Getting Close to the Media World

An ethnographic analysis of everyday encounters with the film industry in contemporary China

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Design by Min Xu

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research topic

A movie theatre in Shanghai, Christmas Day 2017. When the movie, *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* (Chinese adaptation), stops and the lights come back on, no one moves. The main event is still to come. Everyone stares at the stage, expecting the director and key players to walk out. It is time for the Q&A session incorporated into the so-called 'Roadshow', a well-known and popular event in the fast-growing Chinese media culture where audiences can interact with the directors and actors of new movies.

As the Q&A session starts, a young man in the audience gets the opportunity to ask the famous actress a question. He says, "My sister really likes you. She wanted me to ask you how you deal with disappointments in life." Before answering, the actress smiles and utters, "So you do not want to be here. It is your sister who wanted to come." Many in the auditorium laughed. Unlike the young man, those audiences are actually very excited to be there and to finally see the film professionals with their own eyes.

Interestingly, for the sister of the young man, having a relative to interact with the actress she admires still means a lot to her. Because of the face-to-face interaction on her behalf, the sister can claim that she has had a personal association with the famous actress, even though she has not met the actress in person. Having such an association is already different from and considered more valuable than a technologically mediated encounter, e.g. posting a question to the actress on a microblogging site.

What happens at this film event conveys many people's desire to see famous faces in real-world settings. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon, as it has been noted in previous studies. For example, in the nineteenth century, when Victorian literary celebrity Charles Dickens first visited the United States, people were so eager to meet the renowned author that Dickens spent two hours a day simply shaking hands with his readers (Glass, 2016). However, the enthusiasm for meeting famous people seems to

have a fundamentally different context in the twenty-first century, especially because of two contrasting trends in contemporary media culture. On the one hand, everyday audiences are well informed of what is going on with public figures via the media. As Rojek (2012) comments, 'It is a peculiar quality of modern culture that, via the media, ordinary men and women possess the means to be familiar with much of the private lives of celebrities without ever having shaken their hands or even set eyes upon them face-to-face' (p. 2). Taking this logic one step further, one could argue that the idea of face-to-face interaction with those whom we know from the media seems rather unusual or unnecessary, as it offers *less private information* than we get through the media. On the other hand, many people nowadays still seem to be eager to get close to the people and places they know from the media, and where possible, even become part of that media world. For example, celebrity sightings on various occasions, trips to film and television studios, media conventions, and being a studio audience are some well-known ways to catch a glimpse of media productions and media people up close and personal (e.g. Ferris, 2001; Ferris & Harris, 2011; Ricci, 2011). The internet provides countless numbers of "how-to" articles offering tips on how to spot celebrities in Cannes, or how to be part of a live TV show audience in Los Angeles, posted by individuals and promoted by travel organisations.

In China, these two contrasting trends have been further developed by the booming proliferation of new media. Approximately 802 million Chinese people actively use the Internet, and 98 percent of them are mobile users (McCarthy, 2018). People read entertainment news wherever and whenever they want. Entertainment news has penetrated news apps and social media platforms. However, despite the endless information that audiences are confronted with through the Internet, they continue to seek celebrities and media professionals in the flesh, as testified for example, by the huge popularity of movie roadshows.

What is the appeal and importance of these 'close', seemingly 'unmediated' encounters with the media in real life? In this dissertation, encounters refer to the desire and related practices among 'normal people' to experience a close physical proximity

to objects, places or people from the 'media world'. Examples of these encounters are looking at or interacting with celebrities in real life at public events or engaging with media production activities on-site. This dissertation delivers an in-depth analysis of such encounters with the media in contemporary society, focusing in particular on China. Focusing on China is important for two reasons. First, there is a scarcity of research on the topic. The few existing studies on media encounters focus exclusively on examples in the United Kingdom and the United States (e.g. Couldry, 2000; Ferris, 2001; Ferris & Harris, 2011; Bolling & Smith, 2014; Stever, 2016; Williams, 2016; Lam, 2018). The second reason is the remarkable growth of the Chinese film industry in the last decade and its expected growth for the years to come (e.g. Richeri, 2016; Deloitte, 2017). Understanding encounters with this booming film industry can shed light on some characteristics of the Chinese film industry from a unique perspective.

1.1.1 Studying encounters with the media

Current empirical studies of face-to-face encounters with celebrities often focus on fan-celebrity relations (e.g. Ferris, 2001; Bolling & Smith, 2014; Stever, 2016). The meanings for fans are to some extent consistent across these different studies (e.g. Ferris & Harris, 2011; Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland, & Boross, 2014). As Ferris and Harris (2011) identified, fans interested in face-to-face encounters consider such moments superior to 'standard' media consumption. The encounter is interactional and co-present, which has the potential to amend certain asymmetries in usual fan–celebrity relations. Because of face-to-face encounters, fans may feel that they have gathered 'evidence' about the 'real' person behind the mediated information and fictional characters in media productions. The encounters intensify fan–celebrity (pseudo-) social relations. Moreover, fans may feel that they have received some personal attention from an actor, for example, during an autograph encounter, and the autographed picture is then a trophy that fans take from that encounter (Ferris & Harris, 2011). This 'evidence' and the related 'trophies' can have a personal value, but might also operate as 'popular

cultural capital' (Fiske, 1989) within wider fan networks.

Another example is the study of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato, conducted by Reijnders et al. (2014). The authors identified the patterns that make these meet-and-greets a meaningful experience for the participants: 1) the participants project the emotional content of the famous singer's music onto the singer himself, and meet-and-greets serve to validate such projection; 2) within the fan hierarchy, direct, personal contact with Borsato serves as an exclusive status symbol; 3) meet-and-greets sometimes play a key role in personal life narratives of healing.

As these different studies show, 'unmediated', face-to-face encounters with the media, in general, have become valuable in today's mediatised society. For example, many people visit Granada Studios, the set for Coronation Street, a popular British soap opera (Couldry, 2000). Many people seem to have an underlying urge to bring the fictional world of popular culture into real life; they feel a need for proximity—being up-close to the stars and the stories that they have grown up with (Reijnders, 2011). As Reijnders (2011) suggests, such a need for proximity implicitly suggests a more fundamental 'feeling of distance', a rift 'between what is experienced as the world in the media and the world outside of it' (p. 106). When our lives continue to be mediatised, unmediated encounters with the media are also becoming increasingly special, as people hope to go beyond the mediated and seek tangible evidence of places, people or objects that have appeared in the media.

Among the empirical studies on encounters with celebrities, two frameworks are often used to theorise these encounters. One is Erving Goffman's theories of interaction (1959; 1983). The other is Nick Couldry's theories on the place of media power (2000) and media rituals (2003; 2012). To start with the first: several studies have employed Goffman's theories of interaction to address co-presence and additional cues in fan-celebrity encounters. For Goffman (1967), social interaction 'occurs during co-presence and by virtue of co-presence' (p.1). As Ferris and Harris (2011) point out, co-presence, 'actual face-to-face contact between interactants' is crucial to fan-celebrity relations (p. 30). Physical co-presence is sought after by fans, especially when interactions

nowadays are often facilitated by technology and conducted outside of co-presence. Goffman's theories also highlight the availability of additional cues during a face-to-face interaction, such as glances, gestures, positionings, etc. In the case of encounters with celebrity actors, audiences witness, first-hand, verbal and non-verbal expressions of the actors, and interactions between actors (Lam, 2018).

While Goffman's framework for encounters focuses on the interaction and co-presence with individual celebrities, Couldry's framework critically addresses the overarching 'media world'. The starting point of Couldry's theories of the place of media power (2000) and media rituals (2003; 2012) is the idea that there is a symbolic difference between inside and outside the media. In line with the symbolic difference between inside and outside of the media, Couldry notices a parallel distinction between the 'media world' and the 'ordinary world' (or 'everyday life'). The ordinary world is where people live and do mundane activities. The 'media world', in comparison, is presented and experienced as somewhat better, more special and more glamorous, more intensive than 'ordinary life'. Couldry's theories help to deconstruct not only face-to-face encounters with people in the media, such as celebrities, but also encounters with important places from the media, such as studios or locations where filming or media production goes on (e.g. Reijnders, 2010; Kim & Reijnders, 2018), and connect these practices to wider ideas about the role and status of the media in our contemporary world.

Media rituals are defined as 'formalised actions organised around key media-related categories and boundaries' (Couldry, 2003, p.29). In other words, when people cross from the everyday world into the media world, media-related categories are performed, and people act out categorical differences in formalised ways, thus making it a media ritual.

1.2 Research gaps and positioning

By analysing media encounters in China, this dissertation aims to deliver an empirical, theoretical and societal contribution. First, the dissertation delivers an original empirical contribution. So far, studies on media encounters in non-Western cultural contexts remain scarce. From Granada Studios Tour (Couldry, 2000) to the 'Star Trek' convention (Ferris & Harris, 2011) and meet-and-greets with Marco Borsato (Reijnders et al., 2014), and to a Question and Answer session with Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman (Lam, 2018), existing studies are pre-dominantly based on examples in Western countries. However, the existing findings are not sufficient to understand and explain media encounters in the rapidly growing non-Western media cultures. This is not only because people make sense of media messages and products through various cultural backgrounds, norms, and values (Elliott & Boyd, 2018), but also because media-related practices themselves are connected with local contexts. Asian-focused studies can provide empirical grounds to test the applicability of Eurocentric media ritual theory in other contexts (Couldry, 2003, 2012), and serve as a starting point for future comparative studies on audience engagement with media culture.

Secondly, the dissertation responds to Couldry's theories (2000, 2003, 2012), and aims to nuance and update this theory on the basis of original empirical findings. Due to a limited number of studies on encounters with the media, some important aspects have, until now, remained understudied. For example, the production side of media rituals needs further investigation. Understanding the perspective of the producers will help to explain not only the protocol and structures of encounters, but will also paint a bigger picture of the machinery of celebrity culture. As a celebrity's fame is, to a large degree, factory-based fame designed in a veiled system (Rojek, 2012), the questions of why practitioners also make an effort to support direct, 'unveiled' encounters with the media, and how these encounters add to the existing factory system, need to be answered.

Another understudied aspect is everyday audiences' perceptions of media rituals,

such as those who have not participated in media rituals yet but who are motivated to do so in the future. The interests of larger audience groups in physically engaging with the media remain unknown. Probing into everyday audiences' perceptions will help in understanding why encounters with the media are welcomed in the first place. Therefore, this research adds the meanings and underlying cultural values of media encounters to the theoretical framework of media rituals. Moreover, this research also reflects on the relevance of the media ritual theory in the current era of new and social media.

Finally, this dissertation also aims to have societal impact. As 1.3 billion Chinese people are experiencing massive social transformations, the inner experience of many people can become complicated and polarised (Zhou, 2017). Participants' experiences and meanings of media rituals in the film industry identified in the research show the potential significance of media-related practices for those involved in an increasingly mediatised society. The dissertation, therefore, also invites policy makers and stakeholders in the cultural sector to further consider the wishes and interests of the public with regard to the media world.

1.3 Research questions

This dissertation revolves around encounters with the Chinese media industry, in particular encounters between ordinary people and people associated with the film sector. Such encounters are not the only type of media rituals (see more examples of media rituals in Section 2.2.2). Nevertheless, they have become one of the most central and powerful media rituals in today's Chinese society.

Media rituals are 'open to individual appropriation and reflection, as every ritual performance is always only a rough approximation of some imagined form' (Couldry, 2005, p. 65). As a result, media rituals have a high degree of ambiguity. In order to deal with that ambiguity, we need to include the different perspectives and interests of the

different agents. Therefore, this research has adopted a multi-perspective approach, involving audiences, organisers, and participants.

The overarching question of the dissertation is: What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society? 'Unmediated' encounters refer to face-to-face encounters that take place in physical locations. I use quotation marks around 'unmediated' because these encounters are, in fact, highly mediated. Most of these encounters are decidedly organised, and even in the case of 'accidental' encounters, our behaviour is regulated by cultural codes, etiquettes and norms that govern the difference between celebrities and 'normal' people. However, what these events lack is an *electronic* mediation – an absence that actually defines the special nature of these events.

The following four sub-questions help to investigate the overarching query:

1. How do everyday audiences perceive celebrities from the media, and what are their ideas and expectations of 'unmediated' encounters with these famous ones?
2. What are the motives for organising 'unmediated' encounters with film celebrities?
3. What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters in the wider film culture?
4. What are the motives of 'ordinary' people for participating in professional media productions, and how do they experience being 'in' the media?

These questions will be addressed by way of four empirical case studies:

1. Everyday engagements with celebrity culture and expectations of encounters with the famous
2. Inside the movie roadshow: producing encounters at popular media events
3. The attraction of encountering film industry professionals at Shanghai

International Film Festival

4. Living in the media: on the motives and experiences of extras at Hengdian World Studios

All these case studies address the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world. Meanwhile, each case study zooms in on a particular setting, and the perspective of a particular group of people involved in these encounters. To investigate the research questions, the empirical studies mainly employ two methods: qualitative interviews and observations. In total, sixty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with people from different regions of Mainland China, including everyday audiences, media practitioners, live audiences, and participants of media productions. Based on these interviews and observations, this dissertation aims to explore how media encounters are organised and experienced, and how they impact our society and culture.

1.4 Overview of the dissertation

The next chapter will introduce the theoretical background of the dissertation, starting from the traditions and paradigm shifts of audience research and moving to the topic of encounters with the media. To theorise and further frame the topic of encounters, the chapter will not only discuss Couldry's media ritual concept and its relevance in the era of social media, but also rethink the categories of media encounters. The chapter will then depict the Chinese context of media culture through the film industry, in particular.

Chapter 3 explains the methods used within this dissertation. It starts with an introduction of the interpretative paradigm. Next, the chapter discusses phenomenology as a research approach, and the case study design that this dissertation has adopted. It moves on to describe the methods of interviews and observations.

In Chapters 4 through 7, the four empirical studies are presented. These case studies focus on different aspects of media encounters: perceptions of everyday audiences or

potential participants (Chapter 4), the production side of media encounters (Chapter 5), the audience perspective (Chapter 6), and long-term participation in productions as a more intensive version of encounters (Chapter 7). Through an investigation of a variety of media encounters, the case studies investigated in these four chapters build a more comprehensive understanding of the subject, providing greater insight for scholars of media studies into the relevance of media rituals in contemporary Chinese media culture.

Chapter 4 presents the 'prologue' of media encounters and studies how everyday audiences perceive celebrities, value or disvalue certain celebrities, and whether they are motivated to see celebrities in real life, and if so, why. Celebrity culture in the Chinese context involves complicated and intriguing dimensions, such as tensions between tradition and modernity, the occasional divergence between social norms and the promoted value system, and tensions between collectivism and/or individualism. Given these complexities of celebrity culture in China, the investigation into the values and norms embedded in everyday uses of celebrity culture becomes imperative.

Chapter 5 investigates the role of media practitioners and goes behind the scene of the Chinese movie roadshow: a film promotional event featuring face-to-face encounters that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Organising roadshows has become a recurring practice among many film practitioners, boosting the growth of the Chinese film industry and making face-to-face events more accessible to audiences across China. Nowadays, it is no longer surprising that core members of a production team visit more than thirty cities for over two hundred roadshows. The chapter explores the motivations and techniques of such a popular media event. Specifically, it discusses how roadshows are staged as ritualised events, and the implications of organising such face-to-face events for the Chinese film industry.

Chapter 6 explores face-to-face encounters with media professionals at festival talks from film festival-goers' perspectives. Approximately one hundred talks delivered by directors, actors and actresses are one of the highlights at the Shanghai International Film Festival each year, which is one of the largest film festivals in East Asia. Despite the popularity of these festival talks, they have not been studied intensively in film

festival studies. This chapter investigates film festival-goers' expectations and the experiences of seeing and listening to film industry professionals, and seeks to understand how they value these encounters with the film world.

Chapter 7 studies the dreams, ambitions and anxieties of a group of extras at Hengdian World Studios, the so-called 'Hollywood of the East'. In this world's largest outdoor film studio, between two and three thousand extras participate in TV/film productions each day. Yet, their experiences remain unknown to many. The chapter delves into their motivations and experiences, and explores the meanings of being an extra in today's mediatised society.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I will compare and integrate the results from these separate case studies and shed light on the central themes of this research. The chapter will then respond to Couldry's theories on the place of media power (2002) and media rituals (2003; 2012), and the burgeoning interest in audiences meeting celebrities in media industries (e.g. Ferris, 2010; Ferris & Harris, 2011; Reijnders et al., 2014; Bolling & Smith, 2014; Stever, 2016; Williams, 2016; Lam, 2018). Finally, the chapter will end by discussing the specificities of the Chinese context, by comparing the results of this dissertation with those of existing studies performed in the West.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter aims to provide an overview of theories, approaches, and studies relevant for investigating 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary China. Such an overview must begin with the main agents, namely audiences and producers. To make the discussion most relevant to my research focus, I first review the debate about 'produser', a concept which merges the roles of producer and user. The first subsection, therefore, not only sheds light on a contextual background of the digital age, but also introduces the issues of audiences and media producers' power.

Following this broad discussion about the power of traditional media and media producers through the debate about 'produser', I then review some studies on a particular type of audience—live audiences and the live experience. I discuss live audiences instead of media audiences in general because 'unmediated' encounters are characterised by a nature of liveness. Next, I discuss the concept of media rituals, which is directly connected with the research question. I also explain the relevance of the media ritual concept in the era of social media, and reconsider different categories of media rituals. Finally, the last section of this chapter zooms in on the film industry and media rituals within the Chinese context.

2.1 Studying audiences and producers in an era of social media

This section discusses the concept of 'produser' which merges the roles of producer and user. In the act of produsing, these produsers are said to go beyond the 'passive' act of reading and watching, typical for the era of traditional mass media, and have become active participants in online media culture. Examples of user-led content 'production' include Wikipedia, blogs, YouTube, and OurMedia, etc. For example, Bruns (2008a) coins the term 'produser' to describe users who are 'necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base' (p. 2). By the same token, he introduces the concept of

'produsage' to describe 'the social, technological, and economic environment of user-led content creation' (Bruns, 2008a, p. 2). For Bruns (2008a), what the collaborative construction of online sites and social-networking platforms presents is not just a new form of content production. Instead, produsage communities in the digital environment engage in the continuous creation and extension of knowledge, demonstrating the turn towards participatory online culture. Therefore, scholars have argued that the top-down nature of the media has been challenged, and user-produced content is affecting the traditional media, indicating a demise of the traditional mass media (e.g. Bruns, 2008b; Gross, 2009).

The debate about 'produsage' is interesting and ongoing. Most media scholars will agree that the rise of the social media has changed our contemporary mediascape. That said, the concept of produsage and the underlying claims have also met with a lot of critique. Firstly, several scholars are skeptical about the applicability of the notion of produsers. After all, most people still spend far more time as 'passive' audiences than we do as media producers (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2011; Bonini & Monclús, 2015).

Secondly, the 'produser' concept exhibits another pitfall; it fails to acknowledge or include audience reception. For Carpentier (2011), the 'produser' concept overemphasises content production and leads to insufficient attention for the reception of online content, which is problematic. Not all content is appreciated by its audiences because audiences of online content are not passive. Instead, they actively interpret online content, liking or disliking content. Furthermore, Carpentier (2011) points out that the situation of producer and audience being conflated may lead us to view all audiences of participatory media as active participants and to assume that passive consumption is absent or regrettable.

Thirdly, scholars point out another drawback of the 'produser' concept: by celebrating the active role of modern-day media users, the large institutional power of media executives and/or creators is being downplayed. For example, instead of celebrating the freedom of produsers, one could also argue that user-generated content sites such as Facebook and YouTube are using free labour in the interests of corporate

profits (Andrejevic, 2007). In her article, *Are we all 'produsers' now?*, Bird (2011) warns against downplaying the power of media producers, as there seems to be an overemphasis on the emerging cultural power of the 'audience,' 'to whom industry has to respond and accommodate.' In particular, she questions whether the 'produsers' are indeed 'the dominant model of the media audience in the twenty-first century' and warns that 'the celebration of the online produser simply masks the ever-increasing power of the media industry' (Bird, 2011).Similarly, Turow and Draper (2014) ask, 'How broad and deep is this power by individuals and volunteer networks of collaborators compared to the large institutional brokers of cultural and political power in society?' (p. 649). Indeed, audiences are involved in the realities that the industrial mechanisms construct, and we need to take such industrial mechanisms into account (Turow & Draper, 2014). Just because the concept of 'produsers' has garnered so much attention and helped us understand participatory online culture, does not mean we should underestimate the power of traditional mass media and industry creators or producers.

The debate around the rise of 'produsers' provides my research with two major insights. First of all, it is still worth examining the power of traditional media in an era of social media; we should not assume that traditional media such as TV and film are no longer important or that industry producers are no longer powerful. Similarly, it is worth looking into the power relations between traditional media and new / social media platforms. Finally, another insight is that it remains important to further investigate the current relationship between traditional media and audiences. Instead of focusing solely on new and social media usage, I would like to advocate a more holistic approach, by looking at how audiences are positioned vis-a-vis both the traditional and social media in an era of convergence (Jenkins, 2008). As we will read in the following sections, the phenomenon of unmediated encounters between 'normal' people and 'extraordinary' people from the media forms an ideal case to further investigate these tensions.

2.2 Encounters as media rituals

In this dissertation, I aim to analyse the importance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media. Although Couldry's media ritual theory is not the only way to approach this topic (for example, see 1.1.1), it is the most important framework, especially because of its critical approach. This subsection takes a closer look at the media ritual theory, its relevance in the era of social media, and different types of media encounters based on a categorisation of media rituals.

2.2.1 Analysing Couldry's theory of media rituals

Media rituals, put simply, are social forms that naturalise media authority (Couldry, 2012). The media ritual theory deconstructs myths society holds surrounding the special status of the media. The two myths inherent in the form of media rituals include: 1) a core of 'truth' or a 'natural' centre of society; 2) media's claim of a privileged relationship to that 'centre'.

The first myth is the myth of the centre: This idea claims that society has a 'centre', that a core of 'truth' underlies such centralisation, and that we should value the 'truth' as the centre of 'our' way of life. The myth of the centre is open to appropriation, for example, by media institutions (Couldry, 2012). The second myth concerns the claim that 'the media' has a privileged relationship to the 'centre' of society. The 'natural' role of 'the media' is to represent or frame the 'centre' of society. How are the first myth and the second myth connected? As Couldry (2003) suggests, the idea that society has a 'centre' helps naturalise the idea that we need media. At the same time, media's claims as society's 'frame' help naturalise the idea that there is a social 'centre' to be re-presented.

The 'myth of the mediated centre' is thus a label for practices through which media power is legitimated. By 'media power', Couldry (2000) refers to the media's concentration of symbolic power of constructing reality. A lot of people depend on the

media as a way to build and maintain their worldviews. The media's symbolic power is not automatic; media institutions or media texts do not 'possess' media power. Instead, the media's symbolic power is continually reproduced through various practices.

Media rituals are formalised patterns of behavior (i.e. practices) in which a categorical distinction is made between what is 'in' the media and what is not, thus differentiating 'media' persons/things/worlds from 'ordinary' (or non-media) persons/things/worlds. The hierarchy of what is 'in' the media over what is not 'in' the media helps reinforce the status of the media and naturalise the media's symbolic power (Couldry, 2000).

According to Couldry (2003), media rituals are actions organised around key media-related categories such as 'media person/thing/place/world'. Performance of these media-related categories and boundaries reinforces and helps legitimate the 'value' that the media is the access point to our social 'centre'. Examples of acting out these categorical differences, as Couldry (2003) suggests, include: people holding back or rushing forward at the sight of a celebrity; people holding back before entering a place 'in' the media to emphasise boundary crossing (Couldry, 2000); media people's performances to acknowledge their specialness in front of non-media crowds, etc. Through these kinds of (sometimes unintended) media rituals, we act out and naturalise the myth of the mediated centre. In other words, rituals, condensed forms of action, are the moments when the media authority is being marked – the moments of legitimating and naturalising media power.

2.2.2 Categorising media rituals

According to Couldry (2003), a media-related action only becomes a media ritual when the following aspects occur: 1) the above described media-related categories are put to work, and 2) ritualised actions occur as people act out categorical differences in ways that are sufficiently formalised.

What kinds of contexts are we talking about in daily practice? Couldry gives some examples of the places that have been saturated with media rituals but have been little researched:

- studios, or any place where filming or media production goes on;
- sites to encounter people (or things) in the media;
- moments where non-media people perform for the media, for example posing for a camera (Couldry, 2003, p. 51).

Based on the list of examples above, media rituals roughly fall into three categories which revolve around place, person, and activities, respectively: first, entering a place, which is the media 'world', such as studios and filming locations; second, meeting with people who are associated with the media; third, performing activities for the media, such as non-media people's posing for a camera, and performing in formalised media context, such as a talk show or reality TV show.

Among these different types of media rituals, I focus on one particular type of media ritual in this dissertation, namely, 'unmediated' encounters with the media. I do this for two major reasons. First, 'unmediated' encounters with the media are understudied, and yet, such a practice has become increasing popular in contemporary Chinese society. These 'unmediated' encounters with the media are mostly publicly observable, with a large number of participants. To deepen our understanding of the power of traditional media in the digital age, it is almost impossible to ignore the prevalent practice of encountering the media world. Secondly, 'unmediated' encounters with the media is a relatively broad type of media ritual which can include various practices, such as meetings with media people, and encountering the media 'world'. Due to the scope of the dissertation and how nuanced media rituals can be, it would be reasonable to focus explicitly on this type of media ritual and cover it in depth. Any type of media ritual can be nuanced because the levels of engagement are different when non-media people experience media rituals.

In the following subsections, I will discuss the different types of face-to-face encounters, using the case studies to illustrate the settings and types. The subsections are presented in multiple stages of increasing engagement: anticipating encounters (section 2.2.3), face-to-face encounters in specialised events (section 2.2.4) and in general film-themed settings (section 2.2.5), and (long-term) participatory encounters in media productions (section 2.2.6).

2.2.3 Anticipating encounters: everyday audience engagement

Before discussing different types of media ritual, it is worth noting that to obtain a more complete view of media rituals, the research should not be limited to the practices of media rituals per se, which would leave out discussions of preconditions and long-term impacts. The assumed legitimacy of media's symbolic power is reproduced through media rituals, and yet, at a personal level, it is unclear why non-media individuals would like to join or not join particular media rituals. In the case of meeting celebrities, it is reasonable to assume that those who want to meet celebrities are fans, but other more inclusive motives have also been identified, such as celebrity spotting (e.g. Ricci, 2011). Therefore, the stage of pre-ritual deserves investigation, as it can provide insights into the meanings of the media for wider audiences.

With the aim to understand the mindsets behind everyday audience engagement with celebrities, chapter 4 probes into not only people's perceptions of celebrities, but also their opinions on whether they want to meet celebrities or not. The 'non-mediacentric' approach, with which Couldry's approach to researching media rituals is in line, advocates this type of decentering the media - investigating 'the everyday articulation of the relevance of media and communication without assuming this from the outset' (Hepp, 2010, p. 46). My case study, in this sense, focuses on the everyday articulation of the relevance of celebrities. What kinds of celebrities do people value and disvalue? How, and to what extent, do they engage with the celebrities? These questions are necessary to study their potential interest, participation, or disinterest in

media rituals.

2.2.4 Face-to-face encounters in specialised events

Face-to-face encounters with media people compose a major category of media rituals. Such encounters refer to everyday audiences seeing and possibly interacting with media people in face-to-face settings. Ritualised meetings with celebrities are an example of media encounters that one may immediately think of, featuring the distinction between celebrities ('media people') and 'ordinary people,' which parallels the symbolic division between 'inside' and 'outside' the media. For these staged encounters, there can be nuances in different settings. This and the next subsection introduce two case studies in different settings. Respectively, they are specialised events that feature face-to-face interactions with directors and key players, and a more general setting which is often associated with the general atmosphere of media 'world' and usually consists of many events. A specialised event is usually a one-off event in a single location, such as a promotional event, with the organisation of face-to-face interactions between audiences and celebrities as a promotional strategy and central activity. At these events, audiences know who they will see.

The public, face-to-face gatherings highlight unmediated interactions between media people and live audiences in real-world settings. Obviously, the study of face-to-face interaction in social life is not a new perspective. It was famously advocated by Erving Goffman, who stated that the necessity for face-to-face interaction is 'rooted in certain universal preconditions of social life' (1983, p.3). As people come into one another's immediate presence, the 'promissory, evidential character' makes 'a fundamental condition of social life' prominent (Goffman, 1983, p.3). He explained that appearance and manner provide evidence of statuses and relationships, and various aspects, including visual regard, involvement, and initial actions, make it possible for others to glean our immediate intent and purpose (Goffman, 1983, p.3).

In Chapter 5, the case study on roadshows will analyse film promotional events as

ritualised media events *from the production side*. As the case study will show, audience-celebrity encounters at these film events are pre-structured and highly staged by media practitioners, but still open to, and in some cases challenged by, audience input. More in general, this case study addresses the changing status of media rituals in the digital media era (Couldry, 2012).

2.2.5 Face-to-face encounters in general film-themed settings

While some studies are based on specialised settings, such as meet-and-greets (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2014, Stever, 2016), other studies focus on more general settings, such as conventions and film festivals (e.g. Ferris & Harris, 2011; Dickson, 2015). The latter setting often lasts a few days at least and consists of a series of events, in which sometimes audiences do not know whom they will encounter. This more general setting creates a special atmosphere of media 'world'. And yet, within this media 'world', what remains unclear is whether the special status of the media is the same fashion as it is in specialised settings. Given the limited existing studies, it is also questionable how the symbolic difference between 'inside' and 'outside' the media is constructed in both settings and interpreted by its participants.

The case study in Chapter 6 discusses film festival goers' experiences of attending festival talks as face-to-face encounters with media professionals. As Couldry suggests, 'calling something a media ritual does not prevent it from also having intense personal significance' (2003, p. 52). The question of the personal significance of media rituals for festival goers is the focus of the case study is Chapter 5. Moreover, the setting of a film festival enables a second look at how audiences perceive the group of media people. Media people who give talks at film festivals include not only actors but also directors, producers, screenwriters, etc. Some are international superstars, and some are young talents, relatively unknown to many. How do festival goers expect, experience, and reflect on face-to-face encounters with these different types of media professionals and what kind of values lay behind these differentiations?

2.2.6 Participatory encounters in media productions

With 'participatory encounters' I refer to non-media people participating in media productions. As explained earlier, the intensity of engagement with the media is expected to result in different experiences of media rituals. Previously, some studies have been conducted regarding non-media people's participation in media programmes (e.g. Boross & Reijnders, 2017; 2018; Carpentier, 2011; Syvertsen, 2001; Turner, 2010). As Couldry suggests, those who try to become extras at the set of *Coronation Street* and who succeed in becoming extras are 'playing with boundaries' (2000). Non-media people playing with boundaries between in and outside the media, understandably, have different experiences than normal visitors to the set of *Coronation Street*. In Couldry's study, the person who desires to be an extra at the set expresses the idea that even the smallest task in the media 'world' would be more interesting than merely 'looking' at the media world. If the person does become an extra and the episode is broadcasted, he might feel even more empowered because he has appeared on television. Recent studies on media participation of non-media people have identified more complicated experiences than only 'playing with boundaries' as described in Couldry's study. For example, participants of a disability dating show have different modes of participation with different attitudes and strategies, variating from submitting to the rules of the production, or appropriating the production logic for one's interest, to straightforward contesting the claims of the TV show (Boross & Reijnders, 2018).

Chapter 7 discusses extras' motives and experiences of getting 'in the media' at large film studios. They immerse themselves in the media 'world' for a longer period, with more intense and different kinds of experiences compared to non-media people who are only briefly crossing from the everyday world to the media 'world'. These extras' 'insider' perspectives as non-media people provide a glimpse of the symbolic and practical power structure within the media world in China.

2.3 Media culture and media rituals in contemporary China

Before presenting the empirical studies in detail, I will use the remainder of this chapter to sketch the spatial context of this dissertation, in particular China's film industry and Chinese media rituals. This background information helps to conceptualise the role and importance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary China. At the end of this chapter I will return to and further refine the main aims of the current study.

2.3.1 Transformation and features of China's film industry

The social transformation in China since 1978 has had a significant impact on the Chinese media system. Over the years, China's media sphere has become more diversified, commercialised, liberalised, and globalised (e.g. Jensen & Weston, 2007; Zang, 2012; Tai, 2014). To explain the context regarding media power and celebrity culture in China for the purpose of the dissertation, it's worthwhile to take a closer look at these transformations of China's film industry.

Responding to Deng Xiaoping's call for further economic reform in 1992 and the related policies, the media sector has gone through a deep level of commercialisation. After China entered the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, its media conglomeration accelerated, a process that was more or less completed by 2003 (Xu & Sun, 2018). The state-guided marketisation and conglomeration defies the simple dichotomy of the state versus the market. Instead, the interplay of complex dynamics within China's media system has long been recognised by many scholars who problematise dichotomies of the state versus market, and socialism versus capitalism (e.g. Zhao, 2008; Yu, 2009; Yun, 2018).

