to present themselves successfully in public and win the heart not only of the young woman but also of potential employers.

THE SURVIVAL ANXIETIES OF THE POST-1980S GENERATION

As many viewers noted online, in the first few months following its launch, *Are You the One?* consciously manipulated its choices of female contestants and its controversial presentations of male contestants to attract viewers and boost ratings. In other words, in order to win in a fiercely contested "eyeball economy," the producers created a staged drama aimed at manufacturing controversy (*zhizao huati*).

The male contestants were initially presented by means of a series of professionally produced self-introduction videos, shown to the female contestants and viewers in several stages—"basic personal information" (*jiben qingkuang*), "life plan" (*rensheng guihua*), "my ideal girl" (*lixiang nüsheng*), and "comments from friends or relatives"—with particular emphasis on the careers and financial situations of male contestants.¹⁴ Indeed, each male contestant's job and monthly income were highlighted on the screen, as was detail about whether he owned a car or a home. The central attention given to financial success points to one aspect of a new set of values among many younger Chinese: one's sense of adulthood and masculinity is associated with career achievements, especially in business, and one's ability to achieve material success is one of the most important factors in winning the heart of the "ideal woman."

The way male contestants presented themselves was closely related to the representation of female contestants, all of which was achieved by careful selection of candidates and judicious editing of each episode. For the first six months, many up-and-coming models, actresses, and performers were chosen partly because of their above-average attractiveness but also, just as important, for their outgoing personalities and willingness to make daring comments. A major part of the controversy the show generated was associated with these so-called material girls (*baijin nü*), women who openly expressed their contempt for losers and their desire to find a wealthy man. Zhu Zhenfang, a migrant office worker in Wenzhou, made it clear that men who want to date her must have an income of at least 200,000 yuan a month (far higher than the average provincial city monthly salary of about 2,000 yuan). She frequently made outrageous comments when rejecting male contestants, including "I didn't smell a luxurious mansion on him." Yu Xia called herself a "three-good female" (*sanhao nüsheng*)—good figure, good style, and good character—and she claimed to be looking for a "man with the four haves" (*siyou nanren*)—good shape, quality, money, and assets. And, of course, there was Ma Nuo, whose cutting remarks included the following put-down of

an inexperienced admirer: "The number of girls you have dated is not even a fraction of the men I have dated!"

To be sure, some of these "outrageous comments" were hyperbolic gimmicks that some of the contestants, both male and female, employed to turn the program into an effective platform for self-promotion both in their personal lives and in their careers. Their instant fame was subsequently utilized to publicize their own businesses, to sign contracts to become spokespeople or models for various consumer products, or to join the entertainment world as performers or TV hosts themselves.¹⁵

But if everyone knew that it was "just a show," why did the comments from Ma Nuo and others strike such a raw nerve among young viewers and generate such heated online debates among netizens? A good example of the popular uproar elicited by the show involves Zhu Zhenfang, who was quickly punished for her outrageous comments by netizens determined to locate her personal information and to harass her by sending hostile and insulting messages to her place of work. As a result, Zhu had to quit the show to avoid losing her job.

To understand the overwhelming reaction to the declarations of these "material girls," it is useful to take a broader look at the dreams and current predicaments of the post-1980s generation. These are vividly encapsulated by two TV dramas that gained extreme popularity and became hot topics of discussion among younger viewers in recent years. The first was *Struggle* (*Fendou*, 2007), which depicts a group of recently graduated classmates who must find their place and establish their careers in the competitive Chinese market economy. As this drama demonstrates, unlike their parents' or grandparents' generation, the "struggle" of the post-1980s generation is a highly individualistic enterprise aimed at improving individual "quality" (*suzhi*), seeking self-optimization, and gaining material rewards. Intriguingly, the maturing process of the young male protagonist, who also happens to win the heart of the most beautiful woman, is depicted as a "struggle" to choose between his two fathers. One (the biological father) is a wealthy multinational capitalist, a returned Chinese American who invests in China's booming real estate development. The other (his stepfather) is an idealistic Party member who is an uncorrupted local official in charge of city planning and development. This ironic plotline glaringly encapsulates the mixed emotions felt by China's younger generation during the current transformation, which awkwardly attempts to balance socialist and neoliberal imperatives.

