

Discursive Practices in Chinese Talk Shows: Semi-institutional Communication Shaped by Multi-dimensional Power Relations

Chen YANG

Faculty of Humanities, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong; International Education College,
Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo, China

ABSTRACT

Similar to American talk shows, the institutional communication of Chinese talk shows is also affected by complicated and mutually influencing power relations. Therefore, through the analysis of discourse practice and power relations, the author hopes to reveal some unique characteristics of the institutional communication of talk shows in mainland China. By utilizing Sinclair and Coulthard's rank scale model, an episode of *A Date with Lu Yu* was selected for a case study of discursive communication. The study shows that Chinese talk shows shared the common characteristics of semi-institutional communication with western counterpart. Besides, the hierarchical structure of communication is prominently reflected in Chinese talk shows. The social power relations between hosts, guests and external forces shape the discourse structure of Chinese talk shows. In particular, commercial organizations that sponsor media have great power in determining the goals and shaping the forms of discourse practice.

Keywords: Chinese talk show; power relation; discursive practice; institutional communication.

INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact, the talk show has not been classical, or even long-standing at the very least, compared with other types of TV programs such as dramas and variety shows in China. The emergence of TV shows in China has actually been attributed to the prosperity of Chinese media, as a result of the increasingly commercialized operations (Zhong, 1998). The TV shows in China have mostly taken the forms of those in the Western world, especially the US, although the actual arrangements of contents and details of these Chinese talk shows are prominently different from those in the US due to considerably different social and cultural contexts (Xiang, 2012; Wu and Lu, 2018). In spite of this, the institutional communication in Chinese talk shows is also shaped by complex and interactive power relations, like their counterparts in the US. Thus, it is expected to reveal some unique features of the institutional communication in these talk shows in the mainland of China by analysing the discursive practices and the power relations. The main body is divided into three parts. First, a literature review is prepared to clarify the extent to which the existing reports regarding institutional communication have clarified the features of discursive practices in talk shows and corresponding power relations. Second, based on Sinclair and

Coulthard's rank scale model, *A Date with Lu Yu* is analysed from perspectives of discursive practices and of power relations to discuss the features of institutional communication in Chinese talk shows. Last, but not the least, the influence of power relations on the discursive practices in Chinese talk shows is discussed and the findings are listed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Talk shows: semi-institutional communication

Ilie (2001) points out for the first time that talk shows are actually based on semi-institutional communication, which is characterized by the features of both casual conversation and discursive practices in professional communication. This study report is also the first to make investigation into the talk show from a perspective of institutional communication. Ever since, some researchers have paid attention to the discursive practices in talk shows and the related power relations.

Aznárez-Mauleón (2013) underlines the two-dimensional power relations between the host and the guest in shaping the discursive practice by analysing the communication in some Spanish talk shows. In the study report, it is also suggested that the host take advantage of power in controlling and directing the communication. Toth (2015) suggests that the power relations between the hosts and the audience of TV talk shows play an important role in shaping the discursive practices in TV talk shows by analysing the use of rhetoric questions in TV talk shows concerning religious education for children. The study report points out that rhetoric questions are useful in avoiding direct and potentially offensive claims which might make the audience mentally uncomfortable. In other words, the contribution of the audience, most of whom are ordinary people, to the formation of discursive practices in TV talk shows is not only limited to increased casualty, but also more ethical concerns in communication.

Considering the ultimate purpose of most TV talk shows is still attract the audience, it is no surprise that researchers make investigation into the power relations between the participants of TV talk shows and the audience. Lee (2018) refers to scaling as an argumentative resource in TV talk shows to entertain the audience, underlining the role of the audience in shaping the discursive practices in TV talk shows. In addition, the semi-institutional communication in TV talk shows is not always aimed at merely entertaining the audience, but sometimes serves as negotiation with the public. According to Hamo (2006), of the Israeli prime-time talk show *Live*, quantitative analyses reveals that there is a positive correlation between the extent to which guests participate in the communication and the popularity of them, and qualitative analyses reveals that social position is a key indicator of the power relations shaping the discursive practices. In addition, Hamo (2010) suggests that the salience and meaning of the ethos of solidarity in these popular Israeli TV talk shows has undergone changes along with progressive commercialization of Israeli media and gradually updated social customs. The report points out that discursive practices in these TV talk shows are deliberately shaped to serve the purpose to reconstruct solidarity among the public.