China's film industry, as an important sector in the media sector, has also transformed significantly, with similar trends towards the privatisation and marketisation. In 2002, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)

began promoting the cinema-line system nationwide. Private film companies began to play an increasingly important role in the Chinese film industry within the diversified and globalised market. Privatisation and marketisation transformed the industry. Because of such trends, scholars have argued that the industry since then has become close to 'a Western-style industrial structure, management model and market mechanism' (Zhu & Rosen, 2010, p. 8).

Commercialisation seemingly makes economic viability a highlight of media power, as evident in the discussions of 'the power of capital in the Chinese media' or 'market power' for example (Zhao, 2004, p. 179). Filmmakers are pressed to take a commercial approach and to consider box office performance as the measurement of success (Kong, 2007). In 2003, box office takings of domestic films surpassed those of foreign films for the first time – a situation that continues today.

However, the profit-centred situation has provoked concerns over whether commercialisation leads to a flourishing and diverse creative sector or a potential loss for artistic autonomy (Kong, 2007). In particular, media producers face concrete problems, among which the most recent and debatable issue is the quality of their works. Famous film professionals have expressed the concerns publicly, based on their own experiences. For example, a well-known director and actor, Zhang Guoli, described that he could not be calm enough to wait for a script and role he likes, as he wanted to be a trustworthy person and to pay for the agreed amount without letting public investors down (Yang & Gao, 2017)[1]. What boosts the commercial performance of films may challenge artistic depths.

[1] The challenge that Zhang Guoli mentioned is about a practice that has been much criticised: valuation adjustment mechanism agreements (VAM). The two sides, a distributor and a production company, agree on a specific box office goal. The agreement imposes higher pressure on the distributor, who has to pay the production company the agreed amount no matter how the box office eventually performs. Since directors and actors are often shareholders of related companies, they are responsible for VAM contracts and are under huge financial pressure, which harms their artistic creativity (Qin, 2017).

2.3.2 Media rituals in China

Following this sketch of recent developments in China's film industry, in particular its process of commercialisation, this subsection zooms in on the role and significance of media rituals in China's film industry. Contemporary Chinese media culture is abundant with examples of media rituals. Fans visit sites where filming occurs to see their favorite actors and actresses. While such organised visiting of fan groups is usually welcomed, more disorganised fans and visitors are also often blamed for the interruption of serious filming work[2]. Whether organised or disorganised, welcome or unwelcome, fans assume they can learn much about their favorite shows once they have access to the set. In the studios for television programmes, on-site audiences enjoy observing the filming process of a TV programme and comparing this with the end product. After witnessing the production of a programme, some might leave with a greater appreciation for the work of TV professionals. Other live audiences complain about the long waiting hours and lack of proper order[3]. In some filming locations where famous productions are set, tourism increases, with visitors eager to see locations they have seen on television and in films. In the hallway and outside the cinemas, crowds gather for a film festival or a promotional event, hoping to catch a glimpse of the invited directors and key players. In various TV shows, participants without a media-related background tell their life stories, look for a girlfriend or a boyfriend, seek funding for startup projects, get an apartment makeover, join a talent competition, etc.

So far, studies addressing these kinds of media rituals where 'normal' people get into contact with the media world are still scarce within the context of China. That said, several works have focused more generally on Chinese media events and media spectacles. Media events in China have been studied from several aspects. One is narratives about a nation on the occasion of media event, such as how the new millennium celebration was transformed into millenarian narratives about national rejuvenation (Yu, 2009). Another aspect is the consequence of a mega-event on national

[2] http://yule.sohu.com/20160410/n443775165.shtml
[3] http://www.sohu.com/a/279841639_100166604

image, such as the impact of international TV media coverage of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games on China's national image (Zeng, Go, & Kolmer, 2011). Another is the aesthetics, distribution and reception of a media event, such as those of a viral media event about pollution (Yang, 2016). Finally, scholars have also studied the effect of the genre of media events, such as emotional arousal experienced by viewers watching the live broadcast of a grand national ceremony in physical, mediated, and perceived co-viewing conditions (Cui, Rui, & Su, 2016), etc. Although fewer scholars have studied media spectacles, they are also important in China. As Yu (2009) identifies, media spectacles, ranging from spectacular historical events to ordinary and yet remarkable everyday mediated experience, play a central role of the media in China's transformations.

Even fewer studies have built on or included Couldry's concepts, for example by addressing the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media 'world', the mediated centre, and the symbolic power of the media. One of the exceptions is Yuan (2017), who concludes that in China's Central Television's Spring Festival Gala, the ritualised casting for the character of 'rural migrant' serves as a strategy in the process of ritualisation of the Gala, which is then legitimised as a mediated centre in the festival space of the Chinese New Year. Likewise, other scholars have found that a Chinese singing contest involves a temporary suspension of the media/ordinary boundary, only to be re-established toward the end of the show, thus legitimating the media power (Cui & Lee, 2010). The same study concluded that the audience members enjoy this temporary opening up and re-establishment of the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media.

While the aforementioned studies have deepened our understanding of Chinese media culture, two gaps are noticeable in the existing studies on Chinese media culture and media rituals in particular. The first one is the overemphasis on the political discourse and presumed ideological messages of media products, while insufficient attention has been given to the agency of audiences and the communicative practices of popular masses (Kong, 2014). Kong (2014) warns against this tendency to frame

audiences as 'cultural dopes' and popular culture as a site for ideological domination, without addressing the fundamental question of how and why popular culture is able to exert such power over Chinese audiences (pp. 11-12). Kong is not alone in this remark. As Sparks (2010) suggested nearly a decade ago, studies of the Chinese media, even of entertainment programming, have often been politicised; Keane (2013) also commented that media and communication research on China often focused on ideological representations (p. 4). However, the enormous amount and popularity of entertainment programming is a cultural phenomenon that needs to be understood, first and foremost, on its own terms (Sparks, 2010). Considering the overemphasis on content and politics (e.g. Cui, 2013; Yuan, 2017; Feng, 2016; Lu, 2009), we need empirical audience research to enrich our understanding of media rituals in China.

The second gap concerns the fact that, until now, little to no attention has been paid to events outside the realm of the media, such as 'unmediated' encounters between people inside and outside the media. Admittedly, audiences and researchers may take face-to-face interactions for granted since they have always been a part of social life. However, many questions remain unanswered owing to the absence of research on specific topics such as the meanings of face-to-face encounters for audiences and participants, the role of face-to-face interactions in the revival of local popular culture, and more generally, though importantly, how, and to what extent, such practices contribute to Chinese media culture and society as a whole.

To fill in these gaps, we need in-depth analyses of the cultural practice of media rituals in contemporary China. We need to direct our gaze away from media texts and directly search for social interaction and practices in publicly observable ways and with potentially subtle implications. That is why it is particularly relevant to study media encounters as well as the related perceptions and experiences in China. This way we can explore the cultural practices that contribute to, but sometimes perhaps also question, the symbolic authority of the media in China today – a topic that studies based on texts cannot identify. Studying not only media encounters but also the surrounding ideas and practices will deepen our understanding of contemporary Chinese cultural

trends and values in general, and will contribute to media studies in general and media ethnography in particular.

Before presenting the methodology of the dissertation, I would like to return to the overarching research question and the four sub-questions. The research question—what is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society—is concerned with two lines of inquiry regarding 'unmediated' encounters with the media. The first line of inquiry is about how 'unmediated' encounters with the media are organised and experienced, revealing and describing the phenomenon of getting close to the media 'world' in the era of social media. The second line of inquiry is about the cultural significance of these 'unmediated' encounters in the era of social media, and therefore deconstructing the power of traditional media in contemporary China. Based on the theoretical framework presented in this chapter, we can identify the following four sub-questions:

1. How do everyday audiences perceive celebrities from the media and what are their ideas and expectations of 'unmediated' encounters with these famous people?
2. What are the motives for organising 'unmediated' encounters with film celebrities in a specialised event?
3. What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters in a general film-themed setting?
4. What are the motives of 'ordinary' people for participatory encounters in professional media productions, and how do they experience being 'in' the media?

3 Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach of this dissertation. Before explaining the approach, strategy and methods I have applied, this chapter starts with a more general discussion of the paradigm on which this research is based.

3.1 Paradigm: interpretative research

In this research, I seek to explore the ways individuals and groups construct their social worlds and attach meanings to their media encounters. The meanings individuals and groups ascribe to their media-related practices are problems perfectly suited for qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) note that qualitative research is 'multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter' (p. 1). Qualitative researchers interpret phenomena in their natural settings and try to understand the meaning people attach to the phenomena.

While all research is interpretive because research is guided by a set of beliefs about the world and how it should be understood and studied, qualitative research is endlessly interpretative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Generally speaking, there are five major interpretive paradigms in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). A paradigm contains the researcher's premises about ontology (about the nature of reality or being), epistemology (about the relationship between the inquirer and the known), and methodology (about how we gain knowledge about the world) (Guba, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Therefore, the choice of the paradigm is related to the set of research questions; it also reflects the researcher's ontological and epistemological premises and determines the methodological design.

In particular, among the five major interpretive paradigms, the constructivist paradigm contains the following assumptions: 'a relativist ontology (there are multiple

visions on reality), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In other words, ontologically, individuals construct multiple realities; epistemologically, the inquirer and the inquired have an interactive process. The constructivist paradigm is well suited to this research because of the value of individual subjective views. How individuals perceive, organise or experience the encounters with the media can be nuanced and complex. Descriptions and reflections in their own words can deliver subjective and nuanced views of their experiences, providing a rich foundation for understanding the getting-close-to-the-media phenomenon.

In addition to valuing the subjective views of individuals involved in media encounters, I included multiple perspectives to not only report these perspectives, but also to describe the complex interactions among them (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Media encounters involve different parties, and each may have their own motives. Therefore, including multiple perspectives would be necessary for studying encounters with the media. Perspectives from people taking different roles, such as audiences, film professionals and organisers, are desirable to deconstruct the phenomenon of getting close to the media.

3.2 Approach: phenomenology

Within the constructivist paradigm, phenomenology is one of the major approaches to qualitative inquiry. Phenomenology is discussed as a research approach here because the word 'approach' 'signals something concrete and something open, malleable, flexible, and agile' (Vagle, 2018, p. 93). More specifically, empirical phenomenology is a relevant approach to this dissertation. Empirical phenomenology builds on the phenomenology with philosophical and theoretical insights from the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and the sociologist Alfred Schütz (Aspers, 2009). And yet, empirical phenomenology is different from philosophical

phenomenology, as the two approaches have different purposes. While philosophical phenomenology aims to understand the phenomenon itself, empirical phenomenology emphasises the web of meanings constructed by people who experience the phenomenon (Aspers, 2009).

A phenomenological approach is also relevant to studying sense-making in the digital age. Phenomenological research describes 'the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon', focusing on the commonalities as participants experience a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 75). In the digital age, media and communications are fundamental to how we construct everyday reality, and have become our second nature. Still, as Couldry and Hepp (2017) suggest, through phenomenology, the social world, no matter its complexity, can be accessible to interpretation. In particular, they develop a materialist phenomenology of the social world inevitably penetrated by media, viewing media as both technologies and processes of sense-making (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

For this research, a phenomenological approach enables me to investigate how these media encounters are organised and experienced and what kind of meanings people ascribe to the encounters. Phenomenological research is sometimes criticised for being too concerned with individual meaning-making and a lack of considering institutional phenomena (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). However, it is precisely the phenomenological approach that guided my research to shift away slightly from Couldry's study of media rituals. Instead of stressing the symbolic power in media institutions, as Couldry does, I highlight the meanings that different groups of people attach to media encounters.

On a practical level, I treated the relation between empirical material and theories the same as the empirical phenomenological approach Aspers (2009) proposed. Empirical material gathered by the researcher is considered a first-order construct, while the theoretical level, such as the notions of a theory, is the second-order construct (Aspers, 2009). In the research process, the focus is on the first-order constructs, and theories serve as a means in the process of understanding. In other words, the theories

guided me ‘to certain empirical domains and to address certain themes and ask certain questions’, but I did not use the theories as boxes of concepts and fill the boxes with empirical material (Aspers, 2009, p. 6). My research process was open to circumstances where the empirical evidence altered the theories or added dimensions to them.

3.3 Research strategy: case study design

With the phenomenological approach guiding my research, I also needed a strategy to carry out and structure my investigation; I chose the case study design because of its relevance to studying contemporary issues and investigating research questions that are mainly about 'how' or 'why' (e.g., 'how' or 'why' some social phenomenon works) (Yin, 2014). Even though case study research has often been criticised for its limited applicability to other examples, the benefits of deeply examining and understanding a particular instance of a social phenomenon have been widely appreciated (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010).

In case study research, the researcher explores a real-life case or multiple cases through in-depth data collection that involves multiple sources of information, and consequently reports a case description(s) and the themes that emerged during analysis of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This dissertation includes four cases, selected and conducted using similar procedures. The cases met the following criteria: 1) the cases can be considered 'representative' for media encounters in Mainland China in general; 2) the cases focus on trendy practices in contemporary Chinese media culture; 3) the cases have high potential to stimulate rich discussions in relation to the theoretical framework and to deepen our understanding of the getting-close-to-the-media phenomenon as a whole. While the first case study, involving everyday audiences from different provinces in China, quite clearly represents Chinese audiences' attitudes toward media encounters, the other three case studies, whose geographical locations are more limited, are also representative of Chinese media encounters. Roadshows are the best example of widespread media encounters across China, regardless of first-, second-

and third-tier cities. International film festivals are held not only in Shanghai, but also in several big cities, such as the Beijing International Film Festival in Beijing and the Silk Road International Film Festival in Fuzhou and Xi'an. Film and TV studios such as the Hengdian World Studios have attracted wannabe extras from different provinces in China to participate in media productions. Moreover, these media encounters have become increasingly popular in recent years.

The four case studies in this research were decided during the course of the investigation, and the selection of the cases evolved over time. For exploratory and inductive research, the selection of the cases is based on empirical considerations (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 61). I tried to select cases that maximise the opportunities for explaining possible types of the phenomenon and adding insights to the theories. Results of one case study prompted me to consider certain topics and ideas for the next case study. The resulting four case studies involved individuals, two events, and a media-related activity. These case studies were not designed for comparison, but for providing different perspectives on the phenomenon.

Chronologically, the extras case was the first case study to be conducted. It was the same year when a film about extras ('I Am Somebody') was released, and soon extras' stories got public attention. The case study of extras was selected with the interest and intent to learn more about extras' practices in reality, as well as their motivations and reflections.

The extras case is, in a way, an extreme example of engagement with the film and television industry - participation in productions. It was then a logical move to look for more accessible examples. The increasingly popular film festival became a suitable setting for the second case study to investigate media encounters. The festival setting provides good examples of interactions between non-media people and media professionals including festival talks and chance encounters or sightings of film professionals during the film festival.

Following the festival case study, the next move was inspired by some festival goers

whom I interviewed. They suggested that they were not like celebrity fans who would be enthusiastic about seeing celebrities at promotional or fan events. The respondents' words made me realise that film promotional events did take place more often than annual film festivals in large cities, and had gained more and more attention in recent years. This realisation led me to select roadshows as another case study, with a focus on the production perspective. The practitioners' accounts were important to explain the prevalence of face-to-face events.

Finishing these case studies raised questions about the underlying reasons why the practices of getting close to the media happen in the first place, and why interactions between media people and non-media people matter. This wider concern evolved into the inquiry of how young and middle-aged audiences in urban China talk about celebrities. The study into the mindset of everyday audiences regarding celebrity culture in China constitutes the opening chapter of the case studies in this dissertation.

As cases were selected, extensive data collection made use of multiple sources, including observations and interviews. Detailed descriptions of the cases then emerged through data collection and analysis (Stake, 1995). Even though the case studies were not designed for comparison, the analytic process of the research identified certain common themes that transcended the cases.

Following the general discussions about the interpretive framework, phenomenology and case study research, the next few sections explain the methods of interviews and observations.

3.4 Research methods: interviewing and observation

The data for my research is mainly derived from qualitative interviews, supplemented by observations. While there are other qualitative methods, I chose qualitative interviewing as the primary method for the following reasons. I attempted to understand and elucidate the experiences from the subjects' point of view (Brinkmann & Kvale,

2018; Tracy, 2013). As Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) explain, qualitative interviewing reveals the meaning of peoples' experiences and realities from their own perspectives. In addition, the use of participant observation (see 3.4.4) helps me understand phenomena from participants' point of view (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Thus it also benefits mutual understanding and further discussions during the interviews.

I chose one-on-one interviewing in particular because one-on-one settings made it possible for respondents to discuss relatively personal ideas. In the case of media practitioners, one-on-one settings also allow them the opportunity to be more open when discussing strategies. During in-depth interviews, I was able to obtain 'deep' responses. For example, one respondent in the everyday audience case study (see Chapter 4) commented that he rarely told others about his favourite celebrities. This kind of openness would not be as likely to occur in a focus group of strangers.

Another reason for conducting one-on-one interviewing was that the respondents lived in different geographical locations, and it would be difficult to conduct focus group interviews. One-on-one interviewing is more geographically feasible as well as sufficient to fulfil the objective of this study. One-on-one interviews also allowed respondents to more easily fit their participation into their busy schedules without adhering to a set schedule for focus group individuals.

During the interviews, I took a phenomenological approach, understanding the subjects' discussions as descriptive reports of their experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The goal of phenomenological interviews is 'to get as close as possible to precise descriptions of what people have experienced' (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 39). The interviews, therefore, focused on describing how the respondents experience the phenomenon—'how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others' (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

The following sub-sections will discuss interview planning, including sampling and creating the interview guide, conducting interviews, data analysis, and finally observations as a supplementary method.

The data collection journey		
Case & Chapter	**Interviewing**	**Observation**
The extras case (Chapter 7)	-Preparations: late December 2015 to January 2016 -Interviews with 15 extras: January 2016	Non-participant observation in Hengdian (late December 2015)
The film festival case (Chapter 6)	Preparations: June 2016 Interviews with 16 film festival goers: late June 2016	Participant observation at the 19th Shanghai International Film Festival (Mid-June 2016)
The roadshow case (Chapter 5)	Preparations: June 2017 Interviews with 15 media practitioners: June 2017	Participant observation in the cinemas in Shanghai (December 2017, November and December 2018)
The everyday audience case (Chapter 4)	Preparations: June 2018 Interviews with 15 everyday audiences: June 2018	None

3.4.1 Interview planning

Before creating the interview guides, I first pondered over the why and what of the investigation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). To prepare a list of standard interview questions, I revisited my overall research questions, the literature, and fieldwork notes (for the three case studies involving observations). While brainstorming and trying to determine the content, type, and order of interview questions, I considered whether potential questions could help test hypotheses, gather factual information, and explore

new themes and respondents' feelings and opinions, and to what extent (Tracy, 2013). I then created the interview guides, as I determined the questions to ask at the interviews and the order in which to ask them (see Appendix E, F, G, H).

Interview questions were formulated to be simple, clear and straightforward, without using jargon or leading respondents in a particular direction (Tracy, 2013). The questions were mainly open-ended, with the potential to promote complex answers, aiming to deepen the understanding of the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Tracy, 2013). For example, for the everyday audience case, I asked the everyday audiences why they like certain celebrities, and prompted these respondents to recall some examples of the celebrities they appreciate. The list of core standard questions usually revolved around a few main topics, for example, motivations, experiences, and reflections (for the semi-structured nature of the interviews, see 3.4.3). In line with a phenomenological perspective, many of the interview questions invited interviewees to give descriptions (Brinkmann, 2018). When I addressed sufficient descriptive aspects, I added one or two reflective questions to the interview guide for each case study.

3.4.2 Sampling

With the interview guides ready, I applied purposeful sampling, recruiting respondents that could purposefully inform an understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For purposeful sampling, I paid attention to and made decisions about how many people to sample, who they would be, and how long the sampling would take. In total, 61 semi-structured interviews were conducted for this research. The respondents included 15 everyday audiences, 15 media practitioners, 16 film festival goers, and 15 extras (see Appendix A, B, C, D). Based on the research questions of each case study, I decided the groups of people for sampling. I aimed for saturation when collecting data and deciding on the specific number of interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

There were initial attempts to approach respondents on-site for the extras case study (Chapter 7) and the film festival case study (Chapter 6). While a few individuals agreed to give interviews, many of the respondents were recruited via social media groups. During the fieldwork for the extras case study, using social media was suggested by an extra I approached on site. After posting a call on an extras' social media group, I started to receive responses. Later, as I did interviews with more extras, some invited me to a few closed social media groups on WeChat (a Chinese instant messaging and social media mobile application), where I posted calls and also approached individuals without a particular standard of selection. Many of those who added me as 'friend' were willing to participate after a short online chat. For the film festival case study, sampling via social media was relatively easier because there were open social media groups advertised on a popular social networking and review website (Douban.com). These groups were extremely active, as many festival goers exchanged information and movie tickets. I used a similar method of sampling as in the extras case study.

In addition to approaching individuals myself, snowballing was the other sampling plan applied in the roadshow case study and the everyday audience case study. Study participants were asked to recommend other participants. The sample size was, therefore, expanded. The value of snowball sampling has been recognised in terms of dealing with the difficulties in accessing 'hard to reach' populations, in this case, reaching respondents where a certain degree of trust is required to initiate contact, as is common in the media industry (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Miller & Brewer, 2003). Thus, the snowball sampling technique was particularly useful for the roadshow case study.

Although the snowball sampling technique can be useful and efficient, it has pitfalls. The downsides include having one type of group or demographic, and getting out of control (Tracy, 2013). In other words, participants tend to recommend those who are similar to themselves (Tracy, 2013), and the samples rely on the subjective choices of initially accessed respondents (Miller & Brewer, 2003). I tried to avoid the pitfalls in different ways. In the roadshow case study, I made sure to include a diverse representation of media practitioners from various roles in relation to roadshows. In the

everyday audience case study, to eliminate the downside to snowball samples, I had a handful of participants who represent a maximum variation first, and then generated several snowballs from that diverse sample (Tracy, 2013). Snowball samples were recommended by the participants, with whom I became acquainted in various social settings, and their professions varied. Therefore, I was better able to mitigate the possibility of a static educational and social background.

3.4.3 Conducting interviews

All interviews were conducted over the phone or Wechat audio calling. The individuals who responded to my ads on social media groups and those who I approached successfully had become contacts on my Wechat and had short conversations with me. Those conservations before the actual interviews helped in creating a level of confidentiality and trust. After that, I could make audio calls at their convenience without privacy issues. For snowball sampling, the respondents gave me the number of someone they knew who could also be interviewed.

The most obvious disadvantage of telephone interviews is a lack of non-verbal communication, visual cues accessible during physical interviews when interviewer and interviewee are in the same room (Tracy, 2013). To make up for this absence, I completely engaged with the respondents. For example, I naturally used ‘mhm’ and ‘uh-huh’ often to reassure the respondents that I was listening, and their messages were getting across. These sounds were helpful, especially when they provided lengthy answers. Moreover, instead of relying on visual cues, I sometimes summarised their answers, or repeated back phrases, and was always explicit in follow-up questions to gain in-depth answers.

That said, phone interviewing proved cost-effective and more feasible for this research while still producing rich information. First, since the respondents could choose their preferred time and place to be interviewed, they were more likely to be relaxed and willing to share their experiences and ideas. For example, the extras did not

know when they would finish work for the day, hence, making appointments with them was not the right choice. A similar situation occurred with busy media practitioners who could only give interviews when they happened to be free. Therefore, I cleared my schedule and got ready for a call at any time during the day.

Second, qualitative telephone interviews have been considered participant-centered and have the potential to bring about more honest data, as many have become more accustomed to 'virtual' communication (Bieniek, 2012). Virtual communication is widely used by many Chinese people who are at the forefront of digital technologies, with a much higher percentage of instant message and social media usage than global users (Chou, Chung, & Lam, 2019). Indeed, in some cases, participants might be shy during a face-to-face conversation with a stranger, so they would enjoy a certain level of comfort during telephone interviews. This situation happened, for example, during a few interviews with the extras, who mentioned being shy. In the end, they provided fruitful answers.

Lastly, as two case studies involve respondents from different regions of China, it made more sense to talk with them over the phone because of the limited time and budget I had.

The interviews started with a brief introduction of the topic and getting permission. I thanked the respondents for participating in my research, and asked them for permission to audio record and use quotes in the articles, as required by the General Data Protection Regulation at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The respondents were assured that the recording would be confidential, and their names would be changed to preserve their anonymity. Since the respondents I approached had short conversations with me beforehand, and snowball samples had a certain level of trust, all respondents gave consent to the audio recording. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the mother tongue of myself and all the respondents.

The first few minutes of an interview were more about breaking the ice, as building rapport could make the respondents feel comfortable (Tracy, 2013). Very easy and

inviting questions were asked during these first few minutes, such as ‘How long have you been in Hengdian?’ or ‘How many films did you watch during the festival?’ A quick response that I gave as an example was, ‘I was in Hengdian last December’, or ‘I went to the same session, but my seat was not in the front like yours’ helped engage the respondents from the beginning of the interviews.

During the actual interviews, I aimed to be a good listener. The interviews were semi-structured. Unlike an unstructured interview, a semi-structured interview follows a script to a certain extent, focusing on the interview guides discussed earlier (Bryman, 2012). While following a list of core questions (see Appendix E, F, G, H), I also asked additional questions to follow up on interesting answers and further explore in-depth responses. Meanwhile, the respondents could bring up topics in relation to their interests. In this regard, doing interviews for the four case studies, I found myself more open to respondents’ answers. Before, there were some challenges in balancing the focus of the interviews. For example, while conducting interviews for the film festival case, someone stressed that meeting with film professionals was only a part of the festival experience. I would agree and yet was, to some extent, eager to guide the questions back to face-to-face encounters because of the focus. As I did more interviews, I became truly open when hearing unexpected opinions or stories that diverged from the topic. The openness benefited the interviews for the everyday audience case study in that the respondents did share, and much more and diversely than I expected.

What I gathered from the observations was used during the interviews where necessary. My observational results helped to stimulate more detailed discussions during the interviews, to push forward with specifying questions and probe into their opinions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). For each case study, as the number of interviews increased, a saturation of data occurred so that the data from the last two or three interviews was not additional data, but it verified and developed concordance with what was previously obtained (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The interview styles for each case study had much in common, while the roadshow case study was partly different as the data collection involved expert interviews. As this

study dealt with elites, also known as exclusive informants, it can be seen as a special genre of the qualitative research interview (Bruun, 2016). It has been argued that expert interviews are not fundamentally different from elite interviews, and both can encounter the problems of gaining access to elites or experts (Littig, 2009). While not every respondent occupied a senior or middle management position (Littig, 2009), the respondents did have substantial experience with roadshows.

During expert interviews for the roadshow case study, I gathered both factual information about how events were organised and meaning-related information about why this kind of event was organised. I followed the crucial goal of qualitative research: reconstructing latent content of meaning (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009). With such an intention, I familiarised myself with general knowledge of roadshows before the interviews, which helped in contextualising their answers and posing follow-up questions. During the interviews, I felt free to ask questions as an outsider, inviting them to explain, clarify, and reflect upon their experiences, which made the reconstruction of meanings possible.

One possible problem when conducting expert interviews with media practitioners is that they might frequently offer easy, PR-like answers. This potential challenge was partially solved by offering them anonymity. I also ensured a mixed selection of the respondents. Practitioners from different roles in relation to roadshows were more likely to provide various and in-depth answers, especially when some practitioners did not work for companies (i.e. local organisers in the universities). In addition, asking critical questions during the interviews was another way to solve the problem. First, I took the time to probe critical aspects of organising roadshows, such as the discussions on challenges or misbehaved fans (see Appendix F). Secondly, based on their roles and provided answers, I posed critical follow-up questions, such as ‘what if there were not enough live audiences’. Both techniques helped me get behind some superficial answers.

3.4.4 Observations

Although my research is not purely ethnography, ethnographic methods play a role in this dissertation. Observations, as ethnographic methods, serve as a supplement to the method of interviewing for the three case studies (film festival, roadshow, and extras) but not for the everyday audience case study. In case study research, observations include close-up descriptions of events and activities happening in a particular context (Simons, 2014). The observations take place in the natural settings of media encounters, enabling me to be there and feel what it is like to participate in them. Moreover, I had opportunities to observe behaviours that might not be revealed in the interviews. Based on the need of the specific case study and the practical situations, I carried out two types of observations for the research: non-participant observation for the extras case study, and participant observation for the film festival case study and the roadshow case study.

Non-participant observation, also known as limited participation, refers to observational methods wherein the researcher does not directly, or only occasionally, interacts with individuals under study and does not engage in any of their activities (Allen, 2017). In the field setting, I interacted with some extras without becoming an extra myself and doing extras' activities. The main reason for applying non-participant observation instead of participant observation was a practical one. Several documentation requirements made the registration more difficult for wannabe extras who did not take it seriously, or in my case, those interested in doing research.

Despite the challenges of finding the particular sites and approaching extras, efforts of the fieldwork turned out to be essential and sufficient for making the subsequent collection of data possible. I got the general background information, including the extras' working and living environment, and some locals' ideas about the place and being extras. Additionally, I gathered brief first-hand information about extras' activities and became acquainted with their vocabulary.

When doing participant observation, a key method in ethnographic research, the researcher participates in the activity at the site; their participant role is more salient

than the researcher role (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Such participation in the activity helps gain insider views and subjective data. Yet, while it is imperative to develop an effective participant role, the role of an effective observer is also important to make participant observation a useful tool in research (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

With the awareness of keeping a balance between participation and observation, I conducted participant observations for the film festival case study and the roadshow case study. In these crowded public settings, I carried out the covert participant observations to get a general idea of the atmosphere and people's behaviours. Being a participant in the cinema itself was not a difficult task and did not require much attention, as prior experiences with the film festival helped. This familiarity enabled me to pay more attention to the surroundings as an observer, given the venue was often packed.

Participant observations during the film festival and roadshows included observing the crowds' and attendants' behaviours before, during and after the face-to-face events with film professionals, taking pictures, and keeping field notes. Patterns across observations, such as commonalities across the events, procedures, behaviours, and the general environment, were written down. I gathered data on nonverbal behaviour and the event atmosphere while experiencing the entire process of events in the settings relevant to the studies. For example, I observed that stanchions were placed inside the auditorium to separate the space between audiences and media people on stage. The respondents were unlikely to mention such detail during the interviews. In the case of roadshows, while media practitioners had hidden corridors to enter screening rooms after the events started, and to leave earlier than audiences did, how they shared their experiences with the films and interacted with the audiences, as well as the event procedures, could be clearly observed. Meanwhile, it was also useful to see how live audiences reacted.

During the interviews with the respondents, I mentioned what I observed during the events. For example, it was unlikely to hear from interviews that participants were taking pictures and posting on social media all the time. But I asked the respondents

about taking pictures and posting on social media because of my observations on site. They would then reflect upon certain taken-for-granted behaviours.

3.4.5 Data analysis

For data analysis, I adopted thematic analysis, in which themes transcend codes and are built up out of groups of codes identified in transcripts (Bryman, 2012). As explained in this section, the process of analysis includes organising and transcribing the data, reading through the transcripts, coding and identifying themes, and representing and interpreting the data.

After conducting the interviews for each case study, I saved a spreadsheet to note the participants' information and dates of the interviews and the recordings. These recordings were transcribed verbatim by me. As the data and transcripts were organised, I read the transcripts in their entirety several times to see a whole picture, writing memos in the margins of transcripts. These memos, written throughout the analysis process, not only descriptively summarised the data, but also to some extent, synthesised higher-level analytic meanings (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2018).

Central to qualitative research, coding helps make sense of the transcripts. The coding process of this research was lean coding (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Instead of elaborate lists of codes, lean coding starts with a short list and expands the initial codes as necessary. Specifically, the coding process began with five or six categories and expanded as I reviewed the transcripts again and again. The types of information for coding usually revolved around the respondents' experiences and the context of those experiences, descriptions of the particular cases, and issues responding to the important concepts such as the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media 'world'. During the coding process, noteworthy quotes were highlighted, with a description explaining the reason for inclusion. A final code list consisted of no more than twenty-five categories of information.

These categories of information were reduced and combined into a small, manageable set of themes, setting the stage for identification of themes. After reflecting on the initial codes, I understood the continuities and linkages between them. To form the themes, I paid close attention to recurring topics within one interview transcript and across interview transcripts that were related to the research questions, similar and different ways in which the respondents discussed a topic, words that suggested causal connections as the respondents expressed, and points that were related to the theories, etc. (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Bryman, 2012). The highlighted noteworthy quotes were also taken into consideration during the development of themes. In addition, throughout analytic sessions, memos were frequently reviewed to track the development of codes and themes.