The second TV drama, *Narrow Dwelling* (*Woju*, 2009) depicts the disillusionment and despair of the young urban middle class through the experiences of two sisters who adopt contrasting strategies as they settle in a big city. The older sister works extra hours and saves every penny to gradually create a better life for herself through her own painstaking efforts. But the younger sister decides to take a shortcut by becoming the

mentors of a rich and powerful official who gives her an apartment and numerous other expensive gifts. The younger sister's abandonment of her boyfriend for an older, richer, more powerful (and, of course, corrupt) man evoked a heated online debate among viewers. The discussion reflected the constant fear of many young men: without a certain level of wealth and possessions, they will never be able to attract a suitable wife. As one viewer of *Narrow Dwelling* put it, "Society will not force you to succeed, but it will tell you clearly what it is like to be a failure."¹⁶ This pressure to "succeed" is a real threat to the sense of masculinity and adulthood of many young Chinese men. It is a society in which financial inequality and even sexual frustration seem directly linked to poor family backgrounds, undesirable native places, and age, a place where the disadvantaged cannot compete with corrupt officials, rich entrepreneurs, and their "official kids" and "rich kids" (*guan erdai* and *fu erdai*).

Thus, the current generation of aspiring middle-class youth is experiencing a sense of inner conflict that connects two powerful interlocking emotion—a desire for the kind of affluent life they see or imagine others to be leading and a fear of losing everything in the extremely competitive social environment that China has become. More often than not, this frustration of young Chinese males is directed at the objects of their desire—materialistic young women who ignore them and instead use their looks and charms to attract richer men and to take a shortcut to wealth and fame. Such women have become symbols of the social and moral degeneration of contemporary Chinese society, something that is repeatedly emphasized in online debates about TV personalities, including those on reality shows like *Are You the One?* Seen in this context, it is no surprise that the comments by Ma Nuo and other female contestants and the show's relentless focus on the income and material assets of male contestants would lead to online controversies and ultimately to Luo Lei's public attack on Ma Nuo.

But by looking deeper, we can see a major "struggle" between contradictory values here, with Ma Nuo symbolizing both the temptations and the dangers of a society in transition. On the one hand, she and other attractive female contestants are desired for their modern lifestyles and career ambitions, their beauty and fashionable dress, and even their confident, outspoken personalities. Many female viewers want to become one of these lucky women. And many male contestants choose such women as their "Favorite Gals." Some even come onstage to express their admiration. On the other hand, this very modern and highly material femininity poses a threat to the traditional ideal of a virtuous wife and good mother. As Luo Lei's statement made clear, he wants someone with feminine beauty, but she must come home to him every night. These young women are placed on a pedestal, treated almost like revered figures, yet at the same time they must be publicly punished when necessary and "tamed" so that certain ideals of feminine purity and absolute

good are not compromised. And the female contestants are certainly not free of inner contradictions themselves, with many of them apparently unsure of what kind of man to choose and how to judge success in today's society.

COMPETING VOICES: THE LIFESTYLE POLITICS OF THE POST-1980S GENERATION

Are You the One? entailed an exaggerated focus on shameless materialism and tended to fan the flames of young viewers' emotions. This led to extremely heated debates online and in the media, which in turn drew the skeptical attention of official censors. SARFT soon issued notices to several TV stations, including JSTV, criticizing the unhealthy tendencies of dating programs and setting out detailed restrictions on their content:

Such programs are currently dominated by models, actors, and rich young people. They should broaden the range of their contestants. Controversial public figures who are morally suspect and have alternative values and unorthodox views about marriage should not be invited to participate. These programs cannot be broadcast live, and [producers] must make sure they comply with this regulation and delete any problematic content and incorrect points of view.¹⁷

Are You the One? was now facing a crisis. The show was temporarily halted, and JSTV had to find a quick solution in order to avoid a cancellation disaster—a fate that greeted many reality shows that had pushed the envelope too far in the past ten years.¹⁸

JSTV's response to SARFT was compliant yet strategic. The most inventive change to the program involved an invitation to a female professor from the Jiangsu Provincial Party School to sit alongside Le Jia and function as an additional psychological adviser and commentator. Her approachable manner and commonsense perspective helped to balance the occasional sharpness and emotional extravagance of Le Jia, and her Party School background made her an ideal establishment figure, someone who could "supervise" content and demonstrate the "sincerity" of the TV station. Changes were also made to the contestant lineup, with some of the sharper-tongued women removed and the content of the men's self-introductions adjusted. Most important, video material no longer displayed the personal income of male contestants, and the show invited the participation of a much greater variety of men and women representing a broader range of career paths. The producers even staged two special programs on July 18 and August 1, 2010, in which all contestants, male and female, were migrant workers. This was to showcase the program's "media responsibility" (*meiti zeren*) since these workers often find it particularly difficult to meet life partners.