The existing reports regarding Chinese talk shows have still been too sparse to base a comprehensive review on. In spite of this, some preliminary investigation has already been made into the features of communication in Chinese talk shows. Lee, Chen, and Tan (2013) suggest that silence and face work is commonly used in Chinese talk shows as a part of discursive practice after

analysing two representative Chinese talk shows, namely A Date with Lu Yu and Kang Xi Lai Le (Kangxi comes). They do also point out that silence and face work is necessary in these talk shows because of distinguished social and cultural contexts despite that fact that silence and face work is uncommon in Western talk shows because of limited air time. Since Chinese talk shows are different from their Western counterparts in discursive practices, the power relations shaping their discursive practices are expected to be unique and worth analysing.

Potential forces to exert pressure on talk shows

Some external forces do not directly participate in the communication of talk shows like the host, the guests, and the spectators, but their power is so omnipresent and vertical that they have considerable influence on the contexts and goals of communication in talk shows. Thus, it is necessary to review their influence on the media before discussing the power relations in talk shows.

Commercial organizations as sponsors have considerable influence on the media they sponsor. Besides, such influence is common on the media. According to Dragomir (2018), the media require solid financial support such as regular funding to survive the intense competition, and commercial organizations often become the sponsors of the media for commercial promotion and advertising programs. These commercial organizations are likely to challenge the media to make adjustments to the programs such as talk show according to the demographics of their customer base for the sake of attracting more audience and improving the effectiveness of commercial promotion and advertising programs. As the consequence, the goals of communication in TV programs, like other programs on the media, are not merely what their titles and descriptions indicated, and the discursive practices are unavoidably shaped by these additional goals.

Although the audience seem to be no more than passive recipients of the contents provided by the media, they have actually developed considerable bargaining power with the media since the prosperity of internet began to give birth to an increasing number of medias. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) point out that the media are inclined to provide no other contents than those that are consistent with their audience's values. That is, the audience themselves serve as a strong external force to change the contexts and goals of talk shows. It must be pointed out that the audience referred to in this report do not include the spectators watching the talk show in the studio.

Governments do inevitably have the strength to fund some media and sponsor some TV programs. The only question is whether or not the governments find it necessary to do so in promoting some actions. In fact, since the media, including traditional media such as radio and TV channels and digital media such as social-networking sites (SNSs), has now developed an unprecedented influence on the public, the governments in different countries and regions have already been inclined to nationalize some private media to deliver information and promote actions in a more effective and efficient way (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). In addition, it has been mentioned in some existing reports that the media contribute much to the effectiveness and efficiency of political activities (Kavanaugh et al., 2016; Gul et al., 2016). Thus, it is far from surprising that governments in different countries and regions are influential on the local media and their programs.

It must be pointed out that TV stations in the mainland of China are all state-owned and thus the power of governments is inevitably strong. The positive effects of such control are actually prominent and understandable, such as less unrestricted false and misleading information that decimates media credit (Lorentzen, 2014). Thus, the influence of governments should be considered when discussing the talk shows in the mainland of China.

THE STUDY

Methodology

Sinclair and Coulthard's rank scale model

Sinclair and Coulthard developed a model for the analysis of discourse (or more technically, for the analysis of discourse in class), which is based on a rank scale labeling the elements as lesson, transaction, exchange, move, and act (Burns, 2001). In this study, the analysis is conducted at the level of exchange to focus on the power relations that steer the discursive practice in talk shows. Thus, exchanges, moves, and acts are discussed and analysed in this report.

Exchanges are classified into teaching exchanges and boundary exchanges: the former usually contains three moves, namely initiation, response, and follow-up, while the latter usually contains two moves, namely framing and focusing moves, although all the moves are not always contained (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992). Considering the prominent interactivity embodied in talk shows, most of the exchanges are teaching exchanges, so the focus of this study is on the teaching exchanges in talk shows. According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1992), teaching exchanges are classified into informing, directing, and eliciting exchanges; the informing exchange is for the addresser to share new information with the addressee, the directing exchange is for the addresser to direct the addressee to do something, and the eliciting exchange is for the addresser to take the lead of communication by giving positive, neutral, or negative response to the addressee.

Although Sinclair and Coulthard's rank scale model has been developed to analyse discursive practice in class, it is actually suitable for analysis of discursive practice in TV talk shows, especially for those in China. This is because the host in a Chinese TV talk show, like a teacher in class, is the dominant role in communication, which can be seen from the next part of this report.