As themes consisting of several codes were formulated, the interpretative process started. Interpretations were made and refined through comparisons with the data, existing studies, and hypotheses. Themes were evolved into larger units of abstraction, which I later used in qualitative reports.

Similar to the thematic analysis of the transcripts, I also analysed observation reports. The analysis started with reading field notes. After taking in everything I noted, I generated as many codes as possible, as open coding, without considering the theoretical focus (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). The next step was to write memos. With the codes and memos, I identified and developed broad ideas and analytic themes (Emerson et al., 2011).

I combined the thematic analysis of the transcripts with the analysis of observation reports. As I compared data from different sources, similar themes emerged in both transcripts and observation reports. I identified how data from observations provided additional information to transcripts, or how the latter confirmed the former. For example, bridging the distance between live audiences and film professionals is one of the themes for the roadshow case study, and observation reports supplemented interview data: transcripts included common activities that the respondents described, and observation reports included more detailed content of those activities.

In addition, for each case study, various sources of information served to expand my knowledge of the topics. For example, the majority of Chinese moviegoers today find movie information and purchase tickets online using mobile devices. The Internet has thus become the primary means for media practitioners to reach potential audiences. Therefore, in the roadshow case study, I observed the online presence of various roadshows and learned about roadshow information across multiple media platforms, the types of audiences targeted by practitioners, and some standard content of the posts. In the extras case study, I paid attention to their interactions in social media groups. Daily announcements, messages and uploaded photos via social networks were their communication and immediate reflections on everyday practices. Because of their updates and discussions, I became more aware of the extras' latest practices, topics, and vocabulary. Such awareness and even familiarity were as important as observations on-site in stimulating in-depth discussions. Moreover, while these sources of information were not used for analysis, they helped in contextualising the data. With these discussions of the methods for this research, I now turn to the empirical chapters.

4 Everyday engagements with celebrity culture and expectations of encounters with the famous

4.1 Introduction

Contemporary celebrity culture has been a valuable lens through which to understand and analyse social and cultural values, trends, changes, and/or shifts in a society. A majority of studies are based on textual analysis, addressing detailed media representations, while direct enquiries of audiences, producers and publicists are limited. Scholars in the field of celebrity studies have called for research that deepens and quantifies our understanding of audience consumption (Turner, 2010a; Mendick, Allen, & Harvey, 2015). An increasing number of empirical studies have examined what audiences 'do' with celebrity narratives (e.g. Duits & van Romondt Vis, 2009; Jackson, Goddard, & Cossens, 2016). However, little is known about everyday uses of celebrity beyond interactions between stars/celebrities and fans/consumers. Such inquiries are essential to further investigate the values and social norms underpinning celebrity culture, especially beyond Western contexts and in Asian countries experiencing rapid socio-economic and cultural change, such as China.

If the emergence of celebrity is a direct product of late-capitalist society (Marshall, 1997), associated with the decline in organised religion and the processes of democratisation and commodification (Rojek, 2001), why does celebrity culture in China 'appear to mirror the production and consumption of celebrity in wealthy, industrialised nations' (Jeffreys & Edwards, 2010, p.1)? China has a high percentage of atheists and nonreligious people. Contemporary Chinese culture has continued 'the socialist legacy and cultural tradition of the past', while the nation is 'becoming further integrated into the global capitalist system' (Yu, 2009, p. 6). These apparent differences between China and many western countries make us question the nuances in the broader social and cultural implications of celebrity culture. It is possible that certain elements

play a more important role in flourishing Chinese celebrity culture, despite the seemingly similar production and consumption of celebrity, and developments of commodification and mediatisation.

On a deeper level, the complicated dimensions of celebrity culture in China make an investigation even more worthwhile. First of all, there are links and striking tensions between tradition and modernity. Although celebrity culture is seen as a feature of modernity, many celebrities in various fields invoke the rich cultural values of China's heritage, such as 'Wushu Master' Jet Li (Farquhar, 2010, p. 123), action-film star Jackie Chan (Weiss, 2013), and popular singer Jay Chou (Lin, 2013, p. 209). The traditional star images and cultural identities they project are widely welcomed by media institutions and audiences in Mainland China. Second, social norms can diverge from the value system that the government promotes (e.g. Guo, 2010, p. 48). Despite the influence of government in the cultural industries, the commercial interests of this market are growing. Sometimes media content with officially promoted values may not be popular among the public. Last but not least, the collectivism of Chinese culture has long been recognised by scholars (Leung, 2010, p. 231). It is common that a celebrity experiences escalated public support or criticism overnight. As Driessens (2013) points out, there is a need for more studies on non-Western celebrity cultures: 'What kind of celebrity cultures exist in more collectivistic cultures?' (p. 654) On the other hand, Chinese society has witnessed the rise of individualism (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010). Therefore, to what extent does Chinese celebrity culture reflect aspects of collectivism and / or individualism remains an intriguing open-ended question.

This chapter aims to examine the values and norms embedded in everyday uses of celebrity culture and to explore how young and middle-aged audiences feel about encounters with famous people in the Chinese context. It is argued that the categorisation of celebrities is sometimes arbitrary (Driessens, 2015). Research subjects 'tend to be drawn from a limited pool of individual celebrities' (Turner, 2010a) whom 'we assume to be culturally significant' (Mendick, *et al.* 2015). Therefore, to overcome these potential pitfalls, this study does not choose any celebrities in a particular field

(e.g. entertainment, business, and sports) or specific media texts as the starting point. Instead, it turns to general audiences and discusses their perceptions of famous people and the social status viewers assign to famous people. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions: How do young and middle-aged audiences in urban China discuss famous mediated personalities? What do these audiences' practices and self-reflections tell us about cultural values and norms in contemporary Chinese society? And a hypothetical question: how would audiences feel about and value encounters with famous people?

4.2 Celebrity culture and audience engagement with celebrity

The term celebrity, generically referring to anyone of social prominence from a diverse range of social spheres, is formally defined as 'a person whose name, image, lifestyle, and opinions carry cultural and economic worth, and who are first and foremost idealised popular media constructions' (Redmond, 2014, p. 5). In other words, the single term celebrity ubiquitously suggests 'the contemporary state of being famous', although distinctions between different variations of fame have become blurred (Redmond & Holmes, 2007, p. 8).

In recent years, discussions about celebrity culture in the everyday have mainly revolved around social media and reality TV. The former redefines the boundaries between public and private and transforms the 'para-social interaction' (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Celebrity culture previously infused the everyday primarily through television, newspapers and magazines, but today, this infusion occurs increasingly through social media – a manifestation of 'deep mediatisation' (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). The production and consumption of celebrity news, as Turner suggests, plays a fundamental role in the development of 'mediatisation' in everyday life (2013, p.144).

The emergence of 'ordinary celebrities' is another trend that has attracted much scholarly attention in the past decade. Ordinary people can not only easily access

celebrity content and sometimes become caught up in celebrity news everywhere, but also seem to have more opportunities than ever to broadcast their own extraordinariness (e.g. Turner, 2010b, Redmond, 2014). Due to the prevalence of reality TV and online video channels, numerous ordinary people have become famous for 15 minutes. However, the ephemeral nature of contemporary celebrity does not promise an enduring status, whether for a traditional sense of celebrities or today's ordinary celebrities. Instead, the celebrity industry constantly sells new faces. As Redmond suggests, the manufacture of ordinary celebrities has, to some extent, led to 'speed up this process of relentless commodity renewal' (2013, p. 69).

Next to the fleeting nature of fame, it has also been argued that the fame of contemporary celebrities rests overwhelmingly on media coverage of their lifestyle, rather than on talent and achievement (Redmond & Holmes, 2007, p. 8). Partially due to the popularity of celebrity reality TV in Western culture, fame seems to have moved even further from the merits of talent and hard work, relying more and more on luck (Holmes, 2006, p. 47). This new type of celebrity is regarded as 'lottery celebrity' (Press & Williams, 2016). Sports stars can be found as an exception, however, as they are often expected to serve as an appropriate role model for young people (Whannel 2002 cited Turner 2015, p. 123).

In line with the tendency to perceive a distinction between 'heroes', who are distinguished by achievement, and 'celebrities', who are created by the media, it is necessary to note that 'an affective desire for stars is only one facet of celebrity consumption' (Johansson, 2015). Audience attitudes towards celebrity consumption are not all positive and sensational. A more extreme example would be anti-fandom, which exists at a personal, industrial and creative level (Giuffre, 2014). Anti-fans explicitly express their dislike, for example in the form of online reactions to celebrity news and gossips (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014). The ways of audience engagement with celebrity are indeed becoming more complex.

4.2.1 Contemporary celebrity culture in China

Deepening our understanding of the different ways that audiences relate to celebrity culture starts with acknowledging the major differences that exist between countries, since media cultures and their related celebrity cultures are still, to a large degree, of a national character (e.g. De Bruin, 2012; Han, 2015). In the case of China, it can discern two intertwined tendencies, namely, *universalising* and *localising* (van Krieken, 2012, p. 136). The universalising tendency is derived from endless media productions and new media content that spread around the world. The localising tendency in the Chinese context, as argued earlier, can be more nuanced and deserves a closer look.

To begin with, the Chinese language construction for the concept of celebrity implies a slightly different perspective than the word's connotation in the English language. Behind the usage of words about fame, there are 'the wider historical and cultural contexts in which they circulate' (Redmond & Holmes, 2007, p. 8), and presumably diverse implications in different cultures. In Chinese translation, *Mingren* (literally 'famous people') is a term that refers to the famous from a wide range of fields, including entrepreneurs and politicians, as well as pop stars and others from the entertainment industry. Interestingly, people who become famous specifically through Internet media, are described as *Wanghong* (literally 'Internet' and 'famous'). Because of this specific phrasing implying a categorical difference, many people are more likely to associate 'famous people' (*Mingren*) with those who they know from the traditional media. The term *Mingxing* ('celebrity'), however, refers to well-known people in the entertainment industry, rather than generically referencing all outstanding figures in various fields like its English counterpart. There is also a tendency to use *Mingxing* exclusively in reference to glamorous actors and actresses, an even more narrow idea of fame in the settings of media encounters (Xu & Reijnders, 2018).

Secondly, existing studies have identified several notable features of the nation's celebrity culture. These national features range from resisting the 'celebritisation of politics' (Sullivan & Kehoe, 2019, p. 12) to appreciating moral virtue and public

pronouncements of patriotism (Edwards & Jeffrey, 2010, pp. 16-17). Chinese features are, moreover, reinforced by the Chinese government, which is aware of the social impact of celebrities exert and expects celebrities to set an example and standard for the moral direction of society (Chen, 2015). Not only does this value on moral virtue directly influence Chinese celebrity culture, but non-conformity and immorality in this regard would contrarily also result in notoriety (Edwards & Jeffrey, 2010, p. 19). To some extent, celebrities are harnessed as a vehicle for promoting traditional virtues, socialist values, and patriotism (Sullivan & Kehoe, 2019).

These aforementioned remarks are helpful in that they have pointed out the distinctive themes in the research of celebrity culture in contemporary China. However, as many of the arguments are based on textual analysis, I expect to see some nuances in the everyday audiences' accounts – for example, the traits of the celebrities that they find admirable.

Finally, celebrities in the entertainment industry seem to attract more attention than those in other fields, especially on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo, which has many active celebrity users. Adopting social network analysis, a study on repost behaviours shows that a famous actress attracted many more reposts and comments than well-known entrepreneurs or a public intellectual (Zhang, 2016, p. 135). The actress, with an emotional writing style, appeared to have greater influence on readers' disposition to continue discussions. On the other hand, it is also possible that active users of Weibo are generally more engrossed in entertainment celebrity culture. Moreover, repost behaviour does not necessarily mean that the user values celebrities in one field more than those in other fields. Therefore, how audiences value famous people in different domains remains an open empirical question, worthy of investigation.

4.3 Research methods

As empirical studies on China's celebrity culture are limited thus far, an investigation into the meanings behind audiences' discussions of famous people becomes crucial. Any engagement with the celebrity culture starts with certain mindsets. For this exploratory study, a qualitative approach has been adopted, with the potential to build a better understanding of people's attitudes, and shed light on the cultural context of the research topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The study recruited young and middle-aged respondents through personal networks, including eight acquaintances and friends, and seven snowball samples recommended by participants. When approaching acquaintances and friends, the first author made sure that none of them went to the same school as her. Instead, each was acquainted in various social settings, and their professions varied. With this initial choice, the study hopes to mitigate the static possibility of social and educational background.

The resulting pool of the respondents includes seven men and eight women, living in cities across different provinces in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Fujian. While snowball samples ensure a basis of trust for productive in-depth interviews, the limitation is also noticeable. For example, many of the respondents were educated, due to the assumed correlation between the ability to discuss famous figures and the possession of requisite cultural references and knowledge.

A total of 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted on the phone (Bryman, 2012). To stimulate fruitful discussions, the authors familiarised themselves with the latest news of the famous and obtained a general knowledge base of famous people in various fields. Questions were prepared in advance, but they were not followed strictly during the interviews. Instead, the respondents could introduce details and remarks of their own interests. The interview questions revolved around the following topics: the perception of famous people, favourite public figures, the impact

of the famous, and the interest in encounters with famous people. Some specific follow-up questions were asked to probe into more detailed memories and their meanings. These expanded accounts were useful to show the consistency and sincerity of their answers. Saturation of data was verified when the last two interviews hardly obtained additional data but developed concordance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Lasting 30 minutes on average, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed (Bryman, 2012). Based on the analysis of the transcriptions, the research identified recurring patterns, which will be analysed in three sections: how young and middle-aged adults discuss celebrities in everyday life, reasons for appreciating certain celebrities, and the values underlying their discussions.

4.4.1 Discussing celebrities in everyday life

Respondents from all walks of life, despite their different levels of interests, all encounter and read celebrity news during their leisure time. Most do not think they actively consume celebrity content but have a quick flip through it for 'relaxation'. They are informed of news of the famous through television and internet, including major news websites and social media platforms, which are also most commonly used by these respondents to access news in general. Many have the impression that the current media sphere is characterised by news and programmes of the famous, which seem to be everywhere and endless. Consistent with Johansson's finding (2015), respondents in this study also display their knowledge in many domestic and international famous figures. Some respondents would look up a name in the news that they see for the first time.

At the beginning of the interviews, several respondents asked about the definition and the specific spheres of *Mingren* (famous people). When they were told any definition and sphere of their choice would be valid, the connotations given by respondents were diverse. Noticeably, several respondents call the big names in the

entertainment *Mingxing* (celebrities) instead of *Mingren* (famous people). Although many respondents often use social media, they simply do not mention any *Wanghong* (internet celebrities) during the interviews, including one respondent who explicitly says that he does not consider *Wanghong* as famous people.

When it comes to the spheres of famous people, some male respondents suggest that male readers and audiences are generally more into politics, international news, financial and economic news, and sports. A few male respondents have the impressions that girls may be more interested in reading celebrity news, in line with the gendering of celebrity gossip (e.g. McDonnell, 2014; Johansson, 2015). Respondents pay close attention to the fields related to their hobbies and works, and develop the most substantial knowledge of famous people in those fields. For respondents who have been working for many years, they read more about famous individuals in their career-related fields, partaking in opinions and experiences. The younger generation tends to be more interested in the entertainment industry in general, as they enjoy watching films and sports, and listening to music.

Most respondents discuss famous people occasionally in everyday life: whether it is chatting in conversations with families, friends and colleagues, especially when others bring up the topic; or, reposting famous individuals' news or interviews on social media. Yet, they find it hard to recall specific discussions off the top of their heads. In contrast with offline discussions, several respondents share celebrity content online more often, partially because people nowadays spend a lot of time online. Meanwhile, it is easier to recall recent reposts. A few respondents find conversations about the famous casual, which serve as 'harmless gossips', while some respondents are careful about reposting and avoid offending fans of the famous people.

Even at a conversational level, the respondents believe that the famous individuals a person likes mirror certain taste. A few respondents imply or explicitly say that celebrity gossip is low culture (Johansson, 2015), associating celebrity gossip with youngsters as die-hard fans. For these respondents, this fandom is 'related to the age,

his life experience, the environment he is in, and the information he absorbs' (Wen). The reason why many youngsters born after 2000 would be attracted to those good looking but less talented celebrities is clear: 'lacking in life experience in society', 'they feel like being supported emotionally', and 'the power of the media as well as the belonging to fan groups' are the lures (Xiaochen). These comments imply that grown-ups are less likely to become die-hard fans with superficial passions. The maturity lies in the understanding that televisual profiles are produced for industrial purposes rather than the reality of the situation.

Some respondents note that ultimately they are expressing their own opinions by discussing famous public figures, for example, as Hua says:

> I don't post on 'circle of friends' of WeChat or microblogs very often. If I repost messages or articles, I would choose the ones that can express my own identity. Normally, I would add one sentence or two sentences of comments. I would never express negative attitudes. People can get to know my personality by looking at my reposts. Also, I think it necessary to be cautious. Even if I dislike a celebrity very much, I wouldn't publicly say so online, because I don't want to be blamed by his or her fans.
>
> Hua (29, female, PhD student, Shanghai)

Similar to Hua, many respondents believe that readers can already get an idea about the person through his or her reposts about the famous. A previous study has shown that the content posted on 'circle of friends' can reflect the user's real personality traits (Lin, Fang, & Jin, 2017). The behaviour of reposting itself, as some respondents suggest, is a sign of recognition. The topics of famous individuals can therefore serve as intermediacies for many to give opinions, understand others' thoughts and values, and ideally to 'find like-minded people' (Ling). To a large extent, discussions about the famous start with an identification: 'we want to do something but are not able to, or want to say something but we don't have the channels to express, and then there is a famous individual whom you identify with' (Chang).

Sometimes, celebrity content has the potential to stimulate discussions about societal changes, as Xiaochen reflects:

> Some famous people would talk about minority groups on their microblogs. I get to know those people because of the famous. If possible, I would repost, or go to the places where accidents happened or those people are.
>
> Xiaochen (24, female, student, Fujian)

For Xiaochen, some celebrities can be considered as activists who make invisible groups in the society visible. She uses their content to get to know marginalised groups and join societal discussions. It was found that those who particularly follow celebrity culture are least likely to involve themselves in action or discussion about public issues (Couldry & Markham, 2007). Despite the uncertain applicability of this argument in the Chinese context, it is worthwhile for future research to address the possible link between celebrity and public engagement (Markham, 2014). At least, the role of entertainment is present in Chinese citizens' political communication (Wu, 2017) , and fans participate in celebrity-related initiatives such as celebrity-inspired philanthropy (Jeffreys & Xu, 2017). In the case of Xiaochen, she welcomes celebrity involvement in social movements, which may not only provide a 'hook' for media coverage but also attract potential supporters' participation (Meyer & Gamson, 1995).

While discussing their favourite famous individuals, several respondents recognise a personal connection, echoing the appreciation of certain celebrities in relation to familiar personal characteristics in Johansson's study (2015). For example, Hua's self-reflection depicts such a connection:

> I like this TV presenter (Dong Qing) for her appearance, manners and temperament. I watched her programmes as I grew up. When I was little, I watched her hosting singing contests. That's entertainment. Now I'm in the university, and she is hosting cultural programmes. It's like her change in the programmes fits my growing up. I'm on the path that she pointed. I can feel her influence.
>
> Hua (29, female, PhD student, Shanghai)

Apart from the qualities of the famous person she likes, Hua points out the connection between her own life experience and the works of this famous person. Indeed, what many respondents shared during the interviews are the famous people whom they have liked for a long time. Recognising this long-term connection, some can be considered as 'enduring fans' (Kuhn, 2002, p. 197), and the celebrities they appreciate are not limited to film stars. The inspirations the respondents get from the famous are lasting ones.

4.4.2 Reasons for appreciation

Famous people appreciated by the respondents work in a variety of careers, such as scientists, entrepreneurs, TV presenters, directors, musicians, sports stars, writers, and cultural educators, etc. Despite the diversity of these professions, certain famous individuals have become the respondents' favourite for several recurring reasons.

First of all, many respondents admire the diligence and perseverance that famous public figures possess throughout their careers. Below are comments made by Stone and Ma:

> Many people would be destroyed in the face of extreme adversity. But Chu Shijian was able to start over. He started his new business when he was seventy something. He chose an entirely different field, and made the brand stand out. […] The success itself is a result. His inherent spirit is what's extraordinary. That's why he is admirable. This spirit may also be what I need. So it resonates with me.
> Stone (47, male, manager, Shanghai)

> To maintain the high standard performance in basketball matches, one must be very endurable, and train repeatedly and tirelessly in all aspects. I can image his (LeBron James') efforts behind the scenes. I learnt this sort of information from the media, too. I really like this kind of dedication, whatever the field is.

Ma (30, male, teacher, Shanghai)

Stone and Ma describe the famous they like as people that are much more dedicated and perseverant than many others. Likewise, when describing their favourite famous individuals, many respondents emphasise the long-term process of endeavours instead of the direct results of success and fame. A rhetoric that they share is often more about hard work, even when they admire famous people's talent as well. This way of identification with role models can be associated with the age group of the respondents, from 23 to 54 years old. It is possible that younger generations might be more interested in other aspects, such as body image aspirations (Gunter, 2014, p. 40).

Another implication that these quotes bring up is the audiences' active interpretations of mediated portrayals. In this study, the respondents admire certain famous individuals particularly because of their professional dedication, even though there are mediated portrayals of many other famous entrepreneurs and sports stars. The respondents are indeed informed of those famous figures' stories through the media. Although the media coverage may be relatively limited compared to that of celebrities in the entertainment sector, those profiles are memorable and respectful. Those admirable televisual images of famous people depend largely on the top performance in the sectors off-screen.

For the younger generation, such a motivational impact is most frequently mentioned, understandably as the respondents identify with role models. This tendency is in line with a general idea Chang suggests during the interview:

> The society develops rapidly, and the young generation face a lot of pressure. Under the circumstances, those who can motivate people are particularly needed. There must be many individuals like this, from all walks of life. But the media wouldn't give attention to them, because they are not newsworthy. You don't have many opportunities to know about them. Instead, you can learn about the famous.
>
> Chang (27, male, employee in a shipping company, Zhejiang)

Chang ascribes the need for inspirations from famous people to the pressures of everyday life the young generation have faced with nowadays. For him, excellent individuals in everyday life are not promoted by the media, as they do not have eye-catching stories that media reporters assume the public would like to see. One may find Chang's argument somewhat outdated because of the phenomenon of the ordinary celebrity. However, the respondents' instinctive discussions imply a potentially undeniable gap between the ordinary celebrity and a traditional form of celebrity. At the same time, it seems that the fast-paced life and the prosperity and convenience of media platforms have somehow prevented many from discovering inspiring examples in real life.

On the other hand, such a motivational effect is not easily sustainable or accepted. 'Maybe it is no longer there tomorrow. […] It is hard to put it into practice. Perhaps it works better for children. As adults, we have our own living reality' (Qian). A person who sticks to his or her own routine for years and years is less likely to change the self because of the inspirations from the famous and alike. Similarly, some mid-aged respondents such as Hong and Stone admit that their world views are relatively stable and are unlikely to change under the influence of famous figures.

Next to an appreciation of the famous individuals' dedication and perseverance, some respondents express a lot of respect for the famous individuals who are outspoken in opinions shared by the public. For Wen, Bai Yansong, the leading investigative journalist with China Central Television (CCTV), is 'a famous person who has a strong character and excellent journalistic qualities'. Wen is impressed by how Bai balances between being in the central media institution and saying things that normally people might not hear from a national journalist. Bai became known to the public when he first hosted a daytime documentary news magazine programme *Oriental Horizon* (*Dongfang shikong*). Since 1993, the programme presented 'factual materials with an exposure of social issues not usually aired on Chinese television' at the time (Berry, 2009, p. 74). More recently, since China is one of the top ten countries purchasing 2018 World Cup tickets, and lots of Chinese elements including sponsors were present at the

World Cup, Bai praised the cultural exchanges while being humorous, 'it almost feels like the only Chinese people not appearing at the World Cup are the Chinese national football team' (Xinhua, 2018). As Wen notes, such a humorous statement is certainly not usual from CCTV. After all, CCTV represents 'the authority of the Chinese state and the national image of China' (Hu, Ji, & Gong, 2017, p. 72). As another respondent Feifei comments, stating thought-provoking and possibly controversial opinions can be something that ordinary people want to do, but do not dare to, or that they are simply without the opportunity of being in the public spotlight. For these respondents, famous people who are courageous and (skillfully) outspoken are unsung heroes. Such a remark is not unusual, as public intellectuals and writers who articulate their views on popular concerns serve as leaders in public opinion in contemporary Chinese society. For example, Han Han's blogs that engage with social issues, and feature an enjoyable writing style, are welcomed by netizens (Cai, 2017, p.18).

From what have been discussed above, it has become clear that although some mention that 'the famous are also ordinary people', many respondents identify with role models: the famous who *inspire* us and *represent* us. In this sense, several respondents point out that the admired qualities of famous figures are particularly important during China's on-going social transformation. Moreover, the respondents' comments on their role models can overlap with the promoted characteristics of public figures on national TV channels. The respondents in this study actually appreciate some media profiles who appear in the national media institutions. Media profiles in the national media institutions should not be stereotyped, suggested by the example given by Wen of the famous journalist.

Finally, for other respondents, traditional virtues and cultural elements are the reasons why they like particular famous individuals. For example, Chuan recalls a TV presenter who has a lot of respect for the senior, on top of her excellent programme. For the respondents whose favourite famous individuals are TV presenters, directors, musicians and writers, they appreciate the media figures' in-depth knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture. Zhu is impressed by how knowledgeable the TV

presenters of the traditional culture programmes are, saying 'they can naturally speak splendid sentences whenever they respond to anything'. In this regard, several respondents are familiar with certain famous individuals' works, and believe that those famous people are as knowledgeable or sharp as the televisual images. The general appreciation of the works can be transferred to a more specific and personal admiration of the creators. Sometimes more credits seem to be given to those who are in front of the camera, such as TV presenters.

4.4.3 Underlying values and critiques

Several respondents remarkably articulate their ideas of *Mingren* (famous people). With the following attributes, the famous have then earned the right to be called 'famous', as Feifei and Jie remark,

> I would define the famous as the respectable ones. They must have prestige and deserve the reputation. Although some (celebrities) are well-known, such as good-looking, popular young actors, I wouldn't regard them as the famous. For me, famous people need to be respectable in all aspects, and make contributions to the society.
>
> Feifei (23, female, student, Zhejiang)

> I think the famous are those who are respected and to look up to. This makes the person famous. They must do things for the public. When they speak, they are representative of a group, an industry, and a country. They have so many followers. So they have to be responsible. […] But some so-called young famous people are not like that. Some of them only care about money. Their despicable behaviours have caused bad influence to the society.
>
> Jie (54, female, owner of a trading company, Shanghai)

Both Feifei and Jie describe a respectable persona as an inherent requirement of being

a famous person. In a way, this summarises the required qualities for famous people that many respondents discuss, such as being righteous, kind-hearted, responsible, dedicated, and having a positive influence on society. The high hope for famous figures is even more evident in the argument such as 'famous people need to be better than the ordinary people in all aspects' (Zhu).

The attributes suggested by the respondents reflect certain values that they hold dear. Two values, criteria for preference or justification for behavior (Williams, 1968), appear to be dominant. The first is work ethics. For example, Ling's comment suggests that one's fame would be problematic and even criticisable without expected work ethics,

> Now many think they can become famous with the help of traffic online. For instance, recently, an 18-year-old high school girl has become famous for her extravagant lifestyle, going to the pubs and having a relationship with a 'second generation rich', etc. What kind of social value is it? Isn't this telling kids that you don't have to work hard to become famous? I think this is a very bad example that has negative influence. These kinds of content occupies audiences' time and attention, and leads to excessive entertainment. That's terrible.
>
> Ling (26, female, student, Xinjiang)

The appropriate values conveyed in the media, as Ling implies, should include the healthy, inspiring message that 'one has to be working hard to achieve the success or earn the fame'. Such an emphasis on work ethics is not unusual. It is, to begin with, always part of national and local mediated narratives. A lot of successful personages share their diligent professional experiences as featured guests on television talk shows. Wealth is legitimised in China when it is presented as the result of hard work and ingenuity, and when parts of it are handed out through celebrity philanthropy (Edwards & Jeffrey, 2010, p. 19). For citizens, however, it can be a different story. Behind the suggested significance of work ethics, there might be a continuative but a more harmonious way of challenging the rich. For example, heated public resentment about

the new rich in China since 2000 is based on three hypotheses: the new rich's questionable ways of first accumulating their wealth, an inadequate sense of compassion and social responsibility, and rising income inequality (Zang, 2008). In other words, although the presumed underlying reasons for official narratives and people's ideas can differ, the resulting emphasis of certain values such as expected work ethics is shared.

Existing studies on work ethics in western countries often draw on Max Weber's theory of 'the Protestant ethic' in 1905. Yet, hard work does not only belong to religious obligations of protestantism, but is also encouraged by Islam, Buddhism and Catholicism, and may be guided by non-religious value systems in today's multicultural societies (Fineman, 2012, p. 5). In the Chinese context, scholars have found that hard work is positively related to Confucian Dynamism (Zhang, Liu, & Liu, 2012), and people with high Confucian Dynamism tend to emphasise self-improvement and contribution to society (Jaw, Ling, Yu-Ping Wang, & Chang, 2007). In general, traditional cultural values mainly associated with Confucianism, such as harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty, and filial piety, continue to have an impact on the modern-day social mentality of the Chinese people (Zhang, 2013). This has not always been the case, since progressive political, social, and cultural revolutions in the 20th century have lessened ties with traditions (Lian, 2017). However, in more recent times, there has been a resurgence of traditional Chinese values, especially those values that fit well with the new spirit of modernisation (Zhou, 2017). Today, the modernisation of traditional values is considered to play a key role in China's national rejuvenation (Lian, 2017). The system of values circulating in Chinese society seems to have become more diverse, whereby multiple values are able to co-exist alongside traditional ones. In particular, traditional values that celebrate hard work seem to go hand-in-hand with present-day, post-socialist ideas of meritocracy. Traces of these values can be found, for example, in the respondents' ideas regarding the must-have qualities for famous individuals.

The second dominant value is social responsibility, as Jie remarks:

> In the past, we got to know many famous people, who represented the spirit of our nation. Nowadays, those who make contributions to the nation wouldn't become famous. Even if they became famous, nobody would do publicity for them. But those who are buzzworthy and make a lot money rather than making real contributions have become famous.
>
> Jie (54, female, owner of a trading company, Shanghai)

Jie makes a distinction between people making great contributions to society and people creating buzz, similar as 'deep and shallow achievement' (Van Krieken, 2012, p.5). At first sight, it may seem that celebrities' affluent lifestyles are admired by Chinese audiences (Edwards & Jeffrey, 2010, p. 18). However, the respondents' accounts in this study have clearly shown that the mere acts of showing off one's affluent lifestyle, and gaining fortune or attention through indecent approaches or too easily, such as 'crying on an entertainment show' or 'just being good looking', would be disparaged. Instead, several respondents appreciate certain famous people specifically because of their profound and 'real' contributions to society. For example, scientists such as Tu Youyou and Stephen Hawking, are discussed and admired by these respondents. 'The happiness of the rest of my life, and the development of our country rely largely on scientists' (Qian).

Comparably, several respondents comment on those who are famous but not qualified because of their fatally flawed characters and behaviors. The most common critiques of flawed behaviors include breaking the law such as tax evasion and immoral mistakes such as having an affair. The respondents emphasise moral virtues (Edwards & Jeffrey, 2010, p. 17), and obeying the law as the basic requirement for good citizenship. For the majority of the respondents, non-conformity and immorality would result in notoriety and a dislike of those public individuals (Edwards & Jeffrey, 2010, p. 19). Another frequently mentioned critique is the credibility gap: a difference between one's noble and decent public persona and what he or she really does privately, especially when the overhyped nobleness is followed by a scandal.

In addition to the moral dimension, several respondents express their dislikes of those who seem to goof around and those who have overly intense media coverage. 'Their works aren't as wonderful as the hypes' (Xiaochen). The lacking of profound meanings is the reason why the respondents disparage such media coverage, reality TV shows in particular, consistent with the discussion of reality TV stars and their assumed non-existing talent in Johansson's study (2015). Seeing overly intense media coverage is not only an 'annoyance' (Ling), but also lead to the disapproval of limited talent and the questioning of the underlying logic of fame. For example, Ju complains that some good-looking actors and actresses only have 'terrible productions', even though they seem to be able to attract certain groups of audiences. He implies that whether an actor has quality performance in certain productions should be the benchmark. By the same token, Zhexi dislikes so-called experts without solid expertise.