With all these format and content adjustments and promises to do better, *Are You the One?* managed to get permission to continue broadcasting and has maintained its top spot in the ratings for almost two years. Indeed, despite toning down some of its controversial content, *Are You the One?* has managed to further develop its basic function as an "intimate public forum," and its "lifestyle discourse" has engaged legions of young viewers and evoked myriad responses online and elsewhere. The public voice of the show and its various associated network forms are both active and generative.

An exploration of the hypercharged debates generated by *Are You the One?* shows how coming-of-age Chinese consumer-citizens express their individual consciousness and how these individual expressions have been transformed into public discussions about social responsibility and the need for public participation. Of special note are the ways in which the show's hosts allow contestants to raise issues that range far beyond the typical dating format and how dominant assumptions are challenged by alternative voices both on the show and online. In this way, the show became a curious hybrid of popular entertainment and incisive social commentary.

One distinctive example is the recurring debate about the relationship between contemporary lifestyles and environmental awareness. Most contestants on *Are You the One?* display little overt concern for the environment. Their focus is much more on material concerns, career prospects, and physical/psychological attributes of their potential partners. But there have been several conspicuous exceptions involving male contestants who enthusiastically embraced a "green" and sustainable lifestyle. The reaction of many female contestants to these "exceptional" men demonstrates a dominant assumption of the post-1980s generation in China: environmental issues are not central concerns in their lives. Contestant reactions also show that there is a great deal of ignorance about such issues among younger Chinese. The fact that the show consistently gives these "environmental boys" plenty of time to explain their alternative viewpoint indicates that the program's producers and hosts are eager to promote a more mature and socially aware outlook on the issue.

The first environmental enthusiast to appear was a British contestant with the Chinese name Wang Doufu. Although good-looking and personable (complete with an excellent sense of humor and relatively fluent Chinese-language skills), Wang Doufu was rejected by many female contestants when he declared his monthly income to be only a few hundred yuan (he was obviously a foreign student on a small stipend) and revealed that his hobby was serving as a disc jockey at nightclubs—an interest insufficiently respectable or stable for a life partner. Finally, all the remaining lights went off when he said that his other hobby was recycling abandoned objects that he found on the street. The host, Meng Fei, was charmed by the young, British man and gave him a chance to

explain why he used recycled objects. Wang said that these objects could be given a new lease on life and would not be wasted. It was not good for the environment to mindlessly throw things away. When Meng Fei asked the contestant what his parents did for a living, Wang replied that his mother was an artist and his father an investment banker. "In other words, your family is not short of money?" Meng added. By making sure that these points were clarified, Meng was emphasizing that the environmental issue was one that people should take more seriously and that this was a positive decision made by a thoughtful young man about recycling and avoiding pollution. It was not a sign of poverty, contrary to what most of the female contestants seemed to assume.

This emphasis on sustainability was strongly reinforced in a subsequent episode (October 3, 2010) when an intriguing male contestant appeared onstage. Lu Hongyi was Chinese but had spent some of his childhood in the United States and had graduated from Harvard Law School. He had worked in an American law firm for a few years but then became highly committed to the environmental movement and gave up his secure job to return to China to work in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to improving environmental awareness in China. He was a very active person and enjoyed riding a bike, as it not only was healthy but also fit with his "low-carbon" lifestyle. This was the reason he did not own a car. He also mentioned several other ways that he tried to reduce his "carbon footprint," including the rather radical suggestion that he did not want to father any children because the world population is already too large. Instead, he wanted to adopt one or more abandoned children and give them a loving family.