Materials

An episode of *A Date with Lu Yu*, one of the most popular TV talk shows in China, was selected for an analysis of discursive practices (Lu, 2013). The title of this episode is "Zhao Wei: To Youthfulness", concerning a movie to be released at that time. The guests invited to this episode of talk show included Zhao Wei, a popular actress in China and also the director of this movie, and the actors and actresses playing the main roles in the movie. This episode, which involved multiple guests and served as a part of the advertising campaign of the movie, is suitable for an analysis of multi-dimensional power relations shaping the discursive practices in talk shows.

Discursive practices in talk shows

In this part, the discursive practices in the talk show are analysed based on some representative exchanges excerpted from the talks between the host and the guests.

Extract. 1

Lu Yu: Let me introduce from the quest over there, Bao Bei'er, Zhang Yao, Liu Yase, Jiang Shuying, Han Geng, Yang Zishan, Zhao Wei.

Lu Yu: OK, now all the members of your team are here.

Zhao Wei: Yes, they are.

This transaction includes two exchanges: one is an informing exchange with the spectators as the addressee, while the other is an eliciting exchange with Zhao Wei as the addressee. The informing exchange in this transaction includes no more than one move, which introduces the guests from left to right (I). The eliciting exchange in this transaction includes two moves, namely the initiation and response (IR), which indicate the essential role of Zhao Wei amongst the quests.

Extract. 2

Lu Yu: I remember that someone...Shuying? Zishan? or Yase? felt very nervous when meeting Zhao Wei, an idol in her childhood, for the first time.

Liu Yase: Me, that's me.

Lu Yu: You?

Jiang Shuying: So did I.

Lu Yu: You too?

Yang Zishan: So did I.

Lu Yu: I'm afraid all of you did so?

Bao Bei'er: So did I.

This is a typical eliciting exchange with the guests as the addressees. Lu Yu asked the guests several questions to guide them in coming to the conclusion that all the other guests consider Zhao Wei to be an important and influential role. Most of the moves are simple questions (I) and positive answers (R), followed by a conclusive question (F). By the end of this exchange, all the other guests had agreed on the essential role amongst the guests in this talk show. It must be pointed out that all the acts from the host were not assertive but interrogative.

Extract. 3

Lu Yu: By the way, I remember that Zishan and Shuying felt frustrated when meeting Zhao Wei for the first time because they had never expected a director to talk so frankly...

Yang Zishan: I remember that for the first time I met the director in the office, she walked in and looked at me, saying "Very adorable, but a bit fat."

Zhao Wei: She was ill at that time, taking pills containing some hormones...very fat...in fact, you are really adorable, although you look somewhat like a sweet dumpling...

Lu Yu: Don't you think it is far from surprising for a freshman girl to be a bit fat? All freshmen are a bit fat.

Zhao Wei: But she does not only play a freshman girl, she, as well as the other actors and actresses I chose, is supposed to play both an innocent freshman, who has just began a relationship with someone else, and an experienced adult, who has undergone too much to be naive...they must act like that.

Although two guests, namely Yang Zishan and Zhao Wei, are involved in this eliciting exchange, they can be referred to as a whole in analysis. This is another eliciting exchange in the talk show, where Lu Yu mentioned the feelings of Yang Zishan and Jiang Shuying about Zhao Wei to raise the topic (I). Yang Zishan and Zhao Wei started a casual conversation (R). Lu Yu asked a rhetorical question to elicit the subsequent topic (F), and Zhao Wei shared some information about her criteria for selection of actors and actresses. In this exchange, Lu Yu took two moves, one of which contains an important act, namely a rhetorical question.

Extract. 4

Lu Yu: Would you like to introduce some of the roles they play? For example, Bei'er and Yao?

Zhao Wei: Let him introduce by his own.

Bao Bei'er: Without containing spoilers, I will describe the role I play...

...

Bao Bei'er: ...I think I am important, but other people...

Zhao Wei: Yes, you exactly are.

Lu Yu: A man like him does often sneak into your heart, right?

Zhao Wei: Yes, but no more spoilers.

Lu Yu: No spoilers, this is difficult, so we are not going to introduce all roles, after all spoilers are often unavoidable.

Zhao Wei: Exactly.

This is a transaction containing one eliciting exchange and one directing exchange, which is relatively distinguished from the other exchanges in the talk show. In the eliciting exchange, Lu Yu asked Zhao Wei to introduce some roles (I), and thus Zhao Wei asked Bao Bei'er to introduce the role he plays by his own (R). After a long response from Bao Bei'er, Lu Yu made comments on his description in attempt to elicit more information (F). However, the subsequent directing exchange takes place with Zhao Wei as the addresser, who prevented Lu Yu from digging out more information (I). And then Lu Yu stopped and agreed to end the topic (R), and Zhao Wei agreed (F).