Needless to say, the aforementioned critique of certain celebrities is also about media culture, through which media coverage can become an overdone hype. On the other hand, several respondents are aware of the commercial needs of the entertainment industry, and make justifications for some actors and actresses and overwhelming media profiles. 'Maybe they have to make money to support their families' (Xiaochen). 'Many new actors and actresses are manipulated by the companies' (Chang). 'It's an industry in which celebrities needs hypes and pay the media for these' (Ma). Considering complex relations between appearance on the media, commercial benefits, and the media itself, audiences seem to take for granted that the entertainment industry has to develop and this is the way to go. Such awareness among audiences, to some extent, legitimises the prevalence of celebrity content, let alone the fact that such content is welcomed by certain groups of audiences among the general population in China anyway.

Another disappointing impression several respondents have of the mediasphere is an abundance of negative stories about celebrities, which is tied up with an overemphasis on attracting audiences' attention. 'Paying close attention to the negative private lives of celebrities, such as divorce, would give them a lot of pressure, and this

is not necessary' (Ling). The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) indeed prohibits the media from featuring 'celebrities who are embroiled in scandals' and gossiping over celebrity scandals (CRI, 2009). The respondents' accounts seem to confirm the need for such 'censorship' and 'protection' (CRI, 2009). 'If a celebrity repeatedly makes mistakes and lets the audiences down, he or she should not appear in the media any more' (Chuan). Through a few examples, some respondents note that celebrities' disgraceful behaviours presumably make their fans to doubt the beliefs and values and therefore have a harmful impact on the society.

4.4.4 Meeting famous people

The majority of the respondents in this study express interest in seeing those who are famous in real life. One respondent is not picky about whom he would like to see, as he considers a photo with any famous person something to 'brag about.' However, many respondents would prefer seeing their favourite public figures in real life. While some would enjoy events that include seeing and listening to celebrities in person, others are curious about real-life encounters that offer backstage peeks. Generally speaking, an encounter with one's favourite public figure is considered an irreplaceable experience with deeper meanings, as Chang imagines:

> To see him (Kobe Bryant) in real life must be different from watching him on the television. There is a screen when we watch television. But when he is in front of you, you can hear him talking, you would have different emotions. […] I feel that I know enough about him, after seeing him on the media for so many years. But seeing him in person is like a dream come true. After all, I've spent so much time watching him. It would be a dream come true because it is a memorial to all these years of my attention, or to commemorate the past.
>
> Chang (27, male, employee in a shipping company, Zhejiang)

The motivation for Chang to see his favourite sports star in real life would be to anchor

his past self to the encounter and therefore reconfirm his identity. This underlying reason makes seeing one's favourite celebrity in person at a live event different from merely spotting celebrities. Scholars have discussed various motivations for face-to-face events with celebrities. For many participants, this kind of activity is a positive social experience as they can get to know a celebrity or celebrities (Stever, 2009). More specifically, strong motivators for meet-and-greets include validation, status within the fan hierarchy, and, in some cases, therapeutic healing (Reijnders et al., 2014). Admittedly, the implication of Chang's fandom as part of his self-identity is not something uncommon, nor is his motivation to validate his hero in real life. Yet, Chang's turning inward to reconfirm his identity is, to some extent, associated with the current social-cultural situation in China. At the macro-societal level, several respondents shared their feelings that during 'a period of social transformation,' there are tendencies of 'anxiety,' 'material desire,' or 'money worship' in the society. These respondents articulated that they expect to see more exemplary guidance in the media, including the official media framework, in order to overcome the aforementioned 'negative aspects of social mentality' (Zhou, 2017, p. 173). In other words, social and cultural change and instability leads people to look to media for identity formation and stability. For individuals, face-to-face events with famous people would enable them to take the identification with role models one step further.

For a few respondents, my hypothetical question about how they would feel about, and value, encounters with famous people was not so hypothetical; they had already seen their favourite celebrities in real life. In this case, the personal connection between the famous and these respondents has been strengthened. The respondents' perceptions of celebrities evolve, and the appreciation grows even stronger likewise. As Wen and Feifei recall,

> I've read about Bai Yansong from magazines and read all his books. But when I saw him in real life, I felt he is even more real than the one I saw on the television. I felt closer all of a sudden, and found that he has a richer personality (than the televisual profile). He's worthy of more attention. […] The most impressive

> moment was when he arrived. Some audiences were taking pictures. He said, avoid the attitude of watching monkeys in the zoo, and please put the camera down; Second, I'm not a famous person, I'm just a journalist.
>
> Wen (29, female, PhD student, Guangdong)

> I've seen his (Pharoah Sanders) performance. I felt that he was glowing. When I watched him performing on stage, I felt that he was walking towards me. Of course, my feeling shouldn't be like this, because every famous person is an ordinary person, right? But he was just so powerful. His eyes were sparking and firm. And the music he made was beautiful. I just like him.
>
> Feifei (23, female, student, Zhejiang)

From Feifei's quote, the extraordinary/ordinary dimensions seem to co-exist in the eyes of beholders. The seemingly commonsensical idea of 'every famous person is an ordinary person' almost makes the famous individuals' extraordinariness even more obvious on site. In the case of Wen, a PhD student majoring in journalism, after seeing and listening to the famous journalist she admires, her appreciation grows. Such growing appreciation derives from the feeling of being 'closer all of a sudden' and gaining a more in-depth understanding of the famous figure's personality. It suggests that one can always discover something while seeing and listening to a famous person closely, no matter how well one has known the person from observing them in the media. Wen is also impressed by his professional attitude. While audiences consider famous people extraordinary, the famous people on the stage embrace ordinary identities and hope to communicate and connect with audiences.

The feeling that a famous individual in real life is 'even more real' than the televisual image is a recurring remark in the existing studies of media encounters. The popularity of face-to-face events has received increasing scholarly attention, including fans meeting the celebrities at commercial Star Trek conventions (Stever, 2009), interactions during the fan convention weekend for a popular U.S. television show (Larsen & Zubernis, 2012, p. 1), and meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato

(Reijnders *et al.*, 2014), to name a few. Without screens separating the audience and the people usually seen on screen, audiences feel that what they see is more authentic (Xu & Reijnders, 2018). Such a perceived difference between a celebrity on screen and the person in real life is, however, more about an emotional reflection on this difference than a cognitive comparison (Reijnders *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, audiences put an emphasis on the physicality of celebrities.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has assessed how young and middle-aged audiences in everyday life in urban China discuss famous mediated personalities, investigated the cultural values and norms behind their practices and self-reflections, and their ideas of encounters with famous people. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the data is not representative of specific parts of Chinese society. What I aim at, instead, is seeking possible ways to discuss celebrities in everyday life in China. The findings of the current study offer several points worthy of discussions, both theoretically and empirically.

First, the study has identified that the respondents consume celebrity content in diverse fields, and appreciate famous people for several recurring reasons. Some respondents consider the discussion of celebrities in everyday life casual, while others regard it as an occasion to express their own opinions. There is not a specific field of famous people that receive the most appreciation. Despite the variety of the celebrities' fields, the respondents commonly identify with certain public figures who are characterised by dedication and perseverance, frankness in public, traditional virtues, and cultural depths in their works. Generally speaking, role models in different domains identified by the respondents seem to be those who *inspire* us and *represent* us.

Second, for many respondents, the attributes of righteousness, kind-heartedness, responsibility, dedication, and having a positive influence on society demonstrate that the famous have earned the right to be called 'famous.' There are apparently some

overlaps between the qualities of public figures who the respondents identify with and the attributes that the respondents think the famous should have. In a similar vein, the respondents disvalue certain celebrities because of their fatally flawed characters and behaviours, or being overhyped by intense media coverage. The attributes that many respondents discuss reflect the values people attach importance to, with work ethic and social responsibility being the two dominant values.

The intersections between the desirable qualities of famous people and the value system promoted by the Chinese government are clear. Among the 'core socialist values' that are associated with traditional Chinese culture, alongside national goals and social goals, individual values include 'patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship' (Xinhua, 2013). The necessary qualities of famous individuals that were suggested by respondents in this study are connected to and associated with these promoted individual values. Generally speaking, 'no discussion of contemporary Chinese culture can get around noting the role of the state' (Zhong, 2010, p. 8). While Western cultural studies tend to downplay the role of the state, even though the state also plays a powerful role in cultural productions in terms of 'values, ideals, beliefs' in Western societies, the same cannot be said of Chinese studies (Zhong, 2010, p. 8). Interestingly, celebrities' 'social responsibility as public figures is not clearly stipulated,' and the expectation about celebrity conduct from the state is very much about 'a moral issue' (Chen, 2015). However, several respondents in this study take a step further and expect social responsibility to be fulfilled by celebrities.

Meanwhile, the shared and celebrated qualities of celebrities are not only the possible result of a Chinese political agenda, but are also potentially associated with the socio-cultural situation of China's social transformation. This association is made evident when some respondents justify their preferred celebrity values with arguments regarding social transformation and social mentality. Citizens are attempting to adapt to and reflect on the current environment in a rapidly developing country. In keeping with the 'widespread enthusiasm for self-improvement in China,' 'Chinese celebrities

nourish the vogue for self-help or 'success study' by portraying the value of hard work and learning in pursuit of a better life' (Sullivan & Kehoe, 2019, p.8).

Third, several respondents criticise media culture for the relentless pursuit of audiences' attention and for commercial purposes. In this regard, the official endeavours to guide social values seem to resonate with the respondents' ideas about the media culture. Chinese authorities announced a statement with new limits on the salaries of actors in June 2018, preventing the industry from 'distorting social values' and 'fostering money-worship tendencies' (Shih, 2018). Critiques of reality TV stars, considering them 'undeserving' and 'undesirable,' are present in Western countries such as Britain (Hermes & Kooijman, 2016, p. 494), which have also been identified in this study. Yet, for Chinese audiences, they are clear about appropriate social values and likely to criticise media culture based on those values. So is the official statement. On the one hand, marketisation trends in the Chinese media industry continue. On the other hand, both audiences and policy makers are consistent with certain values.

Finally, the majority of the respondents express interest in seeing their favourite public figures in real life. Those who have seen their favourite celebrities have gained a more in-depth understanding of the famous figure's personality and confirmed the extraordinariness. For many, encounters with their favourite celebrities serve as a way to seek a special experience, get closer to their flesh-and-blood role models, and reconfirm self-identity.

This research invited the respondents to discuss celebrities in general without focusing on celebrities in a specific field. It is possible that the celebrities in a specific field, for example, the film and TV industry stimulate more nuanced discussions and views among Chinese audiences. The study has identified the underlying reasons of young and middle-aged audiences' appreciation and criticism for famous individuals, and pointed out the relationship between identifying with famous people and the larger socio-cultural situation. Celebrity content perceived by audiences in everyday life in comparative settings are worthwhile for future research to investigate, of which this Chinese empirical case has added to the discussion.

5 Inside the movie roadshow: producing encounters at popular media events

5.1 Introduction

In the auditorium at the Beijing Institute of Visual Arts, one thousand people are eagerly expecting the appearance of core members of the film production team. The director and other key players have not told the local organiser on campus when they will arrive or through which door. The starting time of the event has already passed. A group of people finally enter; they are all wearing masks, so no one knows their identities. The celebrities hurry onto the stage and enthusiastically greet the audience, making them feel that they are "up-close and personal." The fans are cheering and screaming.

To date, little attention has been paid by Western academics to popular media events in non-Western contexts. Such events, which involve face-to-face contact with film professionals, are not unusual in East Asian countries, however. For example, in South Korea and Japan, fans are often given opportunities to meet their favorite actors and actresses, and in China, similar events are regularly included as part of the strategies to promote mainstream films prior to their release. These so-called "roadshows," which consist of the screening of the promoted film and a question-and-answer (Q&A) session with core members of the production team and cast, are usually held in cinemas and large university auditoriums a few weeks before the official premiere.

In many high-budget productions, roadshows are included in the publicity strategies with the intention of generating free publicity by promoting audience excitement and word-of-mouth recommendations. Roadshows start with an introduction to the film. The key actors then go onstage and talk about the characters they play, and short videos of their performances are shown to the audience. After the screening of the promoted film, a Q&A session is held, in which the key players and the audience interact. Activities, such as games relating to the theme of the film or lucky

draws, are sometimes included. Compared with premieres, which are held only in the largest cities, press conferences, and TV interviews where there is only a studio audience, roadshows are accessible to audiences across China. The scale and popularity of such roadshows have grown exponentially in terms of the number of films participating, the frequency of these events, and the number of participating cinemas and audiences. It is now commonplace for the core members of a production team to visit more than 30 cities and present more than two hundred roadshows. This growth parallels the rapid expansion of China's movie market. Many small-budget Chinese documentaries and arthouse films have also used strategies similar to that of roadshows and organised Q&As after screenings although on a much smaller scale.

The ritualised characteristics and "centering performances" of roadshows in the genre of popular media events make them ripe for analysis through the lens of media rituals (Couldry, 2003). Centering performances are "types of communicative action focused on a thematic core that attempt to articulate a relation to a social 'center' reached through media" (Couldry, 2012, p. 79). Such performances emphasise the intention to reproduce media institutions as the privileged access point to a social "center," thereby reconfirming the special status of media institutions in society. According to Couldry (2003, p. 29), media rituals are "formalised actions organised around key media-related categories and boundaries," the performance frames of which are based on media-related values. Among his examples are "performances by media people that acknowledge their own specialness before a crowd of non-media people" (Couldry, 2003, p. 52). In such situations, people exhibit categorical differences that are formalised enough to be considered media rituals. Previous studies showed that media rituals are conducted in China, such as at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics (Cui, 2013), the Spring Festival Gala (Yuan, 2017; Feng, 2016; Lu, 2009), and on reality TV (Cui & Lee, 2010). Moreover, the growing independence of the Chinese media from the state has stimulated academic discussions about whether contemporary Chinese media emphasise business interests, serve audiences, reinforce their power (Cui & Lee, 2010), or are part of a state–media–market–society negotiation

model, in which each party, to varying degrees, takes other players' interests into consideration (Yu, 2011; Huang, 2007, p. 405).

The study presented in this chapter was aimed to investigate the role of roadshows in the Chinese film industry and contemporary popular culture from the perspective of production. The following questions are considered: 1) Why do Chinese media professionals organise roadshows? 2) In what ways are roadshows performed as media rituals? 3) What are the implications of roadshows for media rituals in the era of digital media?

The findings of this study invite the theoretical re-evaluation of the future of media events and media rituals (Katz & Dayan, 2018). Couldry (2012) noted that in media rituals, the media's privileged status is not unchallenged. In fact, the media and related institutions increasingly face challenges in sustaining attention and legitimacy in the digital media age, which creates "the demand, on the production side, for new forms of media ritual" (Couldry, 2012, p. 69). In other words, when the privileged status and continued economic viability of media institutions are at stake (Couldry, 2012), media rituals persist. This situation raises the intriguing question of how media rituals in both new or evolved forms are performed in the current era of digital media.

The incorporation of a Chinese case study into the academic discussion adds empirical value by addressing the question of whether media's event-based centering power in contemporary China differs from that in Western contexts. In particular, this research seeks to understand the prevalence of popular media events today and to shed light on centering performances and techniques (e.g., Dekavalla, 2012) in contemporary China.

5.2 Popular media events as media rituals

In its analysis of the centering performances and techniques used to produce popular media events, this study adopts Couldry's media ritual theory (2003, 2012). It first

traces the concept of popular media events before applying media ritual theory to investigate the ritualised characteristics and the centering power of popular media events.

Roadshows are examples of popular media events (Hepp, 2003; Hepp & Couldry, 2010). First, popular media events are part of popular culture and everyday routines. Second, most popular media events are organised by the media themselves. They are typically pre-planned, commercialised, and announced in advance. Political communication, therefore, is not typically integrated directly into popular media events, which are media spectacles that are promoted and produced for a commercial purpose (Lichtenstein, 2016). Third, popular media events are pleasure-oriented and aimed to provide viewers with temporary entertainment. Lastly, popular media events monopolise only a certain segment of media coverage. Hence, they are meaningful only within specific cultural environments (Hepp, 2003).

Although roadshows have most of the characteristics of popular media events, one distinctive feature is that they are live and entail face-to-face interactions, whereas popular media events are not viewed in person. Some notable examples of contemporary popular media events include the TV events *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, the *Eurovision Song Contest* as well as film events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Here, I argue that it is necessary to expand the scope of popular media events to include live events. Most scholarly discussions about media events have focused on the live broadcasting of real events and therefore the experience of "not being there." However, the phenomenon of "being there" needs to be included and studied critically not only because of its prevalence but also because encounters are an inherent dimension of popular media events. Furthermore, if the live audience were not there, many popular media events would not have the influence that they currently have.

Although they are produced for commercial purposes, popular media events can be considered media rituals because of their ritualised characteristics and centering power. According to Couldry (2003, p. 2), media rituals include a whole range of situations that reproduce the "myth" of the media as points of privileged access to the

assumed center of the social world; that is, “the myth of the mediated center.” Categories are divided by the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media and between media people and non-media people (i.e., “ordinary people”) based on the assumption that the status of the “media world” is higher than that of the “ordinary world” (2003, p. 27).

In light of the centering performances of popular media events, many questions have yet to be explored because there are few studies on popular media events. Such questions may include whether there are further outcomes beyond the commercial benefit, whether popular events are always under the complete control of the media, and more importantly, the kinds of mediated centers that are created through these performances. To investigate how media rituals are performed when the privileged status of media institutions is at stake (Couldry, 2012), a starting point is to consider how the ritual power of popular media events is actualised on site.

Moreover, it is not yet clear how popular media events are organised and experienced in the current era of social media. So far, the research on personal fan–celebrity encounters has been focused on either encounters only through social media (e.g. Bennett, 2014; Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013) or in face-to-face settings (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2014; Lam, 2018). In these previous studies, the social media aspect was sometimes briefly mentioned (e.g. Raphael & Lam, 2018). However, the ways in which face-to-face elements and social media are interrelated remains understudied.

Because roadshows take place on site, further research is needed about the main actors in these popular media events. A nuanced perspective on the main actors could further incorporate the performers or those in the spotlight as well as live audiences, the digital platforms through which the event is mediated by both the organiser and the live audience, and the various platforms through which viewers participate in the event. In other words, it is necessary to address the complexity of popular media events as they occur on site at the time of mediatisation.

5.2.1 Popular media events in China

Much of the previous research on media events in China has been focused on official narratives (e.g., Cui, 2013; Yuan, 2017; Feng, 2016; Lu, 2009), and popular media events have been understudied (Cui & Lee, 2010; Jiang, 2018).

Moreover, little is known about film events in China despite its booming film industry and avid audiences. China's film industry, like other fast-growing non-Western film industries, has unique characteristics, tensions, and drives that are "distinct from the Hollywood model" even though the industry adapts to the "globalised film practice driven by commercial imperatives" and has become closer to resembling "a Western-style industrial structure, management model and market mechanism" (Zhu & Rosen, 2010, p. 8; Zhu & Nakajima, 2010, p. 18).

Chinese film roadshows appear to be crucial in generating the popularity of films. Moreover, they are the only opportunities for many audiences to encounter film professionals face-to-face. In Western countries, face-to-face events with filmmakers and the core cast before the film's release are rare, and they are organised only to promote low-budget indie films (Knight & Thomas, 2012). However, in China, it is commonplace for the core members of a production team to visit more than 30 cities in roadshows. For example, the production team for the movie *Jian Bing Man* held 211 roadshows in 188 cinemas in 31 cities in a single month in 2015, and this record has continued to be broken (ChinaIRN, 2015). In 2017, two production teams (*City of Rock* and *Never Say Die*) visited 50 cities to promote their films, competing for the holiday box office turnout (Liu, 2017). In second-tier cities (3 to 15 million people), it is possible for a cinema-goer to attend the roadshows of three different movies in 10 days, paying for tickets at the regular price.

Guided by the research questions posed in the previous section, this study on Chinese movie roadshows will investigate how roadshows actualise centering performances and whether they exist exclusively for commercial purposes and whether are under the complete control of the media.

5.3 Research methods

The respondents that took part in the expert interviews included five female professionals and 10 male professionals. They were recruited first through personal networks, followed by snowball sampling based on recommendations by the participants. The snowball sampling technique made it possible to contact respondents with whom a certain degree of trust was required in order to initiate contact, which is common in the media industry (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Although the resulting gender ratio is aligned with a global trend in which filmmakers—film directors in particular—are usually male ("48 Trends Reshaping the Film Industry," [Stephen Follows data 2018]), it cannot be assumed to represent the status quo in the Chinese film industry.

However, I ensured that the sample included a diverse representation of media practitioners in various roles in roadshows. To qualify, each participant needed to have several years of experience working in the Chinese film industry as well as first-hand experience in organising or participating in roadshows. The resulting pool of respondents included event planners, organisers, the marketing managers of production companies, production teams participating in roadshows (e.g., directors and producers), and those responsible for the final practical phase of the roadshow (e.g., event organisers, operational managers in cinemas, and local on-site organisers).

Before conducting the semi-structured expert interviews, a list of questions was prepared to guarantee the comparability and focus of the data collection (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 35). Additional questions were developed during the interviews to understand the specific ideas and scenarios discussed. Data saturation was verified when the last two interviews yielded few new data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, and they were recorded. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analysed thematically (Bryman, 2012). When the interviews were transcribed, the data were open coded by reading each transcript and summarizing the responses of the respondents. During the thematic analysis, themes and categories that emerged from the data were identified. I then

integrated overlapping categories. The categories were further refined and grouped based on analytical and theoretical ideas. The names of the respondents and some of their affiliated universities were replaced by pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

To complement the information gathered in the interviews, I attended four roadshows in Shanghai in 2017 and 2018 to obtain covert participant observations. The roadshow movies were *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* (Chinese adaptation)*; Hello Life; The Pluto Moment; My Neighbor Totoro*. The criteria for selecting the roadshows were film genre (i.e., mainstream commercial film, documentary film, arthouse film, and animation film) with presumably different promotional styles and the potential to attract diverse audiences.

In addition, I observed how the practitioners used multiple media platforms to promote information about the roadshows. For example, microblogs and WeChat newsletters were among the most frequently used platforms. Some posts explicitly stated that recommending the roadshow information to friends on social media would mean they were entered into a lucky draw to win a ticket to the roadshow. These approaches allowed the fans of celebrity actors and actresses and movie fans in general to be the target audiences.

5.4.1 Centering performances with sincerity

Like several respondents in this study, Jin, a marketing manager, acknowledged that roadshows were organised to satisfy audiences and to "meet audience's demand for seeing celebrities." Moreover, these respondents were clear about their commercial aims and how audiences could help them by boosting the efficiency of promotions and the creditability of a good film. Much like business executives who use statistics to prove that they "give the public what the public wants" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 273), by acknowledging the wishes of audiences, the managers interviewed in this study expressed that roadshows were essential branding events.

Despite their commercial purpose, centering performances were described as essential in roadshows, including the planning process. The respondents expressed that each promotional plan was different, and it was hard to summarise or describe a standard procedure:

> We identify all the advantages that the film has, in terms of first, the genre of the film; second, the leading creators, etc., and create a plan accordingly…. There are certain routines, but the rest depends on the advantages that emerge from a project.
>
> (Yan, event planner and organiser of a film production company)

In roadshows, which are structured to some extent, the planning process includes the specific attention to detail. For example, an important task is to design questions for the host to ensure that the film remains the focus of the Q&A session. According to Yan, Ding, and Zou, who were employed in production companies, by designing the questions in advance, they could "manage the focus of communication." They also ensured that the "core messages of the promotion" were delivered appropriately and that the members of the production team on stage responded appropriately if off-topic questions were asked during the Q&A sessions, such those regarding the celebrities' personal lives.

The core messages of the promotion described by the respondents were central to the event's narrative, and they represented the thematic core of the popular media event. The practitioners had specific ideas about how Q&A sessions should be managed. On one hand, they attempt to avoid clichés, while on the other hand, their arrangement of the thematic core was the foundation for the centering performances of the roadshows.

In centering performances, attention is often paid to the visible aspects of an event, such as posters and short videos, the questions asked by the host, and the appropriate answers given by the professionals on stage. Another visible aspect is the audience in the auditorium. Staging a popular media event means not only structuring the performance on stage but also managing the atmosphere in that space, which could be

problematic when the practitioners had to deal with an audience that was deemed too small:

> If there were not enough audience members at a roadshow, we would have to deal with it because we need to take pictures at the end of the roadshow. We would consider moving to a smaller screening room…. It is also true that sometimes we borrow some people from another screening room. I have done this, too.
>
> (Zou, event planner and organiser of a film production company)

Zou recalled how he made the impression of a full house possible. He said that it was common to make such adjustments, such as using a smaller screening room or borrowing people from another room. When a roadshow did not reach the degree of popularity expected by the practitioners, they attempted to give the impression that the film was extremely popular. By borrowing audience members from another screening room or changing the spatial dimensions, the sense of the performance was increased.

More importantly, the responses revealed that centering performances were actualised in a particular manner, which indicated the motivation for organising roadshows. The respondents stated that being face-to-face was an effective and interactive way of bringing audiences and film professionals closer together. Why did proximity matter? Sheng's answer was representative:

> If a film features movie stars, and you don't organise face-to-face events, fans may not embrace the film. Fans want to see stars in real life…. While it's possible to see celebrities via live entertainment streams on the Internet, it is much less interactive than a face-to-face event.
>
> (Sheng, director)

Sheng's response implied that film professionals fear losing the audience's attention. A solution is to be personal and interactive. The face-to-face element of a roadshow differs the event from other types of promotion (e.g., subway station posters, introducing a forthcoming movie on social media through a microblog or WeChat newsletter, or

having cast members interviewed on TV). A live event is singular, while a copy is indefinitely repeatable, and this ontological difference makes "being there" and witnessing an irreplaceable privilege (Peters, 2009). A few of the respondents spontaneously switched to the audience's point of view and expressed that communication through mediated content and words was not comparable to interactions with "a flesh and blood person in real life." On other occasions, such as communication online or on television, media practitioners can control, ignore, filter, and edit the content. During a face-to-face event, however, an egalitarian relationship is deliberately created. This attitude was evident in Xia's response:

> Roadshows can reflect [the fact] that the production company takes audiences very seriously. It is what we call sincerity (*Chengyi*)…. There isn't a screen in-between. Only air is there. We are in the same space. Communication via media can be edited or withdrawn. But what happens on site will be remembered by the audience.... As audiences tend to be more enthusiastic than media reporters, film professionals react to audiences with more ease and a sense of authenticity. (Xia, filmmaker)

Unlike the claim of satisfying audiences, Xia expressed a modest attitude toward meeting audiences from a filmmaker's perspective. According to Xia, roadshows are opportunities for core members of a production team to "show their sincerity (*Chengyi*) … in the same space." "Being there" to witness an event suggests presence in both time and space (Peters, 2009). Being there with an audience also requires presence in both time and space. This sincerity is associated not only with the significant efforts made to tour the whole country but also with the characteristics of face-to-face interactions. What happens on site is considered authentic because the interactions are natural and cannot be modified even though the respondents acknowledged that the events were staged and controlled by the organisers. For audiences, media profiles who appear on their screens "cannot be 100% authentic" because "television or computer screens separate us from the real", and audiences therefore tend to appreciate seeing film professionals in real life (Xu & Reijnders, 2018).

As I observed at the roadshows, sincerity was often conveyed through film professionals' friendliness and willingness to connect with the audience. For example, an actress related to the audience by mentioning that she took the metro to the cinema as did most of the audience. Actors and actresses do not simply answer questions during Q&A sessions but also sometimes ask the audience a question to inspire a short conversation. Therefore, the sincerity of media people appears to be an important factor in creating mediated centers and a socially constructed "sacred" reality at Chinese movie roadshows.

5.4.2 Tensions in control

Although practitioners like to interact with audiences, they still prefer to be in control. Such pre-arranged scenarios were summarised by Huan and Yan:

> Roadshows with interactive games are planned as shows that will often be broadcast later on television. You can almost recognise the participants who will be selected from among the audience. Their clothing is usually pre-arranged. Before a roadshow starts, they sit among the audience. When it's time to play a game with the film professionals, they are invited to go on stage. By doing this, we can avoid uncontrollable circumstances.
> (Huan, event organiser of a cinema)

> A lot of people think that the fans asking questions are our confederates. But I think fans now are not only familiar with films, but also very active. Many questions are indeed what audiences care about. Of course, sometimes having some confederates ask questions is necessary to enliven the atmosphere.
> (Yan, event planner and organiser of a film production company)

Like Huan and Yan, several respondents mentioned similar practices of constructing interactive sessions and arranging some audience members beforehand, especially to answer the first Q&A question and participate in most of the interactive

games. In addition, “sessions for giving autographs and taking photos are usually organised. So it will be orderly” (Sheng). During the interviews, very few respondents could recall occasions in which the audience misbehaved. Huan, who co-organises and witnesses many roadshows in the cinema, expressed that most audience members “take many pictures.” Nonetheless, media practitioners feel the need to make prearrangements to “avoid uncontrollable circumstances” or to “enliven the atmosphere.”

As Hepp and Couldry (2010, p. 8) pointed out, popular media events often occur “in a continuous development” and are “mostly organised by the media themselves.” According to the respondents employed in production companies, when they plan or begin a new project, film marketing and distribution companies are already involved, which is long before the filming work is finished. In many cases, film marketing and distribution companies also invest in the project, and they are paid for their promotion and marketing services. In other words, as investors in the project, they ensure that the marketing campaigns are effective in order to increase the return on their investment in terms of their share of the box office takings.

In reality, the collective effort in organising a popular media event can be complicated. The respondents expressed that several trivial matters should be addressed by the different parties during the collaboration. The description of a roadshow provided at the beginning of this chapter is an example in which the celebrity appeared with his own team and with little or no detailed information.

In addition, it is possible that the organisers think differently from the production team. Xia reflected on a roadshow he participated in as a member of the production team:

> An audience member ran onto the stage. He got everyone’s attention. People on site thought it was real, and they were quite nervous. But for those of us who participated in the event, or for those who knew much about the film industry,

> we instinctively felt this was planned because this happens a lot. But it might be the first time for an audience to have such an experience.
>
> (Xia, filmmaker)

Xia added that the pre-scripted incident of a person in the audience running onto the stage was not unethical. However, he thought that this method was unnecessary. Organisers are keen to make popular media events as eye-catching as possible. As I observed at the roadshows, cinema staff usually place stanchions inside the auditorium when the movie ends and before the host enters the stage. The organisers are aware of the conventionally fixed, separate positions of the audience and the media people on stage. To create a spectacle and attract everyone's attention, the organisers arrange for someone to cross the visible yet symbolic boundary and enter the "center of the stage as well as the center of a certain social entity" (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 12). The centering performance during a roadshow reconfirms the presence of the symbolic boundary (Couldry, 2003).

In addition to the complexities caused by the sometimes-competing priorities of the production team and the organisers, the relationship between media practitioners and the audience can also become convoluted. Previous studies have discussed unscripted occurrences as aspects of live events (Peters, 2009). Incidents that are off-script are key elements of media events. In Chinese movie roadshows, although many of the interactive sessions are pre-staged, unpredictable scenarios still occur. Zhen recalled that a prescribed interactive game got out of control:

> The celebrity actress had taken a pair of sunglasses from her bag and said, "Whoever asks a question, I will give the sunglasses to him or her." Everyone was enthusiastic and wanted to give it a go. We selected the student that we had prepared for the session. When that student went onto the stage and got the sunglasses, he became overexcited and suddenly hugged the actress. The other key players were frightened. I'm sure the celebrity actress was also frightened, but she conducted herself with ease and grace. Then the audience laughed. The atmosphere suddenly got out of control.

(Zhen, local organiser at a university)

As in the previous staged incident, someone went on the stage as pre-arranged. However, the organiser did not expect that the participant would approach the admired celebrity. However, unscripted occurrences seem to add a spontaneous element to the roadshow, creating a dimension that the audience could not experience in watching television. What may have felt to the organiser as chaotic at that moment could have been entertaining and enjoyable from the audience's perspective. Event organisers are expected to meet the audience's demands to see celebrities. Allowing the audience to experience unscripted situations and to witness the celebrities' spontaneous reactions can be a part of fulfilling this expectation. In this study, the organisers with film promotion experience were undoubtedly aware of the possibility of unscripted occurrences taking place, but the benefits of face-to-face interactions outweighed any potential negative outcomes or challenges. These moments added a sense of authenticity and pleasure to a seemingly repeated and structured performance.

The pre-staged crossing of the symbolic boundary stimulates the audience member to make it a real crossing. Thus, the impact of constructing the symbolic boundary provides evidence of its existence. When proof is provided, the continuous manifestation becomes possible. Zhen expressed that the incident was reported the next day in the celebrity news media as an entertaining occurrence. Whether it was a pre-arranged or accidental crossing of the symbolic boundary or a combination, the incident was newsworthy. The message that the media world is special could then be disseminated, which could arouse the curiosity of those not in the media world.