One imagines that many women would be bowled over by this brilliant, articulate, decent-looking young man with his lofty ideals. Once again, Meng Fei gave him plenty of time to state his views and highly praised his idealism and appeals for more people to dedicate themselves to solving China's serious environmental problems. But most of the questions from female contestants focused on material issues. For example, one asked how he would support his family in what she assumed was his low-paying volunteer job. Another contestant asked if he would be willing to reconsider his decision not to father children. While Lu Hongyi did better than Wang Doufu, reaching the final stages and selecting one woman as his date, it is surprising how many of the female contestants rejected him after finding out about his environmental lifestyle despite his apparently excellent personal attributes. However, following this episode, a major debate broke out on the Internet, and many viewers of the show were obviously impressed by Lu's willingness to give up a high-paying job to work for an NGO and his commitment to improving China's natural environment. For example, a Chinese search on Google of the phrase "Fei hong, wunao, Lu Hongyi" generated 32,700 items related

to this episode, many of which are discussions by fans praising Lu's admirable character and environmental awareness.

During the July 2, 2011, episode, the environmental issue once more took center stage when Wang Sheng appeared on the show. He was an environmental inspector whose job was to test waterways for industrial and other types of pollution. But his "green" attitudes were not just restricted to his job. He declared that he wanted to devote his whole life to environmental sustainability, and while he may have been looking for a life partner on the show, in fact he spent much of his video segments and self-introduction (encouraged by Meng Fei and the other two hosts, of course) suggesting methods that people can use to reduce pollution and emissions, such as recycling old batteries and picking up litter. In his first video, he explained that he would regularly pick up trash dropped by other people and put it in litter bins, and the video showed him doing this and using a plastic bag to pick up dog poop left by someone else's dog. One female contestant was obviously concerned. She said she could not stand her boyfriend picking up dog poop because people would look down on them. She turned off her light. Meng Fei cuttingly asked the woman, "If you saw someone who is not your boyfriend disposing of dog poop, would you look up to him?" The woman said she would but not if it was her boyfriend. Meng Fei then concluded the discussion by saying that she was entitled to have such a muddled opinion but that he was also entitled to look down on her for having such an opinion. Although only one female contestant expressed her opinion so directly, all the others soon turned off their lights, and Wang went off without a date. The general assumption among the show's contestants seemed to be that environmental awareness and commitment is a very good thing in theory, but if it requires a real change of attitude and lifestyle, then it is not something they want to bother with.

One could argue that in encouraging the show's contestants to promote environmental awareness, *Are You the One?* is simply following current Chinese government policy. And it is certainly true that since its run-in with the official censors at SARFT, the program must continually show that it is playing a positive role in promoting "healthy," socially responsible values, and its hosts must make it crystal clear where they stand. Yet such a criticism would be unfair because some discussions of this issue (including the Wang Doufu episode) were broadcast before the censors got involved in June 2010. Second, in terms of the format, two sides of the debate are always presented, and the hosts do give the female contestants who are not impressed with environmental activists the opportunity to explain why they opt to reject. In some cases, their doubts may be legitimate. For example, it is relevant to ask how an environmental activist might support his family if he is not getting any income from a volunteer position. This is one reason why the debateron of such social issues on *Are You the One?* can be so vivid and engaging; each contestant has at

least two sides to it, and we see real people (who viewers can identify with) taking both sides of the issue and justifying their decisions. The other important difference that sets the program apart from government propaganda are the debates about show content that continue on various online forums. These are less closely monitored and therefore much less likely to be influenced by the official viewpoints embraced by the show's hosts.

Another important feature that helps *Are You the One?* generate open and productive public discourse is its intentional recruitment of non-Chinese contestants. These have included people from Korea, America, Great Britain, Vietnam, Russia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Even more common is the participation of Chinese contestants who have spent many years working or studying abroad, the so-called overseas returnees (*haigui*). In fact, in more recent programs, *Are You the One?* went so far as to stage special programs exclusively for Chinese contestants who live in the United States (October 9 and 16, 2011) and the United Kingdom (January 29 and February 5, 2012). These contestants often have ideas and values that viewers consider unusual or alternative and in some cases superior to what they see as mainstream Chinese values. Their comments provide many fruitful opportunities for discussion among the show's contestants and hosts and among online fan groups. They force Chinese viewers to confront their own entrenched worldviews and value systems and to consider life from a fresh perspective.