Extract. 5

Lu Yu: After completing the movie, each of you...well, the director has inevitably been anticipating, are you anticipating nervously, or passionately? Zishan?

Yang Zishan: Passionately!

Lu Yu: So is Han Geng?

Han Geng: Yes, I am looking forward to the audience's feedbacks.

Zhao Wei: All of them wish the audience would go to cinema for this movie, because they are all very confident.

Lu Yu: Exactly.

Zhao Wei: Just now I said they are the best.

Lu Yu: The director thinks you are the best.

Zhao Wei: Exactly.

It is an eliciting exchange; Lu Yu asked the guests to share the feelings about their performance in the movie (I), and the guests claimed that they have confidence (R).

Extract. 6

Lu Yu: I think everyone should go to cinema for this movie, and some of our staff have already watched it. Some people might find the story somewhat familiar and moving. Although feelings differ from each other, I think everyone will be moved.

Zhao Wei: Yes, it is like that, more or less.

Lu Yu: Will be moved and get emotional...

Han Geng: When I read the ending of this movie, I was considerably moved to tears.

Lu Yu: Tears are an index, I guess.

It is an eliciting exchange; Lu Yu described the movie as moving to anyone (I), and the guests agreed with her (R). Interestingly, in this exchange, the moves by the host were informative and descriptive, and the acts from the host were no longer interrogative but assertive.

Extract. 7

Lu Yu: Are you going to cinema for this movie? Or...I know you will watch the premiere, but will you go to cinema for a second round with some friends? For the sake of experiencing it once again?

Han Geng: No less than three times.

Lu Yu: At least three times...What about Shuying and Zishan? And Yase, Yao-yao?

Zhang Yao: I guess I will go many times...

...

It is an eliciting exchange; Lu Yu deliberately asked the guests whether or not they would go to cinema more than once for the movie (I). One of the guests told her that he would go three or more times for the movie (R). Then, Lu Yu asked other guests how many times they would go to cinema for the movie (F).

DISCUSSION

The power relations reflected in Extract. 1 suggest the dominant role of Lu Yu in this talk show. From a perspective of knowledge, Zhao Wei, and even any one of the guests, were able to introduce all the guests without making a mistake. However, Lu Yu did not only undertake the introduction, but also ranked these guests in a deliberate and subtle way. On the other hand, Lu Yu referred to Zhao Wei as the most important guest, intentionally and implicitly. In summary, the hierarchical structure of the communication was established at the very beginning of the talk show, and thus the following talks also showed considerable institutional features.

The power relations reflected in Extract. 2 are similar to those in Extract. 1. However, the power of Lu Yu is relatively implicit and the power of Zhao Wei is explicit in this exchange as a part of discursive practice. Although Zhao Wei did not even contribute a word, Lu Yu steered this exchange to the direction that favored her influence to prepare for the subsequent exchanges centering on her. At the very beginning of this talk show, Lu Yu made a clear distinction between the primary and secondary guests, presenting with dominance in the talk show. On the other hand, the interrogative acts by the host contributed much to the conversational atmosphere of communication, making it seem less institutional.

The semi-institutional nature of talk shows is well reflected in Extract. 3. The communication between Zhao Wei and Yang Zishan has typical conversational features; they both took the non-institutional roles in communicating without clear goals for interactions. However, Lu Yu's talks have typical institutional features, steering the communication towards the subsequent topics. In this exchange, Lu Yu presented with the power as a coordinator in communication, taking control of the direction and rhythm of the talk show. The rhetorical question is an essential act for the analysis of discursive practice and power relations embodied in this exchange. On one hand, a rhetorical question is not asked to expect an yes-or-no answer, but a means to warn the addressee of a fact; as a matter of fact, Lu Yu was asking the guests to pay attention to the contexts and focus on the topic, playing the role of an organizer in communication. On the other hand, Lu Yu was striving to make the atmosphere less embarrassing between the two guests, playing the role of a coordinator in communication.

The discursive practices in Extract. 1 and 2 show that Lu Yu is the dominant role in the talk show, and the discursive practices in Extract. 3 clarify her tasks in communication. Lu Yu does not only organize the structure of the texts in the talk show, but also coordinate the power relations between primary and secondary guests.