The pre-staging of incidents may be surprising. However, similar practices occur in different cultural contexts: some public relations writers "plant" fake articles in video production trade journals; company press releases are reauthored to be published as trade articles; producers generate faux amateur content; assistants are paid to pose as fans on fan sites to generate a buzz (Caldwell, 2009).

A limitation of the theoretical emphasis on centering performances is that it attributes too much agency to the media and its control over the construction of the mediated center. As discussed in the previous section, the extraordinary moment and the special social center are not easily constructed. Instead, they are actualised in intentional performances with the sincerity of film professionals. Furthermore, the analysis revealed the presence of tension in the practitioners' attempts to maintain control over the narratives of roadshows. Therefore, the complete control of the media is problematised.

On one hand, maintaining control over a ritualised event requires strategies of ritualisation that differentiate between different ways of acting. A controlled way of acting is perceived to be privileged, more important, and powerful (Bell, 1992; Coman, 2005). On the other hand, allowing for flexibility and spontaneity, or even conflict, during a ritualised event is a way of being strategically situational or "a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances" (Bell, 1992, p. 92). Although this flexibility seemingly undermines the centering power of popular media events, it is also part of strategies of ritualisation. According to Bell (1992, p. 93), "the degree of difference" from other forms of practice is strategic, ensuring "the logic and efficacy of the act." In the case of roadshows, practitioners are aware of the degree of control, which legitimises the ritualisation and actualises its efficacy.

5.4.3 Maintaining the media's privileged status in the digital age

Media practitioners are concerned about the overall effectiveness and benefits of roadshows. For them, certain commonalities exist between roadshows and other types of on-site cultural events:

> On-site events are more direct. The benefits come faster. It's similar to a book signing event. Signing one thousand books on site means having sold one thousand books. Even though a roadshow seems to reach a [small] scale

> audience, it eventually has a huge impact. It will be broadcast and circulated online.
>
> (Xia, filmmaker)

Noticeably, the two major effects described by Xia were also frequently discussed by the other respondents. First, the commercial benefit of roadshows is visible, immediate, and direct. Xia's response indicated what a production company now expects from the director and main cast of a film. Xia regarded it as "a responsibility." Directors and other key players need to "meet their obligations." Although being part of promotional events is not compulsory, it is mentioned in the contract. Without a doubt, many film practices are primarily driven by commercial imperatives. These professionals become commodities in a demanding film industry before they have the agency to be creative and "show their sincerity" in face-to-face events.

Second, like Xia, many respondents stressed the effectiveness and effects of roadshows. At first sight, roadshows seem to reach a smaller percentage of audiences compared with other means of promotion (e.g., introducing a forthcoming movie on social media, such as a microblog or WeChat newsletter, or having a celebrity cast member interviewed on TV). However, roadshows can generate a great deal of attention among many viewers, and further circulation is actualised by media coverage and live audiences:

> The pivotal role of an on-site event is not about the event itself but the consequent promotion. If there is no on-site event, and you just publish a trailer on the Internet, what would the media use to promote the film? If there is no event offline, entertainment news programs will not be able to report the film.
>
> (Sheng, film director)

On a practical level, as Sheng remarked, the key aim is to expand the influence of roadshows. Without a physical face-to-face event in the unmediated world, entertainment news TV programs, for example, would have no news to broadcast. Entertainment news, like other types of news, directly represents reality by broadcasting

real events in the social world. The characteristics of roadshows, such as physicality and the inclusion of the public, cannot be achieved by a movie trailer or an advertisement.

Unmediated face-to-face events are an essential factor in a mediatised society (e.g., Couldry, 2002; Reijnders et al., 2014). The communication process after roadshow events was also discussed by many of the respondents, including Sheng. This follow-up process was mediated. The respondents expressed, "live audiences will recommend the film to others." Hence, the practice of roadshows is similar to Caldwell's observations (2008, p. 61 and 306) that media conglomerates manage how and when to leak proprietary information through publications, and they ensure that the systematic "leaking" of information is premature. Caldwell concluded, "the boundaries and borders between production and consumption are blurring, problematic, and constantly negotiated by industry in public" (2008, p. 306). The same effect seems to occur in roadshows. Media practitioners in the industry negotiate and make use of this trend. Roadshow organisers expect audiences to create user-generated content and spread information on their social media platforms. If negative feedback appears, directors often find a way to respond either on their microblogs or through media interviews.

The respondents expected and valued unmediated events being mediated:

> Events for mainstream commercial films are for commercial promotion. A promotion method should have two goals. One is the reachability of the method (the extent to which the promotion will be received by viewers). The other is to increase the exposure of the film. Now traffic is the most important thing, isn't it? CTR (click-through ratio) per day on the Internet is calculated as traffic. Ranking is available. Will it rank in the top 10 microblog hot search? This relies on the promotion efforts.
>
> (Yan, event planner and organiser of a film production company)

> Photos taken at roadshows will be uploaded to microblogs. A typical roadshow photo features the key player surrounded by a group of audience members

> posing with a unique gesture and holding something related to the film. In half an hour, fans who have attended the previous roadshow can find themselves (in the photo) online. It's very interactive.
>
> (Zou, event planner and organiser of a film production company)

Yan described the concrete result of the circulation that practitioners aim to achieve: the number of people the information potentially reaches by using the measurement of online traffic and clicks. It is clear that the interaction does not stop when an event ends but continues because it has been mediated.

In the digital age, ritualised roadshows combine physical events and social media posts. Photos for entertainment news and social media posts are deliberately chosen for dissemination on the Internet. Organisers like Zou ensure that photos of roadshows are lively and interesting and that they gain attention when circulated online. The circulation of roadshow messages online is another form of the ritual practices that construct the mediated center, extend ritual spaces, and maintain the media's privileged status in the digital age.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter investigated Chinese media professionals' motivations for organising roadshows and their activities in creating centering performances. The analyses of the data collected in expert interviews with 15 media practitioners and in participant observations at four roadshow events led to the following conclusions.

First, in addition to seeking to expand the audience base and maintain audience engagement, media practitioners aim to show their sincerity in an apparently "unmediated" space. In completely commercialised popular media events, such as roadshows, centering performances may be about not only constructing a "mediated center" (Couldry, 2003, 2012) but also (seemingly) valuing the audience as the "center."

In the preparation stage, the centering performance begins with the choice of venue,

a decision on how to present core messages and "act" on stage, and the intention to stage and perform a popular roadshow. During roadshows, there are occasions when the symbolic boundary is unexpectedly crossed by the audience, after which the setting is quickly normalised by the organisers. Nonetheless, unscripted interactions are likely to add degrees of authenticity and pleasure to the experience. After the ritualised roadshow, photos are deliberately chosen to be mediated in entertainment news and social media posts circulated online, thus expanding the impact of the centering performance.

Based on these findings, I conclude that although practitioners follow blueprints in organising events and adhere to basic structures, in practice, popular media events are not overly structured or completely controlled by the media. First, the extraordinary moment and the special social center are not easily constructed but instead are actualised by intentional performances and the sincerity of film professionals. Second, these events are flexible and open to input from participants. Hence, tension can arise when practitioners attempt to maintain control over the narratives of roadshows. Thus, the findings of this study problematise the assumption that the media are in complete control of such events. In exploring practitioners' acceptance of unscripted occurrences, the study revealed insights into the complexity of the "continuous development" of "completely commercialised" popular media events and the nature of "pleasure-oriented" popular media events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 8).

The findings showed the importance of participants' input, which reflects the ways in which today's media events have changed from those practiced during the pre-New Media period. Chinese media practitioners organise roadshows to attract audiences who are interested in "unmediated" experiences on site. However, digital media are deployed to spread information about roadshows, targeting specific audiences and fan groups both before and after the event. This online circulation is another form of ritual practice that constructs the mediated center, and helps maintain the media's privileged status in the digital age.

Despite the symbolic boundary, media events in different contexts are not treated in the same fashion. Bridging the distance between media professionals and audience

members during roadshows is unlikely to have adverse effects on stardom and symbolic media power, unlike the boundary-breaks implemented in Chinese talent shows (Cui, 2017). In fact, many actors believe that their stardom and symbolic media power may benefit from close, sincere contact with audiences.

The implications of roadshows for the state–media–market–society negotiation model in China are three-fold. Regarding extensively commercialised film promotional events, such as roadshows, the role of the state is, most obviously, at the policy level, such as limiting the promotional sessions of imported films before the film's release, to ensure that domestic films are prioritised. The media in general and the film industry in particular consider the market essential to their growth. Media practitioners attempt to involve the public, especially celebrity fans and cinephiles, in this process of growth. Cinephiles are interested in opportunities to engage in the media world (e.g., Xu & Reijnders, 2018). Consequently, a prosperous market attracts more people to engage with the film industry. Therefore, although negotiation is highlighted in the state–media–market–society negotiation model (Huang, 2007, p. 405), in which each party must consider other players' interests and possible reactions, some nuances exist in the popular culture. In popular film events, the element of negotiation seems less evident than the elements of cooperation and reciprocity, although tensions sometimes emerge.

6 The attraction of encountering film industry professionals at Shanghai International Film Festival

6.1 Introduction

In mid-June 2016, crowds gathered in cinemas in Shanghai almost every day, making the 19th Shanghai International Film Festival a hit. During the course of nine days, more than 600 hundred movies were showcased in 45 cinemas, together making more than 20 million Yuan Renminbi (approximately 2.68 million Euros) at the box office. In social media, film festival-goers cheered by uploading photos of dozens of tickets, and those who travelled to Shanghai for this major cultural event asked for subway solutions as they hurried from one cinema to another.

The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF), one of the largest film festivals in East Asia, organises approximately one hundred talks before and after-screenings with directors, actors and actresses each year. These sessions are open to the public, accessible by film tickets. Opportunities for seeing and listening to film industry professionals are guaranteed as a selling point of the festival.

How to explain the popularity of these festivals? According to existing studies, the embodied experience of participating in film culture is what makes attending a film festival different from a standard moving-going experience. In particular, the interactions of audiences with filmmakers in Q&A sessions have been recognised as key parts of such experiences (Stevens, 2016, p. 187), and being physically close to actors and directors has been identified as a pleasure for film festival audiences (Dickson, 2015). More in general, entering the media world has gained a powerful symbolical meaning in today's mediatised society (e.g. Couldry, 2002, 2003; Reijnders, 2011). However, so far, there has been no empirical research focusing on film festival talks, and most existing studies of media encounters are based solely on empirical fieldwork in Western countries. Little is known about encounters with the media in the

non-West. Chinese film festivals like SIFF are an interesting case in point because of their hybrid character, combining Western with non-Western film cultures, and blockbuster movies with niche productions.

An increasing number of scholars have studied film festivals in Asia and advocated the significance of the Asia region in the world cinema as well as the continual advancement of the film festival. On the one hand, film festivals are said to be inherently transnational. As Iordanova argues, the diverse content showcased at these festivals undermines national agendas (2016, p. xiv). Likewise, Stringer reminds that there is not a singular "Asia" as various film festivals are organised in distinct parts of Asia (2016). On the other hand, several scholars have shown how processes of localisation do occur. For example, Berry compares the Hong Kong and Shanghai International Film Festivals, stating that localisation occurs at both festivals and is an ongoing process (2017, p. 29). In a similar vein, *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation*, a recent book edited by Chris Berry and Luke Robinson, invites discussions on what is actually distinctive about Chinese film festivals (2017, pp. 3-4). This chapter aims to contribute to this line of research.

As Colin Sparks (2010) points out, 'studies of the Chinese media have tended to prioritise political issues', and the limitations of such an approach are becoming ever more obvious. He argues that cultural phenomena need to be understood first in their own terms. The absence of much serious work on cultural phenomena makes it hard to address huge changes. For example, there is an explosive growth of the middle class in China, as Sparks suggests, whose 'cultural life, or at least the cultural life of its younger generation, is significantly different to the patterns that prevailed 20 years ago.' (2010) This is undoubtedly the case for Shanghai as one of China's wealthiest cities. Therefore, I shift the focus from the purposes of Chinese film festivals to the meanings that audiences – in particular the younger generations – attach to a cultural event like SIFF.

This study analyses encounters between audiences and film professionals during the 19th Shanghai International Film Festival held from June 11 to June 19 in 2016. More particularly, it poses the following questions:

why are people motivated to see film industry professionals in person during SIFF,

how do these film festival-goers experience seeing and listening to industry professionals such as film directors and key players,

and how do these findings relate to the Chinese context of SIFF?

It aims not only to contribute to the current body of research on media rituals and film festival audiences, especially in non-western contexts, but also to offer an original point of departure for further comparative analysis between western and Asian media culture.

The research is based on a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation during the 19th SIFF. I attended five screening sessions including their pre-screening talks and post-screening talks in different cinemas, and carefully observed festival-goers who participated in the talks and the red-carpet moments before the screenings. Following these events, I held interviews with 16 film festival-goers who had at least watched several films and had attended at least two talks by directors and actors. In the next three sections, I will discuss relevant concepts in film festival research, background information on SIFF, and existing findings in media encounters. The methodology section will then be presented before the results of the analysis.

6.2 Attending film festivals

Film festivals like SIFF are events, which not only generate media coverage, but also serve to provide collective experiences for different audience groups. Non-mainstream films are celebrated at festivals, next to the more mainstream ones (De Valck, 2007, 2014), and yet audiences' experiences include much more than watching those films. While admitting that festival attendance is used as 'bragging evidence of one's cultural

capital', De Valck stresses "attention," "spectacle," and "experience" as ways to frame the popularity of contemporary festivals (2007, p. 196). Indeed, film festivals offer the potential of an unreproducible and unexpected spectacle, attracting people to 'be there' not only for a unique cinematic experience but also for social engagement (Stevens, 2016, p. 186).

This spatial dimension of 'being there' is essential for understanding the popularity of film festivals. Firstly, the consumption of place plays an important role in festival-going, as audiences value spatial pleasure and physical presence in space with 'other bodies' (Dickson, 2015). Secondly, the cities and nations that host film festivals use these events for promoting local identities. The distinctive identity of a festival location is embedded in such a cultural event. For example, film festivals in East Asian cities such as Busan, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, involve city branding priorities of local governments (Stringer, 2001). Likewise, SIFF was founded in 1993 and started as a local initiative from the city government. When the festival became China's only A-list international film festival in 1994, accredited by the FIAPF (Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films), the festival faced pressures. This was partly due to the FIAPF's rule that A-list international film festivals only accept the submission of films that have not been presented before. It then became difficult for SIFF to reach an objective of promoting the Chinese film industry and encouraging co-operations with global industries. Nowadays SIFF places more emphasis on its national and transnational context, 'focusing on Asia, promoting Chinese-language films and supporting new talents.'[4]

While many film festival studies have highlighted the economic, geopolitical agendas and the close relations between film festivals and film industries, there have been limited academic discussions in the significance of film festivals to the general festival audiences (Dickson, 2015) and why these audiences would invest time and money to visit film festivals. In Dickson's focus groups at Glasgow Film Festival, several respondents are glad to see people they know from films, including one

[4] http://www.siff.com/a/2017-11-15/2175.html.

respondent is excited about the directors' autographs he got. Dickson therefore identifies 'spatial freedom' as one of the four dominant 'vocabularies of spatial, social and embodied pleasure', in short, being physically close to not only other audience members but also visiting directors and actors (2015). These findings resonate with more general theories on media rituals. According to scholars like Couldry (2003), being 'close' to places or people from the media has become an important status symbol in today's mediatised society. These theories will be further explained in the following paragraph, showing how post-screening talks can potentially be interpreted as media rituals whereby the symbolic boundary between outside and inside the media is both performed and crossed.

6.2.1 Media Encounters

To understand people's motivations to see film industry professionals in person, it is fruitful to start from Couldry's theory of media rituals. According to Couldry, the symbolic power of the media is constructed and reinforced by ritualised events around the distinction between media people (or celebrities) and ordinary people (2003, p. 27). The replicated and naturalised hierarchy of people in the media over people not in the media reinforces the status of the former, thus contributing to the symbolic power of the media. Such difference between the two categories implies media as the access point to society's centre, which Couldry defines as the 'myth of mediated centre' (2003, p. 47). The symbolic difference between inside and outside the media is not only imposed by the media but also internalised. At the sight of a celebrity, people act out the difference between the two categories in formalised ways, such as holding back or rushing forward, revealing a principle that media celebrities deserve special attention for being special (2003, p. 52).

Couldry offers an important point of departure for explaining the general popularity of the media world, but in order to analyse the precise characteristics of media encounters at film festivals, we need more detailed studies. In their study of meet-and-

greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato (Reijnders et al. 2014), the authors examined the reasons why fans would be interested in direct personal contact with celebrities and how meet-and-greets are organised. Commenting on a 'Couldrian' approach, they argue that reinforcing the special status of media people is not the be-all and end-all. Instead, to complete the picture, they suggest that a meet-and-greet is a cultural happening, with various parties participating from their own motives and perspectives. Based on a series of interviews with Borsato fans, they identity three strong motivators: validation, status symbols within the fan hierarchy, and, in some cases, therapeutic healing.

The aforementioned theories and findings are helpful for us to examine the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media, and provide important insights into fans' experiences of these meetings and the meanings they attach to the direct contact. Fans value the validation of the celebrity's personality when they have the opportunity to meet him or her in real life. Likewise, in terms of this case study, an encounter with a film / TV actor can be regarded as a superior activity to watching film and TV productions; audiences can validate their images outside of a fictional setting and possibly learn some behind-the-scene stories about playing the characters. At the same time, they can gain something exclusive enough to stand out among their peers.

However, to apply the findings of these studies to this case study, certain aspects need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, it is unclear whether people would respond to all media people in the same fashion, and how responses of different people would vary. After all, there is an inevitable difference between media encounters with professionals (celebrities) in the popular media world and in the setting of film festivals. It is insufficient to simply describe such moments of encounters as the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary, because there can be nuances in the so-called extraordinary and in how ordinary people really perceive them. For example, whether film festival-goers would be more enthusiastic about seeing certain film industry professionals because of their fondness for the movies, or whether their reactions depend on the fame of star directors and actors. In other words, if audience find media people (or some of them if not all) extraordinary, what contributes to this

extraordinariness in their eyes, and what differentiations can be found?

Secondly, meet-and-greets are likely to magnify fans' positive experiences as the meetings are small-scale and more intimate, while film festival-goers see film industry professionals from a distance together with others for less than half an hour. Giles (2000) points out that encounters with famous people can bring about three categories of responses, based on a survey he carried out: enhancement, when encounters are positive experiences; normalisation, when the respondents pay attention to celebrities' appearance in reality, eliminating the mystique associated with their appearance; or disillusionment, when respondents are disappointed at, for example, being ignored (pp. 134-138).

Finally, I doubt whether the symbolic boundary between the media world and the everyday world are drawn and experienced in the same way in China and the UK. I would expect to find differences based on the fact that it is not suitable to interpret Chinese media landscape using the teleology of Western theories on democratisation or a binary opposition between the state and society; instead, a more reasonable approach to study current Chinese media landscape is a state–media–market–society negotiation model, in which each party more or less takes other players' interests into consideration (Yu, 2011; Huang, 2007). More particularly, western popular culture is deeply embedded in capitalist culture. Contemporary Chinese culture, in comparison, is characterised by a hybrid of post-socialist and post-modern elements (Yu, 2009, p. 6). In other words, it is 'within a residual socialist system' while 'becoming further integrated into the global capitalist system' (Yu, 2009, p. 6).

6.3 Method

To understand film festival-goers' motivations and experiences as well as the meanings they attach to their activities, I have chosen to follow a phenomenological approach, by adopting qualitative interviews and participatory observations. Such an approach is productive in terms of bringing to light meanings that events have for individuals

(Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 153; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Starting from the last day of the film festival, I conducted interviews with 16 respondents across eight days. I deliberately chose this period to conduct interviews so as to ensure that respondents had already seen the movies and talks they planned to see, but still had fresh memories. The respondents were approached on site and via a film festival-goers group on social media, with 8 male respondents and 8 female respondents, aged from 20 to 35. With the exception of two university undergraduates and one graduate student, most respondents were white-collar professionals, with a medium or high level of education. Amongst these respondents, most of them were not new to SIFF, and each has attended several film screenings and a minimum of two talks this year. Impressively, a few respondents have attended more than 20 films screenings, and were likely to see and listen to more film industry professionals. A majority of respondents have given their permission for quotations to be used with their real names, while some respondents preferred to remain anonymous for quotations.

The interviews were semi-structured, based on three main topics: motivations (frequency of watching movies, preparation after the screening schedule released, decision-making), experiences (atmosphere, favourite talks, memorable experiences and feelings) and reflections afterwards (views on talks and seeing film professionals in person). During the interviews, respondents could bring up topics of their own interests. In order to stimulate detailed and descriptive discussions, they were also asked to share photos with us via an instant messenger, as taking pictures was a common behaviour of film festival-goers. Varying from half an hour to one hour in length, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed (Bryman, 2012, pp. 578-581).

Complementary to the interviews, I attended five film screenings including pre-screening or post-screening talks and one red-carpet moment before the screening for participatory observations. I chose two extremely popular film screenings and three ordinary sessions, based on their performance on the first day of online ticket selling, making sure that I could participate in a variety of events and experience all kinds of

atmosphere in different cinemas. Guests invited to talk for these sessions include Hollywood celebrity actors, famous Asian and Chinese directors and actors, and people from production teams. On site, I observed the crowds' and attendances' behaviours before, during and after the talks, took pictures, kept field notes, and had short conversations with some film festival-goers. All of these benefited the interviews in terms of pushing forward with specifying questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and furthering conversations to get to the bottom of their opinions and meanings.

Then analysis of interview transcripts and field notes began immediately after the data was collected. Through thematic content analysis, I identified the following three recurring patterns on the basis of transcriptions: motivations for attending talks; notions of proximity versus distance between audiences and film industry professionals; values underlying the meetings. In the next three Sections, I will analyse these patterns in more detail.

6.4.1 Motivation and Expectation

During the 19th SIFF, there were multiple ways for film festival-goers to see and listen to film industry professionals. Despite the fact that the opening and closing ceremonies required internal invitations which are mostly given to officials, the press and other related important people, red carpets were also decorated in a few cinemas to welcome directors, actors and actresses for pre-screening and post-screening talks. This is also the reason why crowds gathered to get glimpses of film industry professionals, especially stars. Some arrived fairly early before the screenings to occupy the best locations in the small cinema halls and to get close to the stars as soon as they enter. For most film festival-goers, attending pre-screening and post-screening talks is their best chance to see film industry professionals in person, to hear their voices and ideas, and to take as many pictures as they like. Those who had intentions of doing so usually tried to buy front row tickets. Occasionally, when directors and actors happened to be free, front-row audience might request photos or autographs (fieldnotes).

While some respondents claimed that they care more about movies than about the talks, many film festival-goers were aware of opportunities for included talks, and put a priority on the films with talks:

> I checked out movies with talks first, and went online to see whether the movies would be of my interest, such as genre, etc. Haiyun (20, female)

> If it is a movie by a director that I like, and the director will give a talk, that would be the best and a priority when I buy tickets. Dai (23, female)

What Haiyun and Dai say reveal their different ways of making decisions. The former starts with talks and matches her interest later, while the latter starts with her interest and checks the possibility to see and listen to directors. For both of them and many respondents, talks are a plus, an ideal package, if they can watch movies of their interests.

For those who intended to see and listen to film industry professionals, what were their motivations?

> It was a pre-screening talk. As the movie began, I felt that almost half of the audience left. Obviously, they were going to the cinema gate to see Ian McKellen. Seeing the audience leaving to see him, I decided to join in the fun. [...] I was there for a little while, and then I sensed that he wouldn't go this way. Pan (32, male)

> I will just go there with an attitude of joining the fun. I cannot afford to miss the opportunity. After all, it's impossible for me to see those stars many times in my life. [...] I would see the person in real life, flesh and blood. This is different from what we see on the television. Normally we have television or computer screens separating us from the real, and they cannot be 100% authentic. This cannot give me the feeling that I am there. Lei (27, male)

As Pan puts it, he *joins in the fun* to see the real. Lei, some respondents and festival-goers on site also confess to the same incentive. Noticeably, from the interview, Lei regards seeing the real as a rare chance that may enrich his life experience. He also comments on the difference of seeing people on screen and seeing people in real life. For him, mediated representations suffer from a barrier to reaching audiences, as screens *separate* people on screen and audience. His comment of *cannot be 100% authentic* can be explained by what Reijnders et al. (2014) have identified, that recognizing the difference between the singer on screen and the singer in real life is more about an emotional reflection on the distance than a cognitive comparison.

On occasion, a rare chance may be even regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime chance, especially for fan-celebrity encounters or seeing international film industry professionals in person. During the pre-screening red carpet moment of a Japanese popular band, the leading singer was welcomed by lots of fans. As Dai recalls:

> I think those who were there for the red carpet were more or less fans, or they liked the singer. Even though it was just for one minute, which could have been the only chance to see Yosiki. So it was worthwhile, no matter how fleeting it was, just to see him in real life. Dai (23, female)

Dai notes that most people haven't seen this singer in real life except in vocal concerts. What she implies is that, even though a concert is not mediated, it is a different situation involving a stage where the singer performs; it is therefore not the same as the real him. For her, directors, actors and actresses who give talks on stage during a film festival are more real.

A few more respondents mention that they would like to see and listen to European, American, Japanese and Korean film industry professionals in particular, or give priority to those talks. In fact, as respondents named the talks they had been, I found out that all respondents had attended talks by international film industry professionals. This choice of respondents is partly related to the premise of SIFF. People consider it as the very opportunity to see and listen to international film industry professionals,

while there are indeed other occasions to see domestic ones in person.

Another motivation mentioned by Lei during the interview is *showing off* in social media. Other respondents did not explicitly say such a motivation, for the reason that they did not see it as a main motivation. However, during the on-site fieldwork I noticed that most people were busy taking photos, and film festival-goers were constantly posting photos in social media groups. Such behaviour seems to suggest that the motivation stated by Lei is more widespread among festival-goers. People are more likely to share special moments in social media instead of mundane occasions. In the study of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato, Reijnders et al. (2014) identifies meet-and-greets as status symbols within the fan hierarchy because the participating fans experience a sense of exclusivity that other fans envy. In this sense, the motivation of *showing off* is similar. Even among the general public (instead of the fan community) such significance of exclusivity still exists.

When it comes to seeing and listening to film professionals, some respondents have more specific expectations:

> If it is a small-scale event, I want to see something different, […] different from official topics, something off-record, not something he deliberately wants to present, maybe some personal thoughts. Otherwise I don't think there is a big difference. Xiang (20, female)

> Deleted scenes are something that I want to hear but no one has talked about. Some scenes which have been cut may be helpful for audience to interpret the film. [...] A directors cut can be very different from a theatrical release of a film. I would be most interested to know what things a director intended to keep are, and eventually leave out for various reasons. Lei (27, male)

Xiang expects to hear something *off-record*, and suggests that, without such special content, it may be the same as watching interviews in the media. She does not comment on seeing the real, but expects something more than appearance, such as behind-the-

scenes facts and ideas. Lei, who claims to *join in the fun* and *show off*, in fact, does have more specific expectations. What he says is indeed an example of something off-record, which is not likely to be shown in the media.

Since some respondents express expectations such as hearing off-record stories and showing off, while others are not straightforward about those motivations, it would be flawed to assume that all audiences just want to *join in the fun*. Instead, even though the general audience may not be familiar with the works as much or as enthusiastically as fans, it does not necessarily mean that they are there only for sightings.

6.4.2 Distance and Justification

Half an hour before a screening, crowds had been waiting for the film professionals in the cinema hall. They stood along two sides of the red carpet, behind red rope stanchions, and queued all the way to the second floor on stairs where people could look down the hall. People chatted with each other, with mobile phones in hands. Each time anyone entered the cinema gate, crowds became a little bit more anxious. As the celebrity actor and famous director finally arrived, crowds cheered, screamed, and rushed forward. Security guards got busy, keeping crowds at the right place. When the audience was finally seated in the auditorium, security guards placed red rope stanchions at the first row to prevent the audience from getting too close to the stage. Moreover, people in the audience took pictures of film industry professionals on stage even as many came to the front row, standing on tiptoes (fieldnotes). Two respondents talked about this event in the following way:

> The leading actor just turned up for a little while. In my impression, if you really care about the movie, you would at least sit down in front of the big screen and watch it till the end, and chat with us. But the production team and the actor were only there for a short while. They took a photo with the poster and the actor then left, surrounded by security guards. Most discussions always ended up that way. Ke (28, female)

> The production team entered the Shanghai Film Art Centre, signed autographs on the autograph broad, and posed for a photo. They must have been in a hurry because the audience in the auditorium still expected their pre-screening talk. […] No one sought the celebrity's autograph because there were security guards all around. About 10 security guards surrounded them. Jun (23, male)

What Ke and Jun recall are typical scenarios of red carpet moments and talks, especially when there are famous directors or actors. They are not the only two respondents who notice the distance between the professionals and the audience. One may argue that turning up for a little while and then being surrounded by security guards are necessary or arranged by the organiser, yet such arrangements are also symbolic in the way of organising and meeting the film industry professionals' session. Details like these build up the symbolic boundary between the media people and the audience. Meanwhile, apart from seemingly objective factors, there are factors from celebrities' side:

> Although he is very approachable, he is not a person that you can be in close proximity to, unlike directors. Many directors would have photos with us and chat for a while, and maybe after the talks, they would talk to their friends, standing just beside you. […] While a celebrity pays attention to the physical distance. Except the fact that you can indeed see the real, a sense of distance is always present. […] He wouldn't sit in the first row and watch the movie together with you. […] In fact, he doesn't dare to get closer to audience. Weibiao (26, male)

Weibiao comments on the phenomenon that celebrities are deliberately keeping a distance, while directors tend to be close to the audience and chat for a while. What Weibiao notices and talks about in particular is not when a celebrity meets the audience or the fans, but rather, when the celebrity is not communicating with the audience, for example when a celebrity is comfortable with ignoring the audience around him/her. He makes a comparison between celebrities and directors, to explain the things that

directors would do but celebrities would not. Later, he adds that if the popularity of celebrities exists, celebrities have to keep a distance from audience for safety reasons.

In fact, all respondents experience a distance between the film industry professionals and the audience. They do not protest at this, but come up with seemingly logical arguments as to why this distance is needed sometimes:

> Because a talk is just 20 minutes. They are on stage and the audience are in the auditorium. It is very hard to deepen understandings. Jia (33, male)

> Someone took a photo of the celebrity actor, with us in the background while he was on stage and audience was below. But it was very close, maybe just about one meter or so. So you can think it as a photo together. It should be very close in the photo. Xiaoshen (35, male)

> In such a situation, a conversation is relatively public. Even if I get a chance to ask something, he will still give an answer to all the audience. It wouldn't be like a conversation as you and me are having now. Wen (31, female)

> The distance is inevitable. Because every day we face different things. As a result, we have different ideas and thoughts. Although the famous actor is standing on stage, we have nothing in common. Jun (23, male)

The quotes above are representative of what many respondents experience: a clear gap between them and the film professionals. This gap is explained away by practical arguments, such as the physical distance of film professionals being on stage and the audience being in the auditorium; time limit and restrictions of public talks; the rigid structure of prepared talks that makes it difficult for more interaction; and different life backgrounds.

However, talks seem to be relatively more effective in creating approachability when delivered by international film industry professionals:

> Famous actors and actresses seemed to be more approachable. For example, she (Meg Ryan) just appeared and greeted us, without an introduction by the host, when we weren't ready for it yet. Then the host explained to her, and started again. But that talk became lively. […] Ian McKellen seemed also very approachable. He had a lot to tell. If the staff at the British Council didn't stop him, he would have continued sharing his stories. Lei (27, male)

> I was standing quite close to him (Ian McKellen). He might not see me. I just waved to him, unconsciously, for I suddenly saw someone I know. […] He's very kind. There were other audience waving. As he got on the elevator, he didn't forget to turn around and wave to everyone. Jun (23, male)

These details mentioned by the respondents result in approachable images of film industry professionals and celebrities. What the celebrity wears, the way he or she greets the audience, the content of their talks, their willingness to sit together with the audience and to spend extra time with them can all make strong impressions of approachability on film festival-goers.

Behind these reasonable explanations, are there any other factors for such approachability? Noticeably, previous impressions and expectations play an important role in the respondents' experiences. As respondents expect the glamor of international stars, when international stars appear casually during talks and respondents compare what they see in the cinemas with what they have seen on television, respondents are likely to find these stars approachable:

> I was really excited, while others were not extremely enthusiastic as I expected. He (Bradley Cooper) is such a superstar in Hollywood. I was wondering whether he would think that he was not very famous in China. Because my impressions from the media that at red-carpet moments of other film festivals, people would

> scream until they cannot make a sound anymore. […] He was there as a producer dressed casually. During the talk, he told us his thoughts about the film. Weibiao (26, male)

Through media representations of red-carpet moments at film festivals, Weibiao is informed of how glamorous Hollywood movie stars should be. On the contrary, without previous impressions of media representations of his red-carpet moments, other respondents who attended this talk found it particularly popular already. Therefore, how festival-goers experience the approachability of international film industry professionals can be influenced by impressions of those professionals' popularity from the media.