This brings to mind Lu Hongyi, the Harvard Law School graduate who returned to China to join an environmental NGO. Many of the online comments about Lu compared his socially responsible outlook to the views of another male contestant on the show, Zhang Fan, who graduated from one of China's top medical schools but who was concerned mainly with getting ahead in his job and seemed to have little awareness of broader social issues. Netizens debated whether this was due to the superior moral education provided by American universities or was a problem associated with the materialistic worldview of Chinese society as a whole.¹⁹

Yet it was not until another overseas returnee, An Tian, appeared on the show on March 26, 2011, that this particular online debate really exploded. At first, An appeared to be a buffoon, making funny faces and joking as he walked onstage. Some female contestants were critical of his lack of "seriousness" and "respect." But then they found out that he had an undergraduate degree from Harvard and an MA from Oxford, was finishing a PhD at UC Berkeley, and that he had returned to China to contribute to society by researching agricultural economics. Immediately, those who had kept their lights on (twenty-one of twenty-four women) became highly interested though still suspicious of his "eccentricity." But it was not until the final moments that the true drama played out. Two willing female contestants remained in play, and An was given an oppor-

tunity to ask them a final question before making his choice. He asked them, "If it happened that you won US\$10 million in a lottery, how would you choose to spend the money?" Suddenly, it was clear that despite his joking around, An was very serious about testing the values of the women who might become his life partner. The first woman said that it would not change her life at all; she would just continue to buy things that are necessary. The second woman gave a slightly better answer, saying that she would use the money to make her mother happy and that her mother would not have to work anymore. But An Tian was not satisfied with these responses. He explained to Meng Fei that he would have suggested setting up some kind of foundation and giving the money to a worthy cause like orphans or education rather than just spending it on themselves and their families. "Maybe if it was just \$1 million, you could spend it on yourself, to buy a house, car, etcetera, but \$10 million is such a lot of money! . . . We have to think about serving the people." He decided not to choose either of the women and left the stage alone. Backstage, he explained to the camera that he did not believe it was possible to change someone's basic character. This is why he was looking for a woman with a vision similar to his own, in other words, someone who wanted to give back to society.

This incident triggered an unprecedented surge of responses by fans and other commentators, with over 700,000 posts on the topic over the next few weeks. The online debate was then picked up by the official media, with newspapers reporting on the incident and adding their own editorial commentary. The main thrust of the debate revolved around the question of whether foreign values were superior to Chinese values because they supposedly led to more socially responsible people who really care about giving back to society ("serving the people," or *wei renmin fuwu*, as An Tian put it, echoing the Communist ideal) as opposed to contemporary Chinese values that stress financial benefit ("serving the people's currency," or *wei renminbi fuwu*, as one wag put it). Some educators reflected on what had been lost from China's current education system despite the fact that people still pay token lip service to lofty socialist slogans.²⁰

The An Tian incident is perhaps the clearest example of how *Are You the One?* facilitates public debate on serious social issues through its dating show format, yet it is the deep social emotion that it evokes and restless questioning by young people online regarding the moral uncertainties and social problems in a transitional society that turned this entertainment show into a true public arena. Of course, many other issues have emerged during the show. For example, despite their fashionable dress and contemporary image, many of the contestants seem to have old-fashioned values when it comes to family. Particularly noticeable is a fixation on their mothers among both male and female contestants. Some men have brought their mothers onstage to help them select a partner,

and one mother even joined the show as a female contestant alongside her own daughter, not to find her own date but to make sure her daughter did not make the "wrong" decision. Even when mothers are not there in person, their influence is clear from the comments of contestants. For example, men ask women whether they mind if their mother-in-law lives in the same house, and women sometimes prefer men who portray themselves as helpful to their mothers. Monologues by contestants about motherly love provide many of the more sentimental moments in the show, with contestants and audience weeping freely as they think of their relationships with their own mothers. Although there may be some residual influence of customary Chinese concepts of filial piety, this fixation on mothers seems to result largely from the fact that a majority of young people are only children because of China's one-child policy, and there has been a tendency for parents to indulge these "little emperors and empresses." Some young people have become quite dependent and are unwilling to break away from their mothers when they grow up. Yet even here, there is diversity of opinion, with some contestants declaring that they do not want to live with their parents because they never had a good relationship with them and their values are different.