The power relations reflected in Extract. 4 are complex and multi-dimensional. Of the guests, Bao Bei'er is the second senior artist next to Zhao Wei, so he was allowed to respond to the request from Lu Yu, rather than Zhang Yao. The power of seniority is well reflected in this exchange, shaping the discursive practices performed by both Lu Yu and Zhao Wei. However, another force's power is better reflected in the subsequent exchange. That is, the power relations between the commercial organizations sponsoring the movie, and perhaps the talk show, and the guests and the host are influential on the discursive practices here. From a perspective of institutional communication, this talk show has two interactive goals, including attracting the audience watching TV and advertising the movie. Thus, the discursive practices must serve these goals, and

the power of Lu Yu suffered a slight and transient decline because she had been on the edge to violate the principles of a commercial context.

The power relations reflected in Extract. 5 are even more implicit, because it is actually the commercial organizations sponsoring the movie that played the essential role in shaping the discursive practices involved in this exchange. As aforementioned, one of the main purposes of this talk show is to attract more people to go to cinema for the movie. Under such contexts, the host must elicit some information favoring the attractiveness of the movie, so she raised a topic to lead the guests in making positive comments on the movie.

Conversational as it seems, Extract. 6 is actually a part of institutional communication, because it is characterized by a clear goal. That is, this exchange is aimed at conveying a message to the audience, which tells them that the movie is moving and worth paying for. The power relations between the media and the public are reflected in this exchange, shaping the form and determining the contents of communication in this talk show.

No obvious hierarchical structure can be seen in this exchange from a perspective of communication, and no clear goals can be identified in Extract. 7. As the consequence, this exchange seems to be no more than a part of casual conversation. However, this exchange does actually have a predetermined goal. That is, the host was steering the talks towards the topic about how many times the movie is worth paying for, in attempt to coax the audience to go to cinema more than once and contribute more to the commercial profits associated with the movie. Thus, this exchange was actually goal-oriented, and the guests were actually unlikely to give negative answers in this context. The power relations shaping such discursive practices lied in the collaboration between commercial organizations sponsoring the movie and the TV channel.

The institutional features of *A Date with Lu Yu* can be summarized as follows: 1) the forms of talk are heterogeneous, with informing, directing, and eliciting exchanges included; 2) the talks are highly goal-oriented and predictable, aiming to promote or advertise something; 3) specific restrictions exist, such as avoiding spoilers; 4) the host and the guests take their institutional roles in talks; 5) a hierarchical distribution of representation based on power relations can be identified, and the host steer the talks most of the time; 6) in addition to the host and the guests, the audience watching TV and the spectators have full access to the contents of talks, and thus the host and the guests have to mind their comments that have negative influence on these indirect participants.

One of the commonest mistakes commercial organizations have made in media based advertising programs is that all audiences from different countries and regions in the world are not considered in preparing audience-oriented advertising contents (Kwon, et al., 2014; Shin, Pang, and Kim, 2015). However, it seems far from an issue in this talk show, because the target audience of the movie are Chinese speakers and the audience base of the talk show are also Chinese people.

FINDINGS

First, similar to Western talk shows, Chinese talk shows are also characterized by semi-institutional communication. Second, the hierarchical structure of representation in communication is prominently reflected in Chinese talk shows. Specifically, the host plays the

essential role, and even the guests are divided into primary and secondary ones. As far as this talk show is concerned, Lu Yu plays the dominant role in the talk show, serving as both the organizer and the coordinator. Zhao Wei is the essential role amongst the guests, sometimes intervening with the direction and rhythm of responses from other guests, but she has no chance to raise a topic as Lu Yu did. Other guests than Zhao Wei are passive recipients in the talk show most of the time. They have no chance to raise or end a topic, or even contribute the least to the arrangements of the talks. Last, but not the least, the social power relations involving the host, the guests, and the external forces, shape the discursive practices in Chinese talk shows. Especially, the commercial organizations sponsoring the media have a strong power in determining the goals of and shaping the forms of discursive practices.

CONCLUSION

As stated above, *A Date with Lu Yu* is a Chinese talk show based on semi-institutional communication characterized by multi-dimensional power relations and hierarchical structure in communication. Specifically, the whole talk show is well organized to meet the requirements of commercial advertising programs and the communication is promotion-oriented, and thus the discursive practices are performed considering the demands of commercial organizations. The host, namely Lu Yu, is responsible for raising topics and steering the talks, so almost all exchanges are started by her and the guests respond to her without raising topics most of the time. Casual conversations take place at times but are usually short and started by one of the secondary roles, such as a less popular guest than others.

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