Apart from justifying the distance and commenting on approachability, several respondents also offer ideas about how to bring film industry professionals closer to the audience, proposing solutions to the limitations previously mentioned. Firstly, with regard to diminishing the physical distance, a few respondents give suggestions:

> There could be a session in which the host randomly invites lucky audience members to get on stage to interact with directors. Haiyun (20, female)

> There is a distance, of course. But attending film festivals like this, the distance has already been reduced. For example, during a particular screening, the film's director watched the film in the auditorium with us, from the beginning to the end. Dai (23, female)

> Maybe the director could ask fans to get on stage and interact, for example directing the fans to do some movements (as if he or she were directing actors). Jia (33, male)

Haiyun imagines a session in which lucky audience members are invited onto the stage to either shake hands or interact with directors. She proposes the idea of a raffle to offer

certain audience members this privilege. Both Haiyun and Jia put forward the possibilities of directors and audience members being on stage together. From their perspective, the precise positions for everyone participating in the media ritual matter because it makes face-to-face interaction possible. Instead of having conversations, Jia imagines fans to be on stage and experience what it is like to be actors with the directors' instructions. For Dai, going to film festivals like SIFF brings her to closest to film industry professionals.

Dai suggests that the audience and the director should watch the film together, off stage. The experience of watching the director's work, with the director present, could possibly transform festivalgoers in the auditorium into reviewers or beta viewers with the directors' invitation—certainly a more exclusive experience than that provided to the usual audience. Either being on stage together or in the auditorium together implies not only a change of position, but also a temporary illusion of changing roles (or at least equilibrium) so that festival-goers can experience what it is like to work in the film industry. This temporary illusion of changing roles is also being applied to the film industry professionals:

> People on stage can ask the audience questions, too. This would be a nice interaction. For example, ask the audience why they have come to watch this movie, or what kinds of movies they would like to see me play in, etc. It doesn't need to be specific, just something broad. Bing (30, male)

> I want to hear their sharing about personal experiences beyond their roles (as actors or directors). Xiaoshen (35, male)

> I would probably ask about his life. I guess a director has already gotten tired of all those questions about films. I would ask, for example, how old is your child, where does the kid attend school, and things like these. That would be interesting. Pan (32, male)

What these respondents say can be viewed as a change of film professionals' roles. According to Bing's suggestion, film professionals on the stage give the audience opportunities to express their thoughts, and thus it becomes interactive, even if such interactions would not take long. Xiaoshen and Pan imply dual identities of film industry professionals – one public and one private. For them as well as many other respondents, film industry professionals (especially celebrities) appear at film festivals as public figures. In the roles of film industry professionals, what they say and express are stereotyped. Following what Xiaoshen says about sharing *personal* stories *beyond their roles*, Pan gives examples of questions he would ask, such as the age of his kid and his kids' experiences at school. These conversations are not only *off-record*, but also mimic personal interactions between friends in daily life.

The wish to hear things *beyond their roles* implies that respondents are aware of the distinction between private and public selves, particularly for film professionals. Thus, if an industry professional could say something else beyond his or her position as a film professional or celebrity, such as sharing personal experiences, it would be a significant difference and might increase their perceived authenticity.

6.4.3 Agency and Specificity

As respondents reflect on their experiences of seeing film professionals and listening to their talks, on occasion, the experience can be impressive and positive:

> By attending talks and meetings, we tend to judge whether an actor or actress has a high quality and heartfelt passion for art, and whether he or she treats the audience as friends. […] My impressions of some actors have changed a lot after I attended their talks. Some are so nice, and I would support them even if I don't care much about certain films. […] Nowadays it is easy to badmouth a person online. If an actor has a good reputation among the audience, this is an advantage.
> Lei (27, male)

Having attended many talks at film festivals and roadshows, Lei is now familiar with

many celebrities and famous directors. During the interview, he uses their first names plus elder brother or elder sister whenever he refers to the actors and actresses he has met in person (which is a way to call friends of different ages, often used by the more expressive young generation, and in this case, the typical fan wording to show friendship or proximity with public figures they admire in Chinese culture). He gives examples that he was moved by how the celebrities enthusiastically interacted with the audience, shook his hand and agreed to take photos together until he got a perfect picture. From the quote above, he also posits the idea that, from a celebrity's standpoint, it would be beneficial to win more fans (thereby implying displays of enthusiasm as productive and beneficial). At the same time, he notes the tendency to judge film professionals, revealing the role of agency.

A certain level of agency is even more evident, when some respondents explain the preference of having a distance instead of justifying the distance:

> I wouldn't buy tickets specifically for talks, for example, during film premieres. I don't want to see directors or actors in real life. I wouldn't make efforts to do so. Jing (33, female)

> I'd rather not to have that proximity. That's because I want to keep a distance from film production teams, especially actors. In this case, my screening experience will not be influenced at all. […] Perhaps a film is a world. Those people are just part of that world, presenting the story. I just want to experience it as a world. I don't want to separate it and put it into the real world where I am. Fang (age unknown, male)

Jing does not feel the need to seek out opportunities to see film professionals in person. To take it one step further, Fang avoids seeing or hearing too much about film production in the reality, as he wants to separate the media world and the real world. He accepts the public selves of public figures, yet cannot take in much information about their private selves. For him, the private selves of these public figures may

diminish the creditability of the media world. Although this is a minor point of view, it provokes thinking about the symbolic boundary between the media world and the real world. The symbolic difference between inside and outside the media is, on the one hand, imposed by the media, to construct and reinforce the symbolic power of the media. On the other hand, the difference is internalised particularly because individuals push the relation with the media in this direction to co-create the media world to immerse in.

The way to experience the media is then decided by individuals. Similar to Fang who has specific ideas about the way he wants to immerse in the media world, several respondents express more admiration for directors for a reason of accessing the media world:

> For me, at film festivals, directors are the ones who play leading roles. We are not here to see celebrities. New films are often promoted at roadshows. So people can see celebrities outside film Festivals. For film Festivals, the main focus should be on the interaction with directors, and for many people, the directors are a kind of star. Dai (23, female)

> I would attend talks or meet-and-greets with directors only when I regard the directors as celebrities. For example, I have seen his works and find his ideas very interesting. […] I think meeting directors would be more meaningful, while celebrity watchers may care more about the atmosphere. Xiaoxin (25, male)

> If you like particular directors and actors, watching their films is enough. Outside film festivals, almost all events are commercial. […] But seeing and listening to directors like Emir Kusturica is really a memorable experience. Kusturica's talk was full of wisdom. Lexie (26, female)

> For me, a talk or meet-and-greet would be more valuable and create proximity if

> the celebrity shares the film he produced or directed (if he or she has one). Because when he is there as a producer or director, he would provide his take on this film, and we could obtain important information, rather than seeing his appearance. Weibiao (26, male)

Both Dai and Xiaoxin point out the situation in which directors are stars. Lexie implies that a great director's talk can be exceptionally memorable. It is understandable that many respondents have similar perceptions of directors, since directors, auteurs in particular, are undisputed stars of film festivals throughout film history (Hing-Yuk Wong, 2011, p. 8). Weibiao describes a scenario in which a celebrity gives a talk as a director or producer instead of as an actor. For him, a director or producer can provide important information beyond his appearance, which is, in a similar vein, *more meaningful* as Xiaoxin sees it, or *full of wisdom* as Lexie recalls. Separating famous directors from celebrity actors, the respondents imply that directors are the ones who can better guide them into the undiscovered media world.

Not only do respondents articulate their preference for film industry professionals to celebrities, but also exclude some types of activities. When trying to create proximity, giving autographs and taking photos are favored by very few respondents. Instead, many respondents prefer a conversational format:

> I think a chat would certainly be better. Taking pictures itself is a thing with a strong sense of ritual. But a chat can really involve communication, which would be obviously different. For example, we can chat about their shooting experiences, or things in Shanghai. Weibiao (26, male)

> Seeking photos or autographs is the fans way to express feelings. […] I don't think the autograph itself means a lot. Talks, at least, guarantee some information, even if someone else asks questions and you don't, and some questions or answers may sound like promotions. Wen (31, female)

Weibiao associates taking pictures with the word 'ritual', and expresses his hope for

more content beyond the ritual. Wen describes having a photo or an autograph as one-way expression, with which fans seek *ways to express their feelings*. Like Weibiao, Wen and Pan who would like to ask about one's life, many respondents prefer having conversations with film industry professionals, focusing on the content (and ideally on a small scale), while having autographs and photos can be a form of ritual without special meanings for the general audience. The latter, as ways of making the experience tangible, may be more appreciated by fans. By comparison, film festival-goers pursue experiences beyond superficial ways of seeing film professionals in person:

> I saw him (a famous actor) outside a screening room. I didn't feel very close to him, because we didn't say anything to each other. I just saw him for a short moment, and it ended too quickly. […] During talks, we can at least hear their words. They chat about their ideas, although we sit at a distance. Jun (23, male)

> The content of his film is similar to our life experiences. So we have something in common. There is an advantage to having proximity. Jia (33, male)

For Jun, the physical distance is not the sole key for increasing the audience's perception of proximity, although later he does acknowledge that such a brief meeting is *more direct because the person is standing in front of you* and provides more *familiarity.* On the other hand, Jun did not appreciate such a celebrity sighting very much because he could not know what the celebrity would say. Hearing film industry professionals' thoughts and ideas leads to a deeper understanding of them than seeing them in person at short range does. Likewise, watching their works may also have an effect of conversation. This view is shared by several respondents, including Jia who explicitly suggests that a sense of proximity derives from the similarity between the story of the film and audience. Jia takes fictional content or mediated images as a part of perception of film industry professionals. Ideal conversations could be actualised in the form of talks or by exchanging ideas through works.

As I have shown in this section, respondents appreciate gaining insights into the

media world from film industry professionals instead of celebrities, preferably by having conversations. It becomes worthwhile to investigate whether these kinds of talks can also arouse their interests in cultures of foreign countries, especially at this cultural event SIFF, in which film festival-goers can see and listen to many international film industry professionals. Regarding this, several respondents express their hesitations:

> Attending talks by international production teams probably wouldn't deepen my understanding of another culture. Instead, I would focus on films. If I like a film, I may become more interested in the culture behind this film or the culture of this country. Yet, a film or a talk is not enough. My understanding of a country is based on what I know in daily life. Jia (33, male)

> Talks can only deliver opinions of those individuals. I wouldn't become interested in a country just because of seeing and listening to one's talk. But I would be influenced by films, for example, getting to know the culture of an ethnic minority in China. After watching a film with a lot of cultural elements, I would become more interested in the culture of that region. Jun (23, male)

Although Jia and Jun doubt the impact of talks on representing or promoting cultures of foreign countries, they return to state the positive influence and importance of the media world. Staying in China rather than a foreign country, Jia's way of getting to know a foreign country in his daily life is likely to depend on the media or discussions with others. By comparison, Jun mentions an ethnic minority in China which is less represented in the media, and a film at SIFF introduces the culture of that ethnic minority to him. In this sense, several respondents get the impression of being more familiar with certain foreign cultures while being unfamiliar with some other foreign cultures or even certain regions within China. This perception is a further indication of the impact of media content on our imaginations of places.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated film festival-goers' motivations and experiences of seeing and listening to film industry professionals at the SIFF, and probed into the meanings attached to these media encounters. Based on in-depth interviews with 16 film festival-goers and participant observation during the festival, several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis.

First, it is clear that there is no single, clear-cut motivation for visiting these kind of film festivals talks. Most respondents interviewed for this study mention several motives for attending, such as joining in the 'fun', watching movies together with producers, hearing people talk about their beloved movies off-record and, last but not least, being close to those people one normally only encounters through the media. In that sense, film festival talks seem to operate as 'Couldrian' media rituals, centred on the symbolical boundary between what is 'inside' and 'outside' the media. Attending the talks offers the potential of temporarily crossing this line and becoming part of the media world.

Second, findings show that there is a gap between expectations and experience, especially where it concerns the hope to get close to the 'media world'. In practice the difference between 'inside' and 'outside' the media remains very much present. However, when experiencing this continued distance, respondents do not show disappointment, but they actually justify this symbolic boundary or even appreciate having it (notwithstanding their prior intent of wanting to cross the same boundary). Respondents defend the accustomed distance as a preferred comfort zone or mindset for them to appreciate the media world without distractions from the ordinary world or the real world to which they belong themselves.

In his classical work on media rituals, Couldry is highly critical of the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media, stating that the related 'myth of the mediated centre' is one of the pillars of the (symbolical) power of the media (Couldry 2003). I do not want to ignore the power dynamics inherent to these kind of media

rituals, but I do note that most of the respondents interviewed for the current study actually praise the same boundary. Having the idea that the media belong to another world – even the idea that there is actually another world – is something the respondents would not want to let go.

Finally, SIFF goers articulate a categorical difference between famous celebrities from the film industry and film industry professionals working behind the scenes (directors, camera operators, etc.). They mainly hope to gain insights into the media world from these professionals rather than getting close to particular celebrities. They are clear about their preferences for particular types of events and specific ways of interactions. Most respondents prefer having conversations with film industry professionals to having autographs and photos, and appreciate valuable information of the undiscovered media world and those who can guide them to discover. In this respect, they often admire creative professionals such as directors. Such admiration implies a status difference between directors and celebrities, and between the values of professionalism versus status.

Couldry's study of the *Coronation Street* studio is more or less based on a generic quality of media rituals, underlined by the black and white opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' the media. However, in this study, all respondents were very outspoken concerning their preferences: most of them were enthusiastic about seeing and listening to directors. The prestige status of these media people does not depend on their fame, but on other qualities assigned to them, such as their knowledge, creative powers or cultural capital in general. Thus, this study shows how some audiences do not have one single conception of 'the media world' but identify several layers, whereby some layers are assigned more prestige than others. This implies that the boundary between inside and outside the media is – at least in the perception of these audiences – less rigid than sometimes suggested.

This study has shown that by attending screenings and talks at the SIFF, these audiences – who are mostly educated youths – honour work ethic and creativity. In this case, honouring the media is about honouring professionalism. This value of

professionalism may also fit in a larger cultural trend of today's China: a need for a national culture that promotes progress (Yu, 2015, pp. 18-20). In the West, the fame of contemporary celebrities, as the often cited argument suggests, rests overwhelmingly on media coverage of their lifestyle, instead of talent and achievement (Redmond & Holmes, 2007, p. 8). Chinese film culture, so I would like to suggest, seems to go into a different direction. Some good-looking and popular young Chinese actors are slated for their wooden, robotic, 'emoji acting'. In comparison, the filmmakers are glorified for their 'hard work' and 'creative insights', personifying the ideology of 'Created in China'.

7 Living in the media: on the motives and experiences of extras at Hengdian World Studios

7.1 Introduction

On 2nd January 2016, despite a national holiday, extras at China's Hengdian World Studios were playing dead in dirty military costumes. One extra uploaded a photo of him in costume via instant social networking app. Laying under a pile of 'dead' bodies in the picture, he texted, 'at this moment, the dream seems far away, for this place is packed with so many people sharing the same dream. Hey, buddy, you hurt my feet'.

In the film and television industry, extras are marginalised, and often considered as a 'human backdrop' for pictures. The Chinese film and television industry is booming, and the group of extras is growing likewise. At China's Hengdian World Studios, the world's largest outdoor film studio, more than twenty thousand people have registered in the actors' union. Each day between two and three thousand extras participate in TV/film productions in the so-called 'Hollywood of the East' (Ma, 2015).

So far, extras have received little attention in academic literature, even though they have been a part of the film and television industry almost from its conception. Important work has been done on the experiences of film tourists, who travel to film studios and other film locations with the aim of 'getting closer to the media world' (e.g. Kim, 2010, 2012; Kim & Wang, 2012; Couldry, 2003, 2005; Reijnders, 2011). In most cases, this concerns *short-term* tourists, e.g. participating in a two-hour tour or visiting film locations individually as part of a day trip. However, very little is known about 'ordinary people' – like the extras from Hengdian – who immerse in film studios for a longer period. Their motives and experiences will most probably differ from those of the short-term film tourists and have the potential to deepen our understanding of the relation between film, experience and place. Moreover, in media studies, scholars are

familiar with topics about celebrities and stardom, and there is a substantial body of literature regarding these. And yet, the phenomenon of extras is different from that of celebrities in many ways, including professional backgrounds, roles in media mechanism, and impacts on the society, etc., and thus cannot be discussed by using same concepts.

In this chapter, I take Nick Couldry's concept of media rituals as a point of departure. Couldry suggests that there is a distinction between anything 'in the media' and anything which is not. Being 'in' the media can empower people or objects and offer them a privileged status. The hypothesis of this chapter is that people become extras because they want to be 'in' the media. In particular, this chapter will investigate the motives and experiences of 'Hengdian drifters' at China's Hengdian World Studios, revolving around the following questions: Why are people motivated to become extras in Hengdian? How do they experience being 'in' the media? And what are the deeper, long-term meanings attached to their experiences?

In order to answer these questions, I have conducted interviews with fifteen respondents. However, before diving into an analysis of these interviews, I would first like to present the theoretical framework that has guided this research.

7.2 Theoretical Framework

When trying to explain and theorise the continuous attraction of being an extra, I need to rely on more general theory concerning media rituals, as I focus on extras' experiences 'in' the media, rather than their performing experiences per se. Particularly interesting is the work of Nick Couldry (2003).

According to Couldry, media rituals are formalised 'actions organised around key media-related categories and boundaries' or patterns (2003, p. 2), and function as the crucial mechanism that reinforces assumed legitimacy of the media's social centrality (2003, p. 2). In media rituals, categories of thought are acted out, among which the most

important category difference lies in between anything 'in the media' and anything which is not (Couldry, 2003, p. 47). Couldry suggests that the distinction between 'media world' and 'ordinary world' is essential for naturalizing the media's concentration of symbolic power (2000, p. 15) and the underlying value that media 'stand in' for or represent the social world (2003, p. 27). People take it for granted that the 'media world' is special, somehow better than 'ordinary life', and that 'media people' are special (2000, p. 45).

Film tourists' experiences have been associated with the dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside' the media. For example, Kim and Wang (2012) point out three dimensions of on-site film tourists' experiences: 'prestige and privilege', 'beyond screen, sensory experience and re-enactment' and 'intimacy and memory'. Tourists feel excited to be at the filmed locations in person, touch costumes and props from the drama, and hear more cultural stories as well as behind the scenes stories about producing the drama, etc.(Ibid.). Understandably, the feeling of 'prestige and privilege' is connected with the presumption of entering 'the media world'. Another example is Reijnders's study of Bond pilgrimages, where he shows how the symbolic difference between 'inside' and 'outside' the media is intertwined with other power configurations such as – in this case – notions of masculinity (Reijnders, 2010, 2011).

Yet, extras immerse themselves in the 'media world' for a longer period, and thus they might have more intense experiences with this symbolic difference. In his study of visitors at the set of Coronation Street, Granada Studios Tour (2000), Couldry notices that a few people try to become extras, and briefly discusses those who succeed in becoming extras and are 'playing with boundaries' (2000, pp. 116-118). Couldry explains this desire to act and appear on television not only by the difference between acting and nine-to-five jobs, but also by the symbolic difference between in and outside the media. Even the tiniest role and smallest appearance on television might be enough to become an 'ordinary' part of the media world.

Building on Couldry's theoretical insights, studies have been done to understand media participation of 'ordinary people' who are not media professionals, experts, or

newsworthy (e.g., Andrejevic, 2004, p. 145; Aslama, 2009; Wei, 2016). Referring to Couldry's 'myth of the media centre' (2003), Turner (2015, p. 113) demonstrates that ordinary celebrities acquire a different status as they succeed in moving from the non-media world into the 'social centre' of the media (Couldry, 2003). Motives of ordinary people for media exposure are, however, more complicated than the desire for fame. For example, many media participants have the intention to gain a life-changing experience or impart information publicly, to feel important and special (Ibid.; Andrejevic, 2004; Aslama, 2009; Syvertsen, 2001). What then does such a life-changing experience consist of?

To contribute to this body of knowledge, I investigate the whole process of extras' practices and the relation to the assumed media's social centrality.

7.3 Research methods

Hengdian World Studios is located in Hengdian, a town of Dongyang in the Zhejiang Province, a five-hour drive southwest of Shanghai, China. With 165 thousand inhabitants (Chen, 2015), the town consists of studios and busy streets. Tourists usually visit Hengdian for one or two days. During the 2017 New Year three-day break, 119,500 tourists visited Hengdian World Studios, including its theme park (Zhao, 2017). Yet, mass tourism is only one part of the business strategy of Hengdian. On a single day during off-peak season, participants of media productions may outnumber visitors. Since 1996, crews from approximately 1,800 film and TV productions have worked in Hengdian, with 285 productions in 2016 alone (Zeng, 2016). The popularity of Hengdian World Studios is stimulated by the fact that since 2000, its outdoor scenery has been available to use for free by domestic and international crews. Media professionals are therefore attracted to Hengdian to shoot movies and TV dramas, greatly boosting the service sector in the town (Ying, 2012).

This chapter aims to advance our understanding of people who make efforts to act and get 'in the media', offering a phenomenological perspective on their ambitions and

experiences. For this case study, fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted.

The respondents were recruited in Hengdian and via extras' internal social networks. In total, fourteen male respondents and one female respondent from various provinces around China have been interviewed. The gender ratio is reasonable, as Hengdian is abundant in filming locations for costume dramas, war films, and television series, and there is a much larger demand for male extras. The age difference was minimal, ranging from 23 to 32 years old.

The length of the interviews varied from 40 minutes up to one and a half hours. Key questions were determined in advance, with the goal to investigate motives for becoming extras, experiences of acting and getting 'in the media', and reflections after having been extras 'in the media' for some time. During the interviews, respondents were allowed to bring up their own discussion topics. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed (Bryman, 2012).

Prior to the interviews, efforts were made to get acquainted with several extras, and to get familiar with the extras' working and living environment, including the actors' union, main film studios and filming locations, surrounding streets, and recruiting processes. This fieldwork in Hengdian took place in late December 2015. Since then, complementary to the interviews, I joined and paid attention to the social networks of the extras, especially images and thoughts they shared during and after participating in productions, most of which were updates of long working hours and exhaustion, selfies in costumes and sometimes with celebrities, and spectacular moments during filming such as Kung Fu scenes and fire explosions. Being aware of extras' latest practices and becoming acquainted with their vocabulary and expressions were helpful in terms of generating trust during the interviews, asking specific questions and interpreting questions in the right way (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The analysis in the following sections is based on a three-step process that emerged from most of the interviews. To begin with, Hengdian drifters expect to have a different

lifestyle once they have become extras. They make a conscious decision to follow their dreams of acting. When they have immersed 'in' the media, however, most extras experience a process of demystification and obtain 'inside' knowledge that enables them to see the media world without rose-tinted glasses. Those who decide to stay longer strive to make progress within this hierarchy and recognise the effects of being an extra on their personalities.

7.4.1 An Once-in-a-lifetime Experiment

Most extras in Hengdian, the so-called 'Hengdian drifters' or *HengPiao*, are young people from other provinces, mostly in their twenties or thirties, often without any professional acting training. They move to Hengdian and rent a simple room close to the actors' union, which is one of the assembly points for the extras that have been selected for the productions. The extras compose a diverse community, and major differences can be noted in terms of appearance, stature, educational background, life and working experience.

During the peak season for filmmaking, extras work an average of six days a week, even in the middle of the winter, before Chinese New Year. They have active social networks, where Heads of extras publish the latest recruitment announcements with strict requirements, related to e.g. age and height. Extras that have been selected for roles such as pedestrian, soldier, Qing dynasty guard or palace maid meet at the designated places around five o'clock in the morning for day scenes, take a bus to filming locations and work until the late afternoon. Alternatively, extras meet up late in the afternoon and work until early in the morning for night scenes.

When asked about their motivations to join this busy and somewhat insecure community of extras, most respondents explain that they wanted to explore what it is like to be an extra and to work in the film/TV industry:

> I am here to have fun, to explore a different lifestyle. I just wanted to go out, experience a little bit here and see what it is about and how it works. I will continue if I enjoy it, or

find another lifestyle if I don't like this. (Yong, Shandong Province, 32 years old, 1 month in Hengdian)

I came here because of the film 'I Am Somebody'. […] Because I haven't worked in this industry, I was full of anticipation. (Litian, Guizhou Province, 32 years old, 1 month in Hengdian)

From these two quotes, it becomes clear that before arriving in Hengdian, Yong and Litian were curious about the film studio and expected this place to be different and enjoyable. Other respondents also use the words '*explore*' and '*experience*' to describe their early motivations, regarding the practice as a '*try*', either trying out a job in the film/TV industry or trying a different lifestyle. Most of them know that extras' appearance on the television is fleeting and marginal, but they don't seem to care; their motivations do not necessarily derive from the wish to appear on the television. Putting the *experience* prior to the *visibility* is a finding which resonates with prior studies on media participation (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004; Aslama, 2009; Syvertsen, 2001; Wei, 2016).

As Dyer (1977) suggests, "entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide." For would-be extras, participating in film and TV productions contains the hope of getting closer to the media and entertainment world than by simply watching the television from home. What then is this 'something' extras seek and cannot find in daily life? What do extras talk about when they talk about such an exploration, experience, or lifestyle?

One seems to have a double life - we live in two worlds by performing different parts as an actor. What an actor plays can be quite different from the reality. (Peng, Henan Province, 23 years old, 3 months in Hengdian)

Becoming an actress is my dream ever since I was a little girl. […] Acting allows me to

> explore what it is like to be another character and to explore different lives. In this way, I can enrich my own life. (Qiyue, female, Hubei Province, 27 years old, a week in Hengdian and 2 years in Huairou Film Base in Beijing previously)

The reason why this 'something' cannot be found in daily life is precisely because it is fundamentally '*different*', as Peng sees it. Unlike audiences of film and TV productions who may seek the image to 'escape into', as Dyer suggests, extras embrace the chances to become part of a fictional world. Extras' participation leads them to have the impression that they possess the imaginative happenings at film studios in their own lives. In other words, not only the tasks extras carry out, but also the roles they play in fictional settings become 'real' enough to be seen as part of their lives. Qiyue expresses similar motivations, and her standpoint as well as childhood dream are shared by many respondents. The idea of being other characters is what they like about acting as well as the 'something' attracting them. Becoming extras offers them opportunities for being various characters for a while, shifting roles and playing with their own identities.

This finding is consistent with existing studies on film tourism, which have found that some film tourists want to step into the shoes of their beloved characters by visiting locations associated with the stories (Reijnders, 2016; Kim, 2012; Frost, 2010; Laing & Crouch, 2009, pp. 193–194; Seaton, 2002). From the interviews with extras, all respondents are clear about their favorite types of roles they would like to perform. The wish to be in the shoes of particular characters seems to be shared by both film tourists and extras. In this regard, film tourists collect memorabilia of places, characters and players, and may photograph their re-enactment to capture and enhance their experience (e.g. Kim, 2010). Many extras also keep their costume photos as memories, knowing these images are likely to appear in the productions.

A lot of respondents express that they want to give it a try in the film industry so that they will have no regrets, regardless of whether they can make it and become actors or not. They speak of being extras as a once-in-a-lifetime endeavor when they still have time to do this as an experiment before settling down. Sometimes, making such a once-in-a-lifetime endeavor needs a stimulus in the first place:

> The film 'I Am Somebody' inspired me a lot, and I know some people who came here because of this film, too. We are young and have never left our hometowns, like the protagonist. When he tells his parents about the plan, they don't support it at first. But he comes here anyway. I started my first job at the age of 21 and worked for three years, without any chances to go out. So I decided to go out for an adventure. (Meng, Henan Province, 24 years old, 2 months in Hengdian)

Several respondents, including Meng and Litian, have been induced by the film 'I Am Somebody' (*Wo Shi Lu Ren Jia*) by Derek Yee Tung-sing. Released in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore in July 2015, the film offers a realistic portrait of Chinese young extras who work hard and live under poor conditions with the ambition of becoming actors in Hengdian. This bittersweet film pays tribute to the thousands of *HengPiao*, with real-life extras taking the lead in the film. For Litian, the film has introduced him to the unknown world of film studios and lives of extras. For some respondents, the film has inspired them to make the decision to move to Hengdian and start working there as an extra.

Just like film tourists who want to experience what characters do in the films, several fans of *I am Somebody* are deeply moved by the stories of the fictional extras and want to imitate those protagonists by becoming an extra themselves. Moreover, in both cases there is also a social dimension to their experience. Just like most film tourists like to share their knowledge and fondness of a story with like-minded people (Reijnders, 2016), extras also search for like-minded souls – living together in Hengdian for a period of time and sharing their dream, ambitions and both victories or disappointments along the road.

7.4.2 Demystification and Insiderness

Many respondents still remember their feelings when they have just begun to participate in productions. The excitement firstly sprang from seeing the medium and the realisation of appearing 'in the media':

> I didn't realise that the leading actors were behind me. They walked past. I was excited. So I will appear in that shot for sure. It was the first time in my life to face a real movie camera, which was recording directly towards me, and I walked past. (Tao, Henan Province, 24 years old, 1 month in Hengdian)

Tao is excited about seeing the medium from close by and the promise that he will be in the scene. A filming set is full of things and happenings that one cannot see and experience elsewhere. Although various things on set make many extras' hearts beat faster, such as seeing professional movie cameras, being close to famous actors and actresses as they play pedestrians, and firing guns in war films, etc., their views may change as time goes by:

> I treat it as a job. So I don't find the whole thing 'magical' or anything special. On my first day, I was unfamiliar with things on set. I didn't stand in the right place as they required. It was noisy, and I missed the instruction. In the end, I was blamed for the mistake. (Fei, Guangxi Province, age unknown, 1 month in Hengdian)

It is common to regard the extra's practice as a normal job, as Fei suggests, especially among those who have been working for a while. In the interviews, most respondents say that they have gotten used to this job, and '*it is just like that and there is nothing special about it anymore.*' What these extras seem to experience is a process of demystification. The media no longer appears special, as extras find out how things are mediated by participating 'in the media'. Meanwhile, extras obtain the 'inside' knowledge of filmmaking basics, such as how a camera works, framing, movement, settings, etc.:

> Now I have learned a lot, such as capturing different angles for a scene, ignoring everything outside the camera frame and just ensuring things inside are correct. I also realise how different the filming and images shown on screen can be, for many things are changed due to post-production. (Peng, Henan Province, 23 years old, 3 months in Hengdian)

> I recognise many things when I watch television now, like in TV series, people only eat nuts on the table and never try other main dishes. Why? I didn't know the answer until I participated in productions. Dishes are all props. They are uneatable and crews need to return props. During those days of film shooting, we had the same dishes every time. (Litian, Guizhou Province, 32 years old, 1 month in Hengdian)

Respondents have seen through the verisimilitude of the production process, including inconsistencies of things in and outside the frame, props, etc. This demystification leads some extras to view television productions with different eyes. Sometimes, the discovery of differences between the filming and images shown on screen may result in disappointment:

> I used to find watching television fun. But ever since I was here on set, I found it uninteresting. For example, we often see several people appearing in a scene on television. In fact, each person and each scene are shot separately and scenes are edited later. So I don't think television is special any more. […] Once, I laughed there after finishing the work, hahaha, when there was no camera on set. Actually there was nothing around. That was funny. (Meng, Henan Province, 24 years old, 2 months in Hengdian)

Peng, Litian and Meng all comment on certain techniques of filmmaking. Actions during the filming are different from how they look like on television, or what audiences imagine them to be. In Meng's case, he is no longer attracted by television and doesn't think it's '*special*' anymore, for he has found out that he used to be tricked by an illusion. The illusion consists of many elements, as Meng sees it, such as editing and filming locations. Without cameras and settings, the place is empty and common, where one can do whatever he or she wants. Meng witnesses the transformation of a space from being 'in the media' to 'outside the media', from artificiality, verisimilitude back to reality, and is amused by the change in that space.

They observe procedures of filmmaking and filming sets both during the filming and when there is '*nothing around*', discovering all sorts of differences between 'on screen' and on the actual set. This has been noted before in studies on media pilgrimages:

those who visit filming locations find differences between the set as seen on television and the actual set (Couldry, 2003, p. 87; Reijnders, 2010, 2011). Immersing 'in' the media, extras find differences between actions as seen on television and actual happenings on set, between results as seen on television and actual efforts, and between sets on television and actual sets. Indeed, the process of demystification is partly also a process of differentiation, the 'parcelling out' suggested by Levi-Strauss, confirming the category differences on which the media ritual is based (Couldry, 2003, p. 86).