Another frequently debated issue is the career and life challenges faced by young people when they migrate from one place to another and the impact of these choices on one's ability to lead a balanced life. Indeed, one sees an ongoing contradiction between a materialistic focus on making more money, buying possessions, and getting ahead and a desire to enjoy a more balanced lifestyle with fewer material rewards but broader interests (culture, sports, traveling, and so on) and less stress. We have already discussed the fierce disputes that arose from the Ma Nuo incident and the associated attacks on "material girls" and "second-generation rich kids," which are examples of this conflict. In its postcensorship phase, *Are You the One?* has attempted to invite a broader range of male and female contestants, including some who do not agree with the extreme materialistic viewpoint of some of their peers. The show's hosts have also made a point of questioning contestants who are too narrowly focused on careers and getting ahead to the exclusion of other aspects of the good life.

The debates on *Are You the One?* clearly display the diversity of opinion among the post-1980s generation. In turn, these competing voices contribute to a public discourse on lifestyle choices as important aspects of identity and social responsibility. As Rheingold has pointed out, "The public voices of individuals, aggregated and in dialogue with the voices of other individuals, become the fundamental particles of public opinion. When public opinion has the power and freedom to influence policy and grows from the open, rational, critical debate among peers posited by Jürgen Habermas and others, it can be an essential instrument of democratic self-governance."²¹ In this process, the paradoxically associated net-

works of people online and using social media become active public citizens raising and debating some of the most pressing social and emotional issues that deeply concern restless Chinese youth today.

What, then, can we learn about Chinese media and society from popular entertainment shows? The popularity of the TV show *Are You the One?* and the online debates that it evokes point to an understudied yet very crucial phenomenon in Chinese media. With the growth in media commercialization and a corresponding shift in emphasis from news to entertainment, "the responsibility of the media for informing, educating and providing moral guidance to Chinese citizens is now increasingly being fulfilled by entertainment programs produced at the local and provincial levels."²² Because of the far-reaching influence and broad popular appeal, we should give greater weight to the public space created by them in our efforts to understand public discourse and social emotion in contemporary China.

It may seem strange that a dating show like *Are You the One?* has such a major influence on public discussions of serious social issues like the education system, moral behavior, and family values. But this results from a confluence of several factors, including (1) the willingness of the show's producers and cohosts to encourage detailed discussion of serious social issues that emerge during the dating process; (2) the willingness of both male and female contestants to talk about such issues and give their frank opinions in public, something that older people may not be so keen to do; (3) the extremely rapid development of the Internet and other social media over the past few years (especially among the target audience for the show) and the impressive popularity of authorized and unofficial online netizen fan clubs and bulletin boards that allow the discussion of issues to continue after each episode is broadcast, a practice that is facilitated by the availability of all episodes online, where they can be viewed and exchanged among friends; and (4) the show's conscious selection of some particularly outspoken contestants and hot-button topics. Added to these factors, one could argue that even the official censorship of *Are You the One?* (moves that prohibited overreliance on shock and outrage and forced programing to be more "serious" and "socially responsible" in tone) indirectly influenced its role as a public forum for the discussion of social issues in mature yet still vivid and entertaining ways.

Perhaps the most crucial factor about the impact of the show is the fact that there is a real thirst among restless and self-contradictory young people in China today for public debate and discussion of issues that deeply concern their lives, yet there are not many venues available for them to do this because of restrictions on civil society organizations and state control of official media. While the Internet does allow people more freedom to debate social issues without interference, such debates have tended to be dispersed over many unrelated sites and have had little impact beyond a small group of netizens. What *Are You the One?* has

done is to provide a focal point for many of these debates by linking them with dating and romance, a topic that appeals to almost all young people (and to their parents and grandparents) and thereby creates a central forum involving huge numbers of contestants (and viewers) in which discussions of social issues can become broadly meaningful and influential. In fact, some issues that were raised on *Are You the One?* generated so much interest and emotional discussion among viewers that they began to shape national public discourse in the official media, as witnessed in the An Tian incident.