The demystification during their media participation comes along with a sense of 'insiderness'. In this respect, although people take part in different shows and productions, they all more or less obtain a general knowledge of television making (Boross & Reijnders, 2017; Shufeldt & Gale, 2007). On the other hand, when discussing their experiences, it is hard for extras to ignore the practical things they undergo on set. In most interviews, respondents describe hardships that they have been through, and some of them recall the hardships as the most impressive experiences 'in the media'. They have to work in the outdoors until dawn in extreme temperatures, walk or run back and forth in wet boots, go out before dawn and stand for hours during the day, bear the anxiety and wait for the next role and depend on a low income, to name a few.

7.4.3 Hierarchy and Progress

One might argue that pressure can happen to anyone who is new to any industry. After all, jobs require skills. Yet, the interviews with respondents who have been in the industry for some time and are familiar with their jobs reveal another concern, namely, the hierarchy in the media mechanism:

> I have never been through a hierarchical system like this elsewhere, not in factories or any other industries. Here, there seems to be a distinction between the noble and the base. […] I feel that this comes from the above, the celebrities. People in this industry may learn from celebrities and behave like them. […] Despite tons of jobs outside there, like on construction sites, there are many willing to enter this industry and start as extras.

(Heyi, Henan Province, 26 years old, 1 year in Hengdian)

> Actors and actresses have better boxed meals to eat, cleaner clothes to wear. Crews treat them nicely, but may yell at extras. At first, I had some hard feelings, and then I thought it through. That is the way it is. Extras are extras. We cannot be at the same level as others. One has to reach that level to ask for equality. For now, at the lowest level in acting, one can only tolerate and compromise. […] If one wants to enter this industry, one has to understand its rules and adapt oneself to them. (Qiyue, female, Hubei Province, 27 years old, a week in Hengdian and 2 years in Huairou Film Base in Beijing previously)

Heyi uses 'above' to describe celebrities, people of higher status. Qiyue takes this hierarchical system for granted, commenting 'that is the way it is'. The practices in the 'media world' reinforce a sense of hierarchy by continually making a distinction between actors, actresses, and extras. The hierarchical concept is embedded in people's minds.

Within production cultures, however, the hierarchy is far from something new. Caldwell's study (2008) and many works on production studies afterwards follow the distinctions between "above-the-line sector" and "below-the-line sector". The former includes ''executive'' creators and high-level ''creative'' professionals with high-paying contracts, while the latter refers to ''technical crafts'' and labor involved in productions with union contracts (Caldwell, 2008). In this division of labor, extras are not even listed in "below-the-line sector". On the other hand, this is not unpredictable, since extras are not included in production teams. Caldwell suggests a truism in the film and television industries that "even the lowest and most poorly paid production assistants will find workers with even less power to defecate on" (2008, p. 109).

During the interviews, extras often talk about their own disadvantages of having no professional training, which in a way marks the media/ordinary boundary and prevents them from migrating to other positions in productions. As a result, some of them express

the feelings that they experience a symbolic hierarchy on set, in the form of concrete inequalities.

Another comparable phenomenon is the clear hierarchy among contestants of TV talent shows. The distinction between 'ordinary boy' and 'idol' is represented and reinforced by banishing the 'less-than-talented' and celebrating the exemplary contestants in the TV talent show Idols (Reijnders, Rooijakkers, & van Zoonen, 2007). For extras, the exemplary individuals among them are those who have become 'bit' players. Bit players in early Hollywood played minor parts in support of stars and featured players and would accept extra work if they could not get work in minor parts (Segrave, 2013, p. 80). Bit players in Hengdian are at the same position, playing small acting roles with a few lines to speak. It is therefore not surprising that the phenomenon of having a sense of privilege is not just among celebrities and crews. Meng reveals that it is also evident among bit players:

> Some people on set pretend that they are somebody. Bit players normally do not speak to extras. (Meng, Henan Province, 24 years old, 2 months in Hengdian)

This hierarchical distinction, however, is not something new or idiosyncratic in the Chinese film/TV industry nowadays. There was the caste system among actors in Hollywood, dating as far back as 1932. While stars and featured players mingle freely with a sense of intimacy on sets, a bit player finds himself outside of such intimacy. An unwritten rule governs an extra's actions so that he stays by himself or with his group (Slide, 2012, p. 4).

Extras in Hengdian are still on the periphery of the 'media world,' even though they are, as Couldry notes, 'playing with boundaries' (2002). Becoming a bit player, let alone an actor, an actress or a crew member, means obtaining a more privileged position where one has a closer relation with the 'media world'. Such a position or status is not fixed. Celebrities or the media people need to secure their status through frequent appearances in the media (Couldry, 2012, p. 75). Likewise, people in the 'media world' have opportunities to acquire or upgrade the status. Therefore, many respondents have

humble attitudes, accepting the hierarchy in the media mechanism positively rather than complaining about it:

> It is all about having a positive attitude. They are actors, and we are extras. But there are learning opportunities. So keep learning until we reach the high status. (Peng, Henan Province, 23 years old, 3 months in Hengdian)

Indeed, the locales of media production are at least available to extras. This access to the media world in a spatial term is an advantage for extras, something which media audiences do not have. Many respondents admit a very small chance of becoming 'real' actors, but even as an extra one has the possibility to learn more about the film/TV industry. Some respondents have also decided to gradually shift their focuses to technical skills, aiming at opportunities to become crew members behind the cameras in the future.

At this point, when respondents are still working as extras, they do not think anymore that there is something to be proud of, just because they appear 'in the media.' More than half of the respondents have not shown their costume photos to families and friends or even told them about this job. Instead, they want to keep their experiences to themselves until they become actors:

> I prefer to share normal photos of my real life rather than embarrassing photos of working in TV productions. I just take some photos of myself in costumes and keep them for myself. There is no need to show off. It is a bit special to be on television after all. But it is also because I am not successful enough yet. (Xiaoming, Hubei Province, 24 years old, 1 month in Hengdian)

> I may show my family and friends some photos after I have played a small part, at least. By then there is actually a point in showing, and I will obtain some sense of accomplishment if I see my family satisfied. For now, though, I don't want them to think too much. After all, the old generation doesn't approve me of entering this industry. […] They think that people who didn't graduate from professional schools aren't able to

compete with those who did. I will have to tell them my thoughts and set a deadline for myself. (Peng, Henan Province, 23 years old, 3 months in Hengdian)

Based on Xiaoming's logic, showing photos would be a kind of 'show off' precisely because it is somewhat 'special to be on television'. On the other hand, his awareness of embarrassment derives from the fact that he is doing ordinary things 'in the media', in his words, '*not successful enough yet*.' For extras who immerse themselves 'in the media', the idea of doing extraordinary things in the 'media world' is ever-present and can hardly be replaced by the satisfaction of appearing on television just once or doing something ordinary in the 'media world'. Researchers have observed that people could not get rid of the idea that one should be good enough to join audition of a TV talent show, no matter how the show emphasised its low entrance barrier and invited 'ordinary people' to join (Cui & Lee, 2010), and some contestants only tell close friends and family about their participation in American Idol as 'a preemptive face-saving strategy' (Wei, 2016). Such concerns can also explain why some extras keep their practices secret from family and friends, even though they have already entered the media world. Indeed, 'there isn't a requirement for any prerequisite skills' and 'anyone can do this' as Litian says, yet at the same time, there is a measurement in the minds of extras that they need to be good enough before sharing their experiences.

As scholars found out long before, aspiring actors are aware of a slight possibility of unknown players' rise to stardom. Thus, they are willing to endure negative things about screen acting work, with little control over working conditions and creative processes (Peters & Cantor, 1982). Similarly, several extras stay longer in Hengdian than others, intending to become bit players, especially when some of them are confident in their familiarity with this industry. Peng sets a goal of 'playing a small part', which is not something too ordinary like playing a pedestrian or dead. He assumes that his parents, who would have tried to persuade him not to enter the industry, may be satisfied with his progress in the media world by then. Some respondents have comparable experiences, as it is not uncommon for family members encourage them to get rid of their whimsical ideas for becoming real actors. For Peng and those

respondents, the result of ‘playing a small part’ would break the idea that non-media people with no professional training are incapable of doing something out of the ordinary in the ‘media world’.

Peng does not want his family to think too much, considering their concern about his lack of acting education. Qiyue goes one step further and imagines what people may think of her, heading in a different direction:

> I don’t want to send photos to my family and friends, or let people know, because they wouldn’t understand. If I do a good job in this industry, I will tell. For now, I am an extra or whatever, and I don’t even have much income. If they knew that I had become an actress, they would assume that I was driving cars and living in luxury, etc. […] In fact, I am far from that level. I don’t want to give people that delusion. (Qiyue, female, Hubei Province, 27 years old, a week in Hengdian and 2 years in Huairou Film Base in Beijing previously)

Qiyue’s assumption of people’s reactions reveals a stereotypical way of seeing ‘media people’, which is primarily associated with fortune, the tangible thing. She assumes that non-media people would not understand actual experiences with the media, especially when extras’ participations are almost invisible. Her assumption is not a complete bias, as Wang exemplifies this scenario:

> I sent photos of me in costume to my good friends. They wowed. ‘I cannot believe you are acting in movies. Are you becoming a star?’ No, no, I just came to perform for productions. ‘Which movies? In which productions can we see you? Which character did you play?’ They are very curious about these. It is refreshing to them. (Wang, Henan Province, 23 years old, 6 months in Hengdian)

Wang’s friends are more curious about the resulting films than about his personal experiences, and want to know whether he is going to obtain stardom or not and when he will appear on television. Non-media people in the ‘ordinary world’ usually link the meaning of being ‘in the media’ to fortune and fame, while people in the media world, extras in particular, think differently and have the feeling that they know what it truly

means to enter this industry. As Donglin remarks: 'people who become extras because they fancy glamor in the film/TV industry would leave after a few months.'

If this is the case, how do extras reflect on their experiences of participating in film and TV productions then? Apart from appreciating the learning opportunities, as discussed above, a few respondents realise changes in their personalities along the way:

> I wasn't used to expressing my feelings. Through acting, I have found myself. During the filming, there are many things going on, and I can act out my feelings that are left out in real life. For instance, I care about my family very much; yet, I never spoke about it. As I realise that it is a performance and I am acting here, I can express all my feelings. In this way, I am enriched. (Fei, Guangxi Province, age unknown, 1 month in Hengdian)

Fei is not alone in recognizing positive influences on his life. Xiaozhu says he used to have an introvert character but acting has changed that. Through playing different fictional roles and interacting with the film crews, he continues to expect further transformations in his life. Xiaozhu stays motivated and frequently says things such as, '*there is a long way to go*' and '*try my best*' during the interview.

In addition, some respondents remark that they have learned from fellow extras, either because of previous professional and life experiences in a variety of industries and places, or because of other extras' efforts and dedication:

> Extras who participate in explosion scenes are really admirable. They took the roles, regardless of the danger. This is the spirit you have when you really love something, either a job or a girl. (Anqiang, Jiangxi Province, 24 years old, 1 month in Hengdian)

The dedication Anqiang describes, can be seen in many other industries, and is often regarded as a life lesson. Like Fei, Xiaozhu and Anqiang, respondents transfer the lessons they have learned during the course of their practices in the media world to the social world. For extras who have been working in Hengdian for some time, their experiences and reflections are more complicated than simply 'participating in the media'. In Couldry's case study (2000, p. 116-118), an interviewee desires to be on television for one time. After finally appearing on a talk show, he has feelings of

empowerment because of the nature of television itself. Even though the appearance is ordinary and brief, that one-time experience is significant. For the respondents in the case study on Hengdian drifters, appearing 'in the media' does not necessarily provide them with empowerment, as many respondents have hesitations in announcing their practices to families and friends. Instead, acting and interactions with people are helpful to extras in actualizing certain *transformations in their characters*. Some become more extroverted, some get more comfortable with expressing feelings, while others learn to dedicate themselves on a new level.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has probed into the practices and experiences of 'ordinary people' participating in film and TV productions, focusing in particular on the lives and perspectives of fifteen 'Hengdian drifters'.

Based on a series of interviews, I conclude that most extras undergo a similar process, consisting of the following three steps. To start with, many respondents get 'in' the media with the wish to perform, to experience other roles or to express oneself through roles. Would-be extras assume that elementary jobs in film studios are different from other sorts of jobs, as a different lifestyle worthy to explore. Some believe that they can possess a double life by acting, one in the real world and the other in the media world. This idea resonates with film tourists' wishes to step into the shoes of their beloved characters. Prior to their media participation, people see the media world through rose-tinted glasses, expecting that it is different from anything else.

Second, as they participate in productions on a daily basis, extras tend to experience a gradual process of demystification. They gain knowledge that they could not have known without being 'in' the media. Similar to how short-term film tourists visiting filming locations find differences between the actual set and how it is seen on television, extras discover differences between 'on screen' and 'on set', witnessing and taking part in the process of how reality as well as fiction is mediated. This knowledge partly takes

off the rose-tinted glasses and diminishes their dreams, but they are also welcomed as newly gained ‘insider knowledge’.

Becoming extras is their first experimental step into the media world. For those who decide to stay longer and wish to take on more ‘inside’ jobs in the film/TV industry, they appreciate these kind of learning opportunities and strive to make progress. Some extras recognise the transformation to become expressive along the way, because of the realisation that it is a performance instead of reality or daily interactions with others during their media participation.

Reflecting on the hypothesis that people become extras because they want to be ‘in’ the media, I argue that extras do not consciously aim for the transgression from the ‘ordinary world’ to the ‘social centre’ of the media per se. After all, they are still on the periphery of the ‘media world’ as well as the social world after working in the industry for a period of time. What then are conditions for sustaining the media ritual of working as extras? Many respondents get 'in' the media with the wish to perform, to express oneself through roles, and some recognise the transformation to become expressive along the way. The extras in Hengdian underwent a ‘rite of passage’ (Turner, 1967). As they left one group to enter another with a change of status in society, they also went on a journey of finding the self of adulthood and a position in the social world. The individual’s transition, from a young twenty-something without deep understanding of the self or a goal of life to a mature person with a clear vision of life, is an essential meaning that many of the interviewed extras attach to their practices. Such a condition makes their participation in these kind of media rituals more personal and meaningful and shows how media rituals can stimulate transformation from within.

While the phenomenon of Hengdian drifters are closely connected with the Chinese social and cultural context, this context does not make the discussion distinct from existing western theories and phenomena. Two reasons emerge. Firstly, the wish of getting ‘in’ the media is universal. Admittedly, on many occasions, participants may have more than one motive. The desire for celebrity, however, cannot be a sound universalistic explanation for the motive for media exposure (Grindstaff, 2009). Instead,

many do embrace opportunities to take part in once-in-a-lifetime event, which will bring about experiences and memories (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 145; Aslama, 2009; Grindstaff, 2009). Secondly, some features of the media industry are universal, too. Scholars have recently examined the radio sector in Italy (Bonini & Gandini, 2015), prop-making at Babelsberg Studio, Germany (Vonderau, 2015), and gender inequality in the UK media industry (Gill, 2013), etc, and the phenomena such as problematic working conditions, division of labour, inequalities and hierarchies are not something new to individuals in media work around the world. This also explains the similarities between extras in early Hollywood and extras in Hengdian that are mentioned in the analysis of this study.

More generally, what extras experience at China's Hengdian World Studios also fits in well with Dilthey's idea of a complete experience, 'living through' a sequence of events, involving 'moments' of 'performance', acts of retrospection and 'wishing forward' (Turner, 1982, p. 18). The symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media plays an essential role in marking those 'moments' for media participants to live through, think back or make comparison between their expectations and reality, and finally wish forward. In this way, 'ordinary people' generate meanings and gain experiences during their media participation that may be treasured for a lifetime.

8 General conclusion

This research has examined 'unmediated' encounters with the film industry and the mindsets behind everyday audiences' engagement with celebrities (Chapter 4) in China. Until now, little was known about the social and cultural meaning of these encounters in the Chinese context. The core question of the dissertation is: What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society? This overarching research question is broken down into four sub-questions, which address 1) everyday audiences' attitudes towards celebrities from the media; 2) the role and significance of organising 'unmediated' encounters with film celebrities for media practitioners; 3) the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with film professionals for audiences; and 4) the motives of 'ordinary' people for participating in professional media productions and the evaluation of their experiences. By using qualitative interviews and ethnographic methods of observations, I have investigated these questions from the multiple perspectives of everyday audiences, media practitioners, film festival goers, and extras.

The four empirical studies have answered the four sub-questions, respectively. These studies covered four different settings and different types of media encounters (see chapter Theory). After analysing the 'pre-stage' of media encounters in Chapter 4 (i.e. the mindsets of everyday audiences), Chapter 5 examined the so-called 'movie roadshows', where movie screenings are followed by a Q&A session with actors and media professionals. Chapter 6 focused on the phenomenon of the international film festival and the motives and experiences of ordinary people who attend these events. Finally, Chapter 7 dealt with a more intensive mode of encounter with the media, namely, long-term participation in productions at the world's largest outdoor film studio, Hengdian World Studios. While each case study more or less overlapped with the respective sub-question, I also tried to find cross-roads between the different cases. For example, although the movie roadshow case focused mainly on the media practitioners'

perspectives, I also used this data, where possible, to enrich my knowledge of the audiences' views. In the following sections, I will elaborate on the results of the individual case studies. Following this, I will return to the overarching research question. In particular, I will focus on the *how* (how are different forms of media rituals organised and experienced) and the *why* (what kind of values and meanings are attached to these events by the different people involved). Lastly, I will contextualise the findings and discuss limitations and recommendations for future research.

8.1 Case 1: Ideas about celebrity and expectations of 'unmediated' encounters with the famous

Case 1 investigated how young and middle-aged adults in everyday life in urban China discuss and value celebrities, as well as how they imagine what it would be to meet celebrities in real life. It answered the sub-question 1: How do everyday audiences perceive celebrities from the media and what are their ideas and expectations of 'unmediated' encounters with these famous people? For this exploratory study, I conducted 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Although the respondents mentioned that they consume celebrity content in diverse fields and admire various spheres of famous people, there were several recurring patterns in these discussions about famous people and the reasons for appreciating certain figures.

Several respondents suggested that the famous celebrities they like mirror the person's tastes and underlying values. People tend to express their own opinions on social phenomena when they discuss celebrity news in general. Many respondents identify with the famous who are characterised by dedication and perseverance, frankness in public, traditional virtues, and cultural depth in their work. These qualities overlap with the attributes that the respondents think the famous *should have*, including righteousness, kind-heartedness, responsibility, dedication, and having a positive influence on society.

In general, the everyday audiences' discussions, especially the desirable attributes of famous people and critiques of flawed behaviours of certain celebrities, reflect the values that the audiences hold dear. Two major patterns emerge: Firstly, work ethics and social responsibility are the two values that many Chinese audiences emphasise. The emphasis on these two values is remarkably close to the value system promoted by the Chinese government. However, we cannot simply assume a direct relation between the highlighted values and the promoted value system or overemphasise the role of the state in contemporary Chinese culture. As this study has identified, the respondents also criticise current media culture and express clear ideas about how celebrities should be, ideas that are not by definition fully in line with the promoted value system. For example, several respondents expect celebrities to fulfil social responsibility, even though from the state level, the expectation of celebrity conduct is mostly about 'a moral issue' (Chen, 2015). During the interviews, the respondents criticised media culture's relentless pursuit of audiences' attention and commercial purposes.

The second pattern found is that the values resonating among the audiences are also potentially associated with the past and current socio-cultural situation of China's social transformation, especially since the implementation of the market economy in 1992. Some respondents relate their preferred values to social transformation and social mentality. Modernisation has an impact on young people's sense of identity and values (Jacka, Kipnis, & Sargeson, 2013). To some extent, the respondents' remarks possibly mirror their mindsets as they adapt to the rapid social and cultural changes in China. After all, China's development is not just a narrative. Developments like large scale migration and urbanisation, tensions between economic growth and social development, and income disparity come with consequences that many people experience in their lives (e.g. Lu, 2017).

This study also probed into a hypothetical question: how would everyday audiences feel about and value encounters with famous people? Many respondents expressed their interest in seeing famous people in real life. As this research shows, an encounter is considered a way to identify with role models and reconfirm one's own identity, which

is notably distinct from activities of merely spotting celebrities. Having seen one's favourite famous individuals in real life often strengthens the personal connection with a celebrity. This finding is consistent with the other case studies in this dissertation, with audiences expressing that their appreciation for film professionals begins to emerge or grow stronger because of an encounter.

In sum, this exploratory study has extended our understanding of how Chinese audiences perceive celebrities and celebrity content in everyday life. While existing studies often focus on 'a limited pool of individual celebrities' (Turner, 2010a), often with a bias toward Anglo-Saxon celebrities, this study has analysed audiences' general perceptions of famous individuals in China, without limiting the discussion to any celebrities in a particular field. By doing so, this study has shed some light on the social values that many Chinese young and middle-aged audiences hold dear. Moreover, the research draws a connection between general audience reflections on celebrity content, and their desire to see celebrities in real life. Such a connection has rarely been studied in previous studies on media rituals. An investigation into this connection can help us understand the potential participants' motives for and perspectives on media encounters, but also why encounters with the media are welcomed in the first place.

8.2 Case 2: Organising 'unmediated' encounters with film celebrities at movie roadshows

Case 2 focused on Chinese movie roadshows featuring face-to-face encounters with film directors and key players in the productions, thus providing an answer to sub-question 2: What are the motives for organising 'unmediated' encounters with film celebrities in a specialised event? More in particular, this case study has examined media practitioners' motivations for organising these roadshows, the ritual dimension of these events, and the implications of roadshows for media rituals in the era of digital media. Based on expert interviews with fifteen media practitioners, as well as

participant observations at four events, this study has the following main results.

From the preparation to the follow-up stage of roadshows, media practitioners employ a diverse series of activities and strategies. In the preparation stage, the choice of venue, the decision on how to present core messages and 'act' on stage, and the intention to stage and perform popular roadshows all contribute to the planning of ritualised performances. During roadshows, to avoid uncontrollable circumstances and enliven the atmosphere, media practitioners make prearrangements such as arranging some 'audience members' beforehand for interactive sessions. Additionally, cinema staff place stanchions inside the auditorium, further emphasising the separation of the audience and the media people on stage. After roadshows, media practitioners deliberately choose photos to re-mediate and circulate online via entertainment news and social media posts.

A major goal of roadshow events, for media practitioners, is to show their 'sincerity' within an 'unmediated' space, to expand the audience base, and to keep audience engagement alive. This sincerity is associated not only with the significant efforts made to tour the whole country, but also with the fact that face-to-face interactions are seemingly authentic because they cannot be modified. Furthermore, the film professionals try to show their sincerity through friendliness and willingness to connect with audiences.

Media practitioners allow for some flexibility and spontaneity during a ritualised event, but only to a certain degree. Sometimes the symbolic boundary between audiences and media people is unexpectedly crossed by the audience. For example, one member of the audience went up onto the stage – which was actually pre-arranged - to interact 'spontaneously' with a celebrity. But during the meeting, he moved closer to the celebrity than agreed, which disturbed the organisers of the event with regard to the safety of their personnel. And yet, media practitioners have practical ways of dealing with those unexpected circumstances, and these unscripted interactions are likely to only add authenticity and pleasure to the experience. Media practitioners' acceptance of audiences' input and unscripted interactions is a way of being strategically situational

during a ritualised event.

To summarise: firstly, the roadshow case study has nuanced the concept of popular media events (Hepp, 2003; Hepp & Couldry, 2010), particularly by specifying the complication of these 'more pleasure-oriented' and 'completely commercialised' popular media events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 8). Secondly, the study has identified how media encounters in China have become strategically situational, responding to the ongoing need for new forms of media rituals in the digital age (Couldry, 2012). Although this flexibility strategy seemingly undermines the centring power of popular media events, it is also part of the strategies of ritualisation. Ultimately, flexibility and spontaneity reflect the practitioners' awareness of the degree of their control over the roadshow narratives, which legitimises ritualisation and actualises its efficacy. Finally, the study has showed how face-to-face elements and social media are interrelated in practice, adding to the previous studies on fan/celebrity encounters (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2014; Lam, 2018; Raphael & Lam, 2018). Media encounters in the digital age combine physical events and communication on new media and social media, with the 'unmediated' events being mediated. The circulation of roadshow messages online serves as another form of ritual practice that constructs the mediated centre, extends ritual spaces, and presumably helps to maintain the media's privileged status in the digital age.

8.3 Case 3: Encountering film professionals at festivals

The film festival case study answered sub-question 3: What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters in a general film-themed setting? For this study, I conducted 16 interviews with film festival goers and undertook a series of participant observation during the Shanghai International Film Festival in 2016. I have explored how audiences experience 'unmediated' encounters with film professionals and the meanings that these audiences attach to these encounters. The film festival goers are motivated to visit the festival and to experience encounters with film professionals from

nearby. However, when attending the festival talks, most festival goers tend to experience a continued distance between media professionals and live audiences. Surprisingly, many justify this symbolic boundary or even appreciate having it. Some festival goers defend the accustomed distance as a preferred comfort zone or mindset for them to appreciate the media 'world' without distractions from the everyday world.

For these audiences, the significance of 'unmediated' encounters is based on two aspects. Firstly, as audiences are aware of the differences between seeing a media person on screen and in real life, they take the opportunity of face-to-face events to validate mediated personalities of film professionals, seeking a sense of 'authenticity'. For them, television or computer screens separate the audiences from the real, and the mediated personalities 'cannot be 100% authentic' (Lei, 27, male, in the film festival case study, see Chapter 6). In contrast, the audiences' physical proximity to the film professionals at the festival gives them the impression that they can deepen their understanding of those professionals' 'real' personalities.

Secondly, festival-goers value the opportunity of hearing film professionals talk about their beloved movies off-record. In particular, many hope to gain insights into the practices of the media world directly from film professionals. In this regard, having contact with directors is generally more appreciated than meeting actors, who are seen as less powerful in the media hierarchy. Many also prefer having conversations with film professionals to having autographs and photos; they appreciate valuable information about the workings of the media world and those who can uncover it for them.

By focusing on film festival talks, a setting which has not been studied before, this case study has demonstrated participants' motivations and experiences of encountering film professionals in the context of China. International film festivals, organised in several Chinese cities, have become increasingly popular in the past few years. Empirically, the findings of this case study complicate the pleasure and value of being physically close to film professionals and the interactions in Q&A sessions at film festivals (e.g. Dickson, 2015; Stevens, 2016). Theoretically, understanding the festival

goers' experiences can help us to rethink the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media – one of the core ideas of the media ritual theory - for the following two reasons. First, although such a symbolic boundary can be critically deconstructed for its association with the symbolic power of the media, it is never far away, and audiences experience a continuing difference between them and the media people. This is not by definition bad; some audiences tend to justify the boundary and even consider it a preferred comfort zone. Second, festival goers perceive a categorical difference between celebrities who are entertainment stars in front of the cameras, and other film professionals within the media industry who are usually behind the scenes and considered higher-up the professional ranks of the industry. Therefore, it is worth reconsidering the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media from the live audiences' perspectives, asking whether or not the single presumed symbolic boundary still holds when the audiences perceive different categories of 'insiderness' within the media world.

8.4 Case 4: Becoming an extra in the Chinese film industry

The extras case study dived into a more intensive mode of encounter, namely long-term participation in media productions. It answers sub-question 4: What are the motives of 'ordinary' people for participating in professional media productions, and how do they experience being 'in' the media?, based on 15 interviews with extras at Hengdian World Studios, the so-called 'Hollywood of the East'.

As the interviews showed, the extras in Hengdian were originally from various provinces across China, with differences in appearance, stature, educational background, life and working experience. The extras engaged in different productions, based on the fit for recruitment announcements, on an average of six days a week. And yet, despite these diverse backgrounds and performing activities, the extras all seemed to go through a similar experience consisting of three phases. Firstly, many extras have the wish to perform. Before their participation, it is common to romanticise the media

world. They assume that working in the media world is a different lifestyle, hoping to explore it as an once-in-a-lifetime experiment.

Secondly, as extras participate in productions on a daily basis, they gain 'insider knowledge', and such knowledge partially diminishes their idealised perception of acting in the film/TV 'world'. In addition, extras experience the hierarchical system of the film world that privileges professional actors over extras, which also diminishes their earlier rosy perspective of that world. While extras gain valuable insider knowledge through participation in the filming, they remain marginalised outsiders, more aware of their 'outsider' status than live audiences because they are a peripheral part of the hierarchy. In other words, it is sometimes possible to get 'in' the media world and obtain 'insider' knowledge, but this doesn't exclude remaining an outsider in essence.

Finally, the extras who have finished the two first phases and still long to stay in the film studios are those who are extremely humble; they positively accept the hierarchy in the media mechanism without complaining about it. In this sense, it is clear that long-term experiences of the extras in Hengdian are different from those of locals joining a one-off production as extras on the set for a short period in time (e.g. Mayer, 2017).

The investigation into extras' experiences and media world hierarchies resulted in two implications. First, the Chinese film industry has a strong hierarchy. Therefore, it is reasonable to question whether the dichotomy between inside and outside the media still holds, if there are so many barriers, borders and power differences within the media industry. Second, scholars must reconsider the presumed empowerment of the media. In Couldry's study (2000, p. 116), the person who desires to be an extra assumes that entering the media frame and doing even an ordinary task in the media 'world' would be significant. After finally appearing on television, a talk-show participant who had described himself as quiet felt that he had changed and became open enough to talk to anyone (Couldry, 2000). However, the extras case study has shown a different path. Personal feelings of lay participants in the media are often derived from how one

interacts with the media instead of the mere act of getting 'in' the media world. Participating in media productions is not only about the activities, per se. Instead, acting and interactions with people in an intensive, somewhat isolated working environment provide the opportunity to enrich the extras' personalities, which is considered important, especially for extras in their twenties and thirties. At the same time, a considerable amount of humbleness – instead of empowerment - seems to be needed in order to continue one's role in a media production.

8.5 Cross-case conclusions

In the following paragraphs, I will present the cross-case conclusions, and summarise the main theoretical and empirical contributions of this research. These findings about media encounters in contemporary China are largely context specific. Therefore, I will first present the findings before contextualising them further and answering the main research question in the next section.

Conclusion 1: Media encounters have become more accessible and popular throughout China. Motives for participating in these encounters are diverse.

China has seen a strong rise in media encounters, making it fairly easy for every Chinese to participate in one of the related events. Why would people be interesting in doing this? As this research shows, many respondents are interested in seeing famous people and encountering the media world in real life. In particular, both everyday audiences and live audiences are motivated to encounter media people beyond merely spotting celebrities. Everyday audiences imagine that encountering one's favourite famous individuals will be an irreplaceable experience, identifying with role models or anchoring one's past self and memories to the encounters. For live audiences, encountering media people is an opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the film professionals and to gain insights into the media world. In addition, the audiences all

highlight their own values in the media people they revere. For example, everyday audiences highly value work ethics and social responsibility of media people, and film festival audiences particularly honour work ethics and creativity.

Involving a more intensive and long-term mode of encountering the media world, the extras hope to experience what it is like to participate in media productions and to thus gain transformative life experiences. Extras can put up with their marginal positions in the media hierarchy as long as they keep up dreaming about progress in their acting career.

Conclusion 2: Media encounters are flexible and open to change and unscripted circumstances. At the same time, they are usually highly commercialised, and part of a larger marketing strategy to attract and bind audience groups.

As already mentioned in previous studies, media encounters and similar types of media rituals have always been open to change. This flexibility has even increased recently because of the ongoing need for new forms of media ritual in the digital age (Couldry, 2012). This dissertation has shown how, in the case of China, media encounters are still highly ritualised and centred around the performance of a symbolical boundary between inside and outside the media, but the event is not only about demonstrating and reinforcing the symbolic power of the media. Instead, media-related practices such as Chinese movie roadshows have become strategically situational, employing practical ways of dealing with certain circumstances such as when audiences disrupt the scripted arrangements and cross the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media. Therefore, such events are open to change as media professionals have to deal with unexpected circumstances and differences between the diverse audiences.

Secondly, **media encounters are increasingly audience-oriented**. Despite the fact that there can be unscripted interactions during media encounters, media practitioners still attempt to involve the public. They accept the unexpected occurrences

as discussed above. For some media practitioners, those unscripted occurrences on site, which cannot be modified or deleted in the same way mediated content can be, help them to connect with the audiences. Media practitioners make use of these encounters in order to expand their audience base, which is, of course, essential to the growth of the film industry. Meanwhile, audiences are interested in various opportunities to engage in the media world and are willing to contribute to film promotion by joining events and spreading messages on new media. Therefore, although tensions sometimes emerge, encounters between audiences and media people have become increasingly audience-oriented, incorporating reciprocity with audiences, especially in an extensively-commercialised setting.

Conclusion 3: The notion of 'unmediated' has become more complicated as face-to-face media encounters increasingly include social media elements.