It is in this sense that *Are You the One?* has created a public space for debating competing values in contemporary Chinese society. Certainly, this public space is limited since the show would immediately be censored if it strayed over the line between legitimate discussion of social issues and challenges to the political status quo. Furthermore, it is not the case that all interactions among contestants and netizens constitute serious public debates. Many are extremely trivial. But despite these constraints and the show's obvious focus on ratings and commerce, it does play a crucial role in mediating public discourse. It has clearly encouraged younger people to think about some of the conflicting values that are on display in China today. The program has demonstrated that there are diverse voices challenging mainstream materialistic assumptions, and it has given these voices an opportunity to participate in public discussions with both like-minded and different-minded peers. It is impossible to say what impact this will have on the future development of Chinese society, but, at the very least, it can provide young people with a sense of variety when it comes to lifestyles and diverse values and perspectives that go far beyond the limited experiences of young viewers.

The "intimate public forum" of *Are You the One?* also challenges simplistic assumptions about the allegedly passive, disengaged, and self-centered ways of the post-1980s generation. This case study should cause us to reflect on the frameworks that we use to discuss civic engagement and citizenship among younger generations more broadly. For increasing numbers of Chinese citizens, like citizens in the West, "politics in conventional (collective, government-centered, electoral) forms has become less salient."²³ Thus, we need to look beyond the conventional forms of civic action and political participation that center around party, state, or other political institutions and organizations and pay more attention to the kinds of "lifestyle politics" that make their presence known through popular culture and virtual communities. These individual expressions about lifestyle-related political issues are a crucial aspect of the sort of civil society and democratic life that is emerging in the process of China's modernization and globalization. It is likely that expressions of this sort will become "increasingly forceful features of state-society relations"²⁴ in twenty-first century China.

1. Baidu, "Support Luo or Sympathize with Ma" (百事支持谁还是同情谁), <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?z=741491320> (accessed October 10, 2011).
2. Baidu, "Is There Anything Wrong with Ma Nuo?" (马诺错了吗), <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=702641120>; "Don't Let Beijing Lose Face" (马诺你千万别给北京人丢脸了吗), <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=709076808> (accessed October 10, 2011).
3. According to the Fans Network, on May 17, 2010, ratings for *Are You the One?* reached their highest point of 4.23 percent, surpassing *Citadel of Happiness*, the most popular Chinese entertainment show of the past decade, and its fees for a fifteen second advertising slot during the show almost quadrupled, from 40,000 to 140,000 yuan. See Yu Xiang, "Feicheng wurao's Ratings Go through the Roof, and Its Advertising Rates Quadruple" (非诚勿扰收视率暴涨 广告价格翻四番), *Fans Network Entertainment* (粉丝网娱乐), February 23, 2011, http://media.ifeng.com/pk/special/xuanxiupkfuqizhenrenxiu/yingxiangli/detail_2011_02/23/4813762_0.shtml (accessed October 10, 2011).
4. Zhu Ying, "Critical Masses, Commerce, and Shifting State-Society Relations in China," *China Beat*, February 17, 2010, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=1526>.
5. "Lifestyle politics," as explained by W. Lance Bennett, indicates a tendency whereby "individuals increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them." It is used by social scientists to describe "a shift from traditional civic life and political participation to a new age of 'lifestyle politics' driven by values articulated at the level of individual behaviour and popular action in consumer choices, online exchanges, demonstrations and other informal forums." See Bennett, "Branded Political Communication: Lifestyle Politics, Logo Campaigns, and the Rise of Global Citizenship," in *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*, ed. Michele Micheletti et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004), 103. See also Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
6. I use this critical concept in the way Chris Berry suggested, both related to yet distinct from "public sphere." In his article "New Documentary in China: Public Space, Public Television," Berry chooses to use the term "public space" instead of "public sphere," which is more commonly used in media studies. He argues that the latter is too focused on the power of the state over society and fails to allow that other social actors "also exert power and produce, constrain, and shape public space and activity as well as civil society." See Chris Berry et al., eds., *Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology and the Experience of Social Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 108.
7. Calum MacLeod, "China Smitten by TV Dating," *USA Today*, May 17, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-05-17-china-dating_N.htm?csp=34 (accessed October 10, 2011).
8. Mei Zixiao, "Feicheng wurao's Producer Wang Gang: We Will Restrict the Number of Contestants from the Fashion Model World" (非诚勿扰《制片人王刚: 将限制模特嘉宾比例), Wangyi Entertainment Special Column Network, May 24, 2010, <http://hi.baidu.com/%D3%F1%ED%FE%D0%C4%BE%AA/blog/item/1da8cf89c51c75dfdd1f1007.html> (accessed October 14, 2011).
9. According to my own observations supported by published statistics, the vast majority of contestants are in the age range of twenty to thirty-five years, in other words, young adults born after 1976. These are conventionally referred to as the post-1980s generation. The concerns about giving the post-1980s generation a public space are both practical and political. Young audiences are the keenest audiences and participants in reality TV shows, especially talent shows and contest programs. To exploit this niche market and make its content and format appeal to this group and engage them at a deeper level through Internet delivery and discussion is one thing that distinguishes *Are You the One?* from its peers.

10. James Fallows, quoting Shi Hongsheng, in "Voices from China #1: The Post-1980s Generation," <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/04/voices-from-china-1-the-post-1980s-generation/236968> (accessed October 14, 2011).

11. Stanley Rosen, "Chinese Youth and State-Society Relations," in *Chinese Politics: State, Society and Market*, ed. Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (New York: Routledge, 2010), 161.

12. Data from the China Internet Information Center, "第29次互联网发展统计报告" (The Twenty-ninth statistical report on the development of Chinese Internet, January 2012), <http://www.cnnic.cn/research/bgxz/tjbg/201201/P020120116330880247967.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2012).

13. Data from the China Internet Information Center, "2009年中国网民社交网络应用调查报告" (2009 research report on social network service use of Chinese netizens, November), http://www.cnnic.cn/research/bgxz/spbg/201102/t20110222_20351.html (accessed May 25, 2011).

14. Sometimes the self-introduction videos may also include "self-evaluation" (*ziwo pingjia*), "hobbies and interests" (*xingqu aihao*), and "past romantic experience" (*qingyu pingli*).

15. Ma Nuo appeared to be thriving despite her exit from the show. She was given a contract as a guest judge on another show titled *It's You!* (Anhui TV) largely on the basis of her notorious reputation and her ability to generate a large, if polarized, following among viewers.

16. Quoted in Ruoyun Bai's research, "Snail House as a Middle-Class Construct," unpublished workshop paper presented at the Chinese-Language Television Drama Workshop, Chinese University of Hong Kong, January 22, 2011.

17. SARFT, "SARFT Notice on Further Regulation of TV Programs about Marriage, Love and Friendship" (广电总局关于进一步规范婚恋交友类电视节目的管理通知).

18. Previous reality shows that were canceled because of government regulation include *Perfect Holiday* (Wanmei jiaqi, 2000), *My Hero* (Jiayou hao nanhai, 2007), and *Quirritual Garden* (Xinling huayuan, 2009). Other shows, including *Super Girl*, were forced to tone down their content and format in order to continue broadcasting. See "SARFT Strictly Regulates TV Programs on Human Feelings; *Soul Garden* Goes Off the Air" (广电总局严管情感类电视节目 [心灵花园] 停播), *Dongfang zaobao*, January 3, 2009, <http://news.hexun.com/2009-01-03/113022806.html> (accessed October 10, 2011). After the SARFT order in June 2010, Anhui TV edited the already produced episodes of its dating show so that Ma Nuo was no longer given a central role and terminated her contract for future shows.

19. One example is a posting that was copied by many bloggers titled "Character Analysis of Zhang Fan and Lu Hongyi from *Are You the One?*" (对于非诚勿扰男嘉宾张帆和陆弘毅的性格解析). See one reproduced version on a blogger's Web page at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4bcc84ea0100m7jr.html. What is most interesting here is that this blog also copies and pastes the different responses to the original post.

20. See, for example, a post on the *Feicheng wurao* net bar on Baidu titled "The Wisdom and Honesty of An Tian: A Slap in the Face of the Chinese Education System" (安田的智慧与诚实给了中国教育体系一记响亮的耳光), which attracted thirty-six responses in just one day, with a great variety of opinions expressed about the Chinese and American education systems.

21. Howard Rheingold, "Using Participatory Media and Public Voice to Encourage Civic Engagement," in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, ed. W. Lance Bennett (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 101.

22. Wanning Sun, "From Central News to Regional Entertainment: The Manufacture of Illusion," unpublished workshop paper, Australian National University, March 2, 2012.

23. Bennett, "Branded Political Communication," 103.

24. Zhu, "Critical Masses Commerce, and Shifting State-Society Relations in China."