While face-to-face encounters are organised to attract those who are interested in 'unmediated' experiences on site, Chinese media practitioners use social media to spread information about these events, effectively targeting specific audience groups, and maintaining communication regarding the event. Consequently, online communication complicates the symbolic boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the media. The convergence of face-to-face and online communication serves as another form of ritualised practice that constructs the mediated centre and extends ritual spaces.

Conclusion 4: Everyday audiences and live audiences do not have the perception of a singular 'media world', but notice strong hierarchies within that world. Similarly, extras participating in media productions experience large barriers and power differences within the media industry.

Participants studied in this project do not have the perception and experiences of a singular media 'world'. For example, both the film festival goers, and the everyday audiences articulate differences between creative filmmakers and 'good-looking actors'

with ‘too much media exposure’. Another example is revealed by those who get ‘in’ the media world and experience it themselves. For the extras who participate in media productions and temporally immerse themselves in the media world, they experience the film sector as a rather hierarchical system, suggesting several barriers and power differences within the media industry at large. Therefore, the media world is not perceived as a coherent whole.

Theoretically, in this research, I have nuanced one particular type of media ritual, namely ‘unmediated’ encounters with the media. I have proposed and examined different types of face-to-face encounters based on the levels of engagement and the various settings. In particular, I have included the stage of pre-ritual in media encounters in order to study a wider audience’s potential interest, participation, or disinterest in media encounters. Through the four case studies, this research has further complicated the media ritual concept. My investigation of media encounters, as one type of media ritual, has shown their complexity in that these encounters play out differently according to their context and are experienced differently by different audience groups. Moreover, I have identified elements that have not been discussed in-depth in previous studies on media rituals (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

This research on media encounters has brought the following elements to the fore:

- **Accessibility**: media encounters have become a recurring phenomenon in many cities around China and accessible to many Chinese from different layers of society
- **Flexibility**: Chinese media encounters are flexible with only a relative degree of control in order to be strategically situational
- **Reciprocity**: media encounters have encouraged cooperation and reciprocity

between audiences and media professionals, although tensions remain and sometimes emerge

- **Convergence**: the presumed 'unmediated' character of these encounters has been problematised by the increasing role of new and social media during these events

Empirically, I have identified the motivations and experiences of media encounters, and the features of such encounters in the digital age. The results of these case studies have also further complicated the key concept of media rituals such as the homogenous notion of a 'media world'. Therefore, empirical contribution of this research can be summarised as follows (see Table 2 below):

Table 2

The results of the case studies have identified:

- Non-media people are interested in participating in media encounters based on three main motives: 1) to have an irreplaceable experience and, in some cases, to identify with one's role model; 2) to gain insights into the media world; 3) to gain transformative life experiences.
- Online communication complicates the symbolic boundary that presumably divides 'inside' and 'outside' the media. This is especially true for the case of China with one of the world's most active social-media users (Chiu, Lin, & Silverman, 2012).
- The media 'world' itself is not perceived as a coherent whole, but as an industry characterised by many barriers and power differences on several levels.

8.6 Contextualising the findings: on the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society

Based on the empirical findings above, this section answers the main research question, focusing on the *how* (how are different forms of media rituals organised and experienced) and the *why* (what kind of values and meanings do people involved attach to these practices). I first contextualise the findings in relation to the rise of social media and the cultural context of China. Next, I explain the role and significance of media encounters for the different actors involved, namely Chinese producers, audiences and lay participants. Finally, the chapter concludes with the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

8.6.1 Media encounters in an era of social media

As Couldry (2012) suggests, when the media as our access point to the social centre and the media's continued economic viability are at stake, new forms of media ritual are needed. Based on the conclusions in the previous section, it has become clear that contemporary media encounters, as a major type of media rituals, show characteristics that partly differ from media rituals during the pre-New Media period..

Previous studies on media encounters have addressed either encounters solely through social media (e.g. Bennett, 2014; Click et al., 2013) or in face-to-face settings (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2014; Lam, 2018). However, as my research has shown, new and social media are integral parts of contemporary media encounters. In the pre-phase of encountering media people and the media world, people use both new media and social media to stay informed about celebrity culture, events, and opportunities for participating productions. During the face-to-face events and in the post-phase, new and social media also play important roles in reporting the encounters, furthering interactions between non-media people and media people, and extending the ritual

spaces. In sum, the rise of social and new media have not diminished media rituals, but have made media rituals more complex, with a multi-layered dynamic centered around the unmediated and mediated symbolic boundary inside/outside the media.

8.6.2 The role of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society

Before reflecting on the specificities of media encounters in the Chinese context, it is worth noting similarities between different Asian popular cultures, and also similarities between East and West popular cultures. The common occurrence of face-to-face encounters with celebrities would be one example of similarities that popular media cultures in Asia share. Moreover, the Chinese filmmakers in this research are concerned with showing 'sincerity', a word often used to describe the desired characters of Korean stars as well (e.g. Pease, 2009).

It may not be as easy to identify similarities between Eastern and Western media cultures, but they do exist. The notion of the myth of the mediated centre is most relevant to some Western countries, as it implies the type of centralisation in which the media institutions operate in a state-driven modernisation (Couldry, 2012), and it is reasonable to expect variations in non-Western countries with different systems. Some of the findings in the dissertation indeed echo the studies conducted in Western countries, including the idea of a strong hierarchical system within the media world and the related inequality in the media industry (e.g. Bonini & Gandini, 2015; Vonderau, 2015; Gill, 2013), but also the everyday audiences' critiques of celebrities with limited talents (e.g. Redmond & Holmes, 2007; Johansson, 2015), and media practitioners' promotional strategies (e.g. Caldwell, 2008).

Despite these similarities of with other popular cultures, this dissertation also revealed patterns that seem to be particular to the Chinese context.

First, media encounters in the Chinese context are ritualised and yet have

become strategically situational and open to change. To ensure profitable outcomes of media encounters, the practitioners present audiences with a mild, flexible and negotiable display of the symbolic power of the media.

Second, the symbolic boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the media, a central aspect of the media ritual, is far from clear-cut in the Chinese context. As this research shows, there are different gradations of 'insiderness', separated by many nuanced barriers and value systems. For example, directors are seen by film festival attendees as more prestigious and thus as closer to the media centre than most actor-celebrities. Another example is that extras experience the symbolic power of the media which operates harshly in the daily practices of the media system.

Finally, extras are treated differently than professional actors; this hierarchy offers a sharp contrast to the 'sincerity' and cooperation that media professionals hope to showcase in front of live audiences. Such a contrast suggests that encounters with the media are ultimately social interactions, which are not only organised around the difference between media people and non-media people, but perhaps more inevitably, around the differences among people with different social status. Because of the low social status of lay participants, such as extras', participation in media productions cannot easily change their status in any fundamental or serious way or enable them to enter the social centre.

The role of media encounters in the Chinese context

- Media encounters are ritualised and yet strategically situational and open to change.
- The symbolic boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the media is far from clear-cut in the Chinese context.
- Media encounters are not only organised around the difference between media people and non-media people, but also around the differences among participants with different social status.

8.6.3 The significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society

The significance of media encounters in contemporary Chinese society is diverse and encompasses more than only reinforcing the symbolic power of the media. **For producers, face-to-face encounters are the moments to show their 'sincerity' in an apparently 'unmediated' space while they ensure profitable outcomes.**

Moreover, **media encounters in contemporary China serve to engage the public with China's cultural soft power through an apparent emphasis on the commercial, successful performance of domestic films.** For commercial purposes, practitioners in the film industry make use of celebrities and strategically engage the public. For example, practitioners often involve celebrity fans and cinephiles in the promotion and circulation of films. Impressive box office results then help attract more people to not only watch films but also experience future film events themselves.

At a deeper level, media encounters may have a more subtle impact on China. Media encounters take place much more prevalently for homegrown movies than for international ones. These encounters can boost the attractiveness of domestic films among audiences. Attractiveness is fundamental to the soft power concept, and the media industries are the complex and key soft power industries in China (Keane, 2013). For China, its massive audience/consumer market is a significant advantage in the soft power competition (Chua, 2012). Media encounters in China, therefore, are not entirely focused on reinforcing media power, but also on attracting new audiences and building instead of reinforcing media power. In other words, the elements of media encounters typical for the Chinese context (flexibility, cooperation and reciprocity), as summarised in the previous section, should not be understood as an over-optimistic finding about media encounters; instead, these identified elements are context-specific and can be more complex than they appear. Winning the hearts of many of China's younger generation apparently serves the commercial purpose of domestic productions, but on a deeper level, it also pays lip service to the desire and endeavour to enhance cultural soft power.

As the significance regarding the *production* of media encounters has become clear, it is worth returning to the significance of media encounters for Chinese audiences and lay participants. **For these latter groups, media encounters function as a way to anchor personal meanings and values and - so this research has shown - to seek a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing society.** They rely on the outside (media) world to motivate and enrich themselves. As the Chinese film market continues its significant growth, as part of a larger experience economy, experiences for the sake of entertainment or leisure seem to overshadow the more important social benefits of these events. And yet, for individuals varying from everyday audiences to extras, many people relate the experiences of media encounters to their own stages in life.

The current pressures on young Chinese are widely acknowledged (e.g. Cockain, 2012). When the young generation graduates and enters the labour market, they face upward pressure for employment, housing, and living expenses (Li, 2013). While scholars have discussed aspects of modernisation such as consumerism and Chinese young people's participation in the 'status game' (e.g. Jacka et al., 2013; Zhang & Wang, 2017), fewer studies empirically investigated the meanings and the juxtaposition of traditional and modern values behind their cultural practices. For Chinese audiences, a range of factors, including income, education, social welfare, location, household registration, gender and ethnicity can inform their experience in society as well as their film consumption (Talmacs, 2017). It is not surprising, therefore, that many participants, including the audiences and the extras investigated for this dissertation, may not be interested in media rituals just for pleasure, but more importantly, for a sense of direction and belonging in a society that is undergoing major social transformations. The myth of the mediated center may not be more than a myth, but it is a myth that resonates strongly among the Chinese audience.

Furthermore, the respondents' motivations, activities, and their ways of looking at favourite celebrities seem to present **a collectivistic way of being individualistic**. In the book *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society* (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010), scholars have identified a growing individualisation of China. The

Chinese individualisation process 'does not simply represent a copy of the European path of individualisation'; instead, it 'must be understood as Chinese-style individualisation' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, p. xiii). In particular, at the individual level, people may appropriate socialist collective identity as a resource, invoking the socialist collective identity to pursue their individual interests (Li, 2010; Yan, 2010). Therefore, while scholars have found much evidence showing the rise of Chinese-style individualisation such as a greater emphasis on individual choices in social practices, we still need to explore the Chinese individual identity in relation to a collectivity, 'albeit increasingly an individually chosen collectivity' (Yan, 2010, p. 31). This study has examined a media-related practice in the context of popular culture without explicitly addressing individual rights, freedom or the individual–state relationship as most studies on individualism in China would. Nevertheless, **the findings of this dissertation reveal how a growing individualisation on the basis of collectivism works out in practice and how media encounters are one way of dealing with these tensions.** For example, as I have shown, people have their own idols in different fields, favourite genres of films, different ways of seeking and reconfirming individual identity, etc. At the same time, the value of work ethics has returned in all the case studies. While I do not deny the rising trend of individualism, the inherent collectivism is still present when people attach those kinds of nationally promoted meanings to their media-related practices.

The contribution of this dissertation to media and communication studies is, therefore, not only to complicate media power in an understudied socio-cultural context, but also to add to the frequently discussed individualist-collectivist argument, such as in creative industries in China (e.g. Keane, 2013) and in celebrity studies (e.g. Driessens, 2013).

The significance of media encounters in the Chinese context

- Media encounters are the moments to show the film professionals' 'sincerity' in an apparently 'unmediated' space while they ensure the commercial interests of domestic films.
- Media encounters help boost the attractiveness of domestic films among audiences and therefore serve China's political strategy to enhance its cultural soft power.
- For Chinese audiences and lay participants, media encounters can be a way to anchor personal meanings and values and to seek a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing society.

8.6.4 Limitations and recommendations for future research

The findings of this dissertation are context-specific, and the limitations need to be noted. First, this research focuses solely on China. As mentioned in Chapter 1, focusing on the Chinese context is important not only because of the scarcity of research in this direction, but also because of the impressive growth of the Chinese media industry in the last decade. And yet, the results of the study cannot be easily generalised to other non-Western countries that are going through similar economic growth, such as India or Brazil. More comparative research is needed to fully understand the relation between media rituals and cultural contexts.

Second, China is an enormous country, containing about 1/5 of the total world population, so it is hard to make any general, final statements on media encounters in China. Instead, I have chosen to do several case studies in different areas of China, in the mode of an exploratory study. Due to budget constraints, all participant observations for the film festival and film events took place in Shanghai. Moreover, although it is also hard to generalise the findings and say anything about *the Chinese* media ritual, I included my respondents' accounts about how they related their experiences to the

Chinese context and thus stayed close to an 'emic' perspective on the Chinese character of the selected events.

Third, most of my respondents, especially in the everyday audiences study, the film festival case study, and the extras case study, were young people in urban China. The participants of the film festival study were also mostly educated youths. Other demographic groups may have different experiences with media encounters, with less access to them, and perhaps also less interest in them.

To overcome the limitations of this study respectively, future studies can consider the following directions. First of all, more work on media encounters in non-Western countries are welcome to make it possible to compare media encounters in different socio-cultural contexts and identify the connections between media encounters and media systems. Another direction for future research on this topic is transnational media encounters, such as transnational participation of Chinese moviegoers in festivals abroad. For transnational moviegoers, previous experiences of domestic film festivals may influence how they experience and interpret festivals abroad. Moreover, as the festivals themselves are context-specific, transnational moviegoers may present different patterns of experience from the experiences identified in this dissertation.

Secondly, studies with larger sample sizes and more diverse groups have the potential to advance our understanding of media encounters. For example, future research should include adolescents and senior people, exploring the impact of encounters with the media on adolescents' everyday life or inspiration, or the role and meanings of encounters with the media in senior people's lives.

With this dissertation, I have responded to the growing interest in audiences meeting celebrities in media industries (e.g. Ferris, 2010; Ferris & Harris, 2011; Reijnders et al., 2014; Bolling & Smith, 2014; Stever, 2016; Williams, 2016; Lam, 2018). I have provided empirical evidence to test the applicability of the media ritual theory in the Chinese context, also taking on board the role of social and new media. The empirical evidence is unique because it not only incorporated ethnographic

elements, but also adopted a multi-actor approach, integrating different perspectives. In particular, the study has included the production side of face-to-face encounters and everyday audiences' perceptions of media encounters, which were underexplored in the existing literature.

As we have seen, **in a society undergoing fundamental social transformations, media encounters offer a unique perspective on how those changes are configured and experienced.** Media encounters have become accessible for most people, at least within most cities around China. In the Chinese film industry, media encounters serve to engage the public and ensure profitable outcomes while also indirectly contributing to the political strategy of enhancing China's cultural soft power. At the individual level, through media encounters, the audiences and lay participants obtain the experiences that anchor personal meanings and a sense of belonging in an increasingly mediatised society. In a society that is going through a phase of mediatisation and individualisation, intertwined with Chinese collectivism, meeting people from the mediated center has become a symbolically charged event.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of respondents (everyday audiences for the everyday audience case study)

Name (Pseudonyms)	Age / Generation	Gender	Location (Province in China)	Profession
Ling	26	Female	Xinjiang	Student
Xiaochen	25	Female	Fujian	Student
Feifei	23	Female	Zhejiang	Student
Hua	29	Female	Shanghai	PhD student
Wen	29	Female	Guangdong	PhD student
Zhu	born in the 60s	Female	Shandong	Teacher
Stone	47	Male	Shanghai	Manager
Jie	54	Female	Shanghai	Owner of a trading company
Chang	27	Male	Zhejiang	Employee in a shipping company
Chuan	49	Female	Shandong	Accountant
Ma	30	Male	Shanghai	Teacher
Qian	30~35	Female	Qinghai	Teacher
Ju	32	Male	Beijing	Screenwriting agent
Hong	45	Male	Shanghai	Sales
Zhexi	35~40	Male	Shanghai	Investment manager

Appendix B: Overview of respondents (media practitioners for the roadshow case study)

Name	Age	Gender	Profession	Organisation	Location of the organisation
Yan	29	Male	Event planner and organiser	Film production company	Shanghai
Sheng	31	Male	Director	Film industry	Nationwide
Zhen	30	Male	Local organiser	University	Shanghai
Jin	39	Male	Marketing manager	Film production company	Shanghai
Zou	27	Male	Event planner and organiser	Film production company	Shanghai
Ding	40	Male	Film producer	Film production company	Beijing
Cheng	36	Female	Operations manager	Cinema	Shanghai
Wan	37	Male	Local organiser	University	Shanghai
Xia	50	Male	Filmmaker	Film industry	Nationwide
Su	34	Male	Film distributor	Distribution company	Nationwide
Huan	30	Female	Event organiser	Cinema	Shanghai
Qin	32	Female	Event organiser	Film museum	Shanghai
Guan	39	Female	Independent organiser	Film screening and discussion club	Shanghai
Tan	35	Male	Event planner and organiser	Film production company	Beijing
Ting	33	Female	Manager of star agent	Entertainment company	Beijing
Note. All names of respondents and universities have been replaced by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.					

Appendix C: Overview of respondents (audiences for the film festival case study)

Name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Profession** (Student / Employee)
Haiyun	20	Female	Student
Dai	23	Female	Student
Pan	32	Male	Employee
Lei	27	Male	Employee
Xiang	20	Female	Student
Bing	30	Male	Employee
Xiaoshen	35	Male	Employee
Jia	33	Male	Employee
Jun	23	Male	Employee
Weibiao	26	Male	Student
Crystal	33	Female	Employee
Wen	31	Female	Employee
Ke	28	Female	Employee
Jing	33	Female	Employee
Lexie	26	Female	Employee
Fang	unknown	Male	Employee

Appendix D: Overview of respondents (extras for the extras case study)

Name	Age	Gender	Location (Province in China)	Experience
Yong	32	Male	Shandong	1 month in Hengdian
Litian	32	Male	Guizhou	1 month in Hengdian
Peng	23	Male	Henan	3 months in Hengdian
Qiyue	27	Female	Hubei	a week in Hengdian and 2 years in Huairou Film Base in Beijing previously
Donglin	27	Male	Jiangxi	4 years in Hengdian
Wang	23	Male	Henan	6 months in Hengdian
Dehua	25	Male	Jiangxi	1 month in Hengdian
Anqiang	24	Male	Jiangxi	1 month in Hengdian
Meng	24	Male	Henan	2 months in Hengdian
Xiaoming	24	Male	Hubei	1 month in Hengdian
Chengwu	25	Male	Heilongjiang	3 months in Hengdian
Tao	24	Male	Henan	1 month in Hengdian
Fei	unknown	Male	Guangxi	1 month in Hengdian
Heyi	26	Male	Henan	1 year in Hengdian
Xiaozhu	26	Male	Jiangsu	3.5 months in Hengdian

Appendix E: Interview guide (for the everyday audience case study)

- Which media do you usually use in your daily life?
- What type of content do you read or watch most frequently?
- How do you feel about news and shows about celebrities in general?
- Which types or categories of celebrities do you pay attention to? Why?
- Who are your favourite celebrities?
- Why do you like or appreciate them? Any examples or stories that you find impressive?
- What kinds of celebrities do you dislike? Why?
- What do you think about negative news involving celebrities?
- Do you talk about celebrities in your daily life, or do you forward articles or videos about celebrities? Any examples?
- When someone talks about celebrities, or forwards articles or videos about celebrities, to what extent do you associate those discussions with his or her values?
- What qualities do you think famous people should have?
- In your opinion, are these qualities very much needed by Chinese society now?
- What traits of famous people do you find admirable?
- How do you see the influence of famous people in your life?
- Would you like to see famous people in real life?
- How would you feel about encounters with famous people?

Appendix F: Interview guide (for the roadshow case study)

- What aspects would be taken into consideration during planning an event?
- What preparation do you do before a face-to-face event?
- Why are events organised?
- What are your expectations and goals?
- What things are outsourced to film promotion, marketing and distribution companies, and which aspects would you pay attention to?
- Could you give an example to describe how the meetings are set up?
- How long does a face-to-face event usually take? How much time do the media and audiences have respectively for asking questions?
- Which event is a memorable experience for you and why?
- How have events changed, compared to events in the past? Why?
- Have you encountered any challenges, or what kinds of situations do you find difficult? How did you find a solution?
- How do you see the differences between face-to-face events and events broadcast on television or the internet?
- In what ways would organisers and media professionals treat media people and audiences differently during face-to-face events (e.g. roadshows)?
- How would you describe the questions and answers during Q&A sessions at these events in general?
- Were there occasions when fans misbehaved? How did you solve or prevent such issues?
- How would you describe the role of face-to-face events within the wider process of reaching audiences?
- What are the advantages and meanings of face-to-face events (e.g. roadshows) in which production teams and audiences see each other?
- How do you see the effects of promoting productions through the media otherwise?
- How would you describe the relationship of various parties involved during the entire process?
- Are there any formats of events you would like to do in the near future? Why?

Appendix G: Interview guide (for the film festival case study)

- Why are you here?
- How many times have you been to film festivals? How many movies have you watched during this festival?
- What do you like about the film festival?
- How did you decide which movie to watch? (Which aspects do you usually pay attention to?) Why?
- Have you been to any talks? Which ones attracted a crowd? Could you describe what it was like? Which one is less engaging, and why is that, in your opinion?
- Why did you choose to go to these talks? What are the things you would like to see and hear? Do you prefer seeing directors and producers, or movie stars?
- How do you find film industry professionals in real life? Are they the same as the images that we see on television? Do you find them authentic?
- Is there a particular talk you found special or impressive? Why?
- How did you feel about being so close to film industry professionals? What were you doing?
- For you, what are the differences between watching movies at home, and going to the film festival and seeing directors, producers and movie stars?
- What kind of experience do you find the most memorable during the festival?
- Do you have the feeling you got closer to or got to know more about the people who appeared in talks? Or do you feel a distance between audience and film industry professionals? In what kinds of situations?
- If there are more 'private' meet-and-greets which involve opportunities for film industry professionals and fans to meet each other, would you be interested in attending? Why?

Appendix H: Interview guide (for the extras case study)

- When did you start as an extra?
- How did you get the idea?
- Before coming to Hengdian, have you imagined what it will be like to act in front of a camera?
- Have you watched the film 'I Am Somebody'? What do you think of it?
- Can you describe your everyday life here?
- What are your views on acting as an extra now?
- Have you ever considered leaving? What makes you stay here?
- What are the things you like about acting?
- What are your memorable experiences?
- Do you have a favourite role that you always want to play? Why?
- Will you watch the scenes in which you participated when the film or TV episode is available?
- What is your dream?
- Do you want to play a role, such as a leading role that many audiences would remember?
- Do you post your costume photos online or via social network app to show to your family and friends?

Summary

In the nineteenth century, when Victorian literary celebrity Charles Dickens first visited the United States, he spent two hours a day shaking hands with enthusiastic readers (Glass, 2016). This desire to see famous faces for real is still present today. It is somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, mass media provide endless mediated content about celebrities: we seem to know every detail about their private lives. On the other hand, the wish to experience these people personally and directly, without the interference of any medium, seems to have all but diminished. According to several scholars, recent years have shown a growing interest in meeting celebrities in media industries, such as singers (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2014; Stever, 2016), actors (e.g. Ferris & Harris, 2011; Bolling & Smith, 2014; Williams, 2016; Lam, 2018), and even newscasters (Ferris, 2010).

Despite an increasing number of studies on these kind of media encounters, especially encounters between ordinary people and media personalities, two key aspects remain relatively underexplored. First, most existing studies have been conducted in Western countries (e.g. Couldry, 2000; Ferris, 2011; Reijnders et al., 2014; Lam, 2018). However, the media industries outside the West are booming, with India, South Korea, and Japan having some of the largest film industries in the world. As media-related practices are often rooted in local social and cultural contexts (Elliott & Boyd, 2018), it is crucial to do more research on media encounters in non-Western contexts. This will provide empirical evidence to test the broader applicability of concepts like media encounters and media rituals, while also delivering a deeper understanding of possible differences between media cultures across the globe.

Second, little is known about the *production* of media encounters. Most research focuses on the fan perspective (e.g. Ferris, 2011; Reijnders et al., 2014; Stever, 2016). This perspective is interesting and relevant, especially for fan scholars, but it should be

acknowledged that this is only part of the story. Media encounters are not only fan phenomena, but also powerful instruments in the hands of media producers. They are a crucial part of constructing the 'myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry, 2003). Analysing media encounters from both the perspective of fans and media practitioners will provide a more holistic perspective on the role and significance of media encounters in today's society.

Having acknowledged the above, this dissertation aims to provide a multi-sided perspective on encounters between ordinary people and the film industry, focusing in particular on media encounters in China. It poses the following main research question: What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society? The dissertation investigates not only how these media encounters are organised and experienced, but also the wider impacts of this cultural phenomenon.

Why focus on China? The Chinese film industry has experienced phenomenal growth in the last decade and is expected to become the world's largest market in box office revenue and audience numbers by late 2020 (Deloitte, 2017). Likewise, opportunities for these Chinese audiences to encounter media people face-to-face have greatly increased in the past five years. However, despite the prevalence and popularity of such practices, media encounters remain an underexplored topic within Chinese media studies. Understanding the cultural phenomenon of media encounters in China can shed light on this booming film industry from a unique perspective.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The theory chapter introduces the theoretical background of the dissertation, reviewing the media ritual theory and its relevant applications in China. According to Couldry (2003), media rituals are formalised actions that are organised around key media-related categories such as 'media person/thing/place/world' (p. 29). In other words, in media rituals, a categorical distinction is made between what is 'in' the media and what is not,

which implies a hierarchy of 'media' persons/things/worlds over 'ordinary' (or non-media) persons/things/worlds. Couldry's approach to media rituals is powerful in deconstructing widely-held myths surrounding the special status of the media. However, this approach, to some extent, overemphasises reinforcement of symbolic power in media institutions, leaving little space to explore the significance of media rituals for different groups of people.

The current research gives voice to different groups of people instead, without excluding the producers' perspective, and delves into the meanings these different groups attach to media rituals. It focuses on one particular type of media ritual, namely 'unmediated' encounters with the media, and discusses multiple levels of engagement. Furthermore, this research introduces a new categorisation of media encounters, based on the idea that the set-up and experiences of these encounters will vary from context to context. Each case study explores a different category.

Methodologically, this study has adopted a phenomenological approach, using qualitative interviews, non-participant observation, and participant observations in order to answer the research question. To build a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of media encounters, I employed a multi-perspective approach and included diverse perspectives from producers to participants, extras and audiences. In total, 61 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 everyday audiences, 15 media practitioners, 16 film festival goers, and 15 extras. In addition, I carried out observations during the media encounters as a supplement to the interviews.

Empirical case studies

To investigate the views of the general audience, Case 1 focuses on ways in which young and middle-aged adults in urban China perceive media celebrities and probes a hypothetical question: how would audiences feel about and value possible future encounters with famous people? This case study identifies that most respondents have a shared way of valuing celebrity: celebrities should have strong work ethics and

showcase social responsibility, only then do they 'earn' their right to be considered 'famous'. The values that the audiences hold dear with regard to celebrity (meetings) are closely related to the dominant values circulating in today's society. These values also partly echo the value system as promoted by the Chinese government.

The first case study also finds that many everyday audiences are interested in seeing famous people in real life, because this helps them to identify more closely with their role models. The findings extend our understanding of how Chinese audiences perceive celebrity culture in everyday life. More importantly, these findings further draw a connection between audiences' reflections on celebrity content and their desire to see celebrities in real life. By identifying the potential interests of general audiences in media encounters, this case study, therefore, sheds light on why encounters with the media are welcomed in the first place.

Case 2 focuses on the production side of popular media encounters. More in particular, it explores the motivations and ritualised techniques of Chinese movie roadshows, a type of promotional event that has become hugely popular in China since 2015. Roadshows give audiences opportunities to encounter directors and key players face-to-face. As the case study concludes, these roadshows are staged as highly ritualised events, centred around the performance of a symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media. This study also deciphers the ritual dynamic of the Chinese movie roadshow. On the one hand, media practitioners employ strategies of ritualisation to maintain control over a ritualised event; on the other hand, they also allow for flexibility and spontaneity, as this aspect is crucial to the 'unmediated' image of the roadshow as perceived by the audiences.

Additionally, the second case study shows that roadshows, as seemingly 'unmediated' encounters with movie stars, incorporate social media, extending the reach of the event to even more people engaging with digital platforms. These findings complicate the concept of popular media events (Hepp, 2003) by showing how the events are staged and performed. Moreover, the findings have suggested how media encounters in China have become strategically situational and open to change,

responding to the ongoing need for new forms of media rituals in the digital age (Couldry, 2012).

Turning the focus to the perspective of live audiences, Case 3 examines festival talks at one of the largest film festivals in East Asia, looking at festival goers' motivations for attending and their experiences of face-to-face encounters with film professionals. The results show that most festival goers have similar motives for attending, namely validating their perceptions of film professional personalities, and hoping to mine unique, off-the-record knowledge about their beloved films and the underlying production process from film professionals. Remarkably, most festival goers note that the division between ordinary people and media people is all but lifted during the festival talks. But this continuing distance between film professionals and live audiences is justified for practical reasons or sometimes actually appreciated. The festival goers' reflections on encounters with film professionals reveal a set of shared cultural values that honour work ethic and creativity – quite similar to the set of values found in Case 1. These findings suggest that from the live audiences' perspective, a continuing difference between audiences and media people is not necessarily unfavourable. Furthermore, the findings also challenge the single presumed symbolic boundary between what is inside and outside the media, since the audiences perceive different categories of 'insiderness' within the media world.

Following these explorations of two relatively common types of media encounters discussed in Case 2 and 3, Case 4 investigates a more intensive mode of engagement with the media: extras' long-term participation in media productions at China's Hengdian World Studios, the world's largest outdoor film studio. The study explores not only extras' motivations and experiences, but also the deeper and personal meanings they attach to their media participation.

As the interviews show, many extras pursue opportunities as background actors because they desire to participate in media productions with the hope to gain transformative life experiences. This study identifies a three-step process that most extras undergo. Before their participation, many extras simply wish to become part of

the media world, initially seeing this world through proverbial rose-coloured glasses. However, the experiences as extras 'in' the media world quickly diminish their idealised, imagined perception of acting in productions. One major reason is that 'insider knowledge' partially removes the rose-coloured glasses. The other reason is the hierarchical system that privileges professional actors over extras. For those who eventually stay, they tend to humbly accept the hierarchy in the media mechanism.

With these findings, I argue that appearing 'in the media' does not necessarily empower lay participants. Instead, it is acting and interacting with production teams and other extras that enable the extras to have meaningful experiences and potentially much-desired transformations in their personalities. These findings also show the many barriers, borders and power differences that are at work in the Chinese media industry, thus further nuancing and differentiating the far from simple dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside' the media.

Conclusions

Based on these diverse case studies, the following, more general conclusions are drawn. First, media encounters in the Chinese context are ritualised and yet have become strategically situational and open to change. To ensure profitable outcomes of media encounters, the practitioners present audiences with a mild, flexible and negotiable display of the symbolic power of the media.

Second, the symbolic boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the media, a central aspect of the media ritual, is far from clear-cut in the Chinese context. As this research shows, there are different gradations of 'insiderness', separated by many nuanced barriers and value systems. For example, directors are seen by film festival attendees as more prestigious and thus as closer to the media centre than most actor-celebrities. Another example is that extras experience the symbolic power of the media which operates harshly in the daily practices of the media system.

Third, the significance of media encounters in contemporary Chinese society is

diverse and ‘doing’ more than only reinforcing the symbolic power of the media. For producers, face-to-face encounters are the moments to show their sincerity in an apparently ‘unmediated’ space while they ensure profitable outcomes. For audiences, these encounters can be a way to anchor personal meanings and values and to seek a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing society. At a deeper level, the values that these participants attach to (meeting) media personalities reveal how contemporary China is caught between a growing individualisation and a more traditional collectivism.

The research has contributed four empirical case studies of media encounters in China, looking at both the production and audience perspective. The findings of this research are context-specific and cannot be easily generalised to other non-Western countries that are the fastest growing economies in the world. Therefore, more work on media encounters in non-Western countries are welcome in order to compare media encounters in different socio-cultural contexts and identify the connections between media encounters and media systems.

Samenvatting

Toen de Victoriaanse beroemdheid Charles Dickens in de negentiende eeuw voor het eerst de Verenigde Staten bezocht, heeft hij twee uur lang de handen geschud van enthousiaste lezers (Glass, 2016). Deze behoefte om beroemdheden in het echt te zien, is vandaag de dag nog steeds aanwezig. Hierin schuilt een paradox. Enerzijds berichten massamedia non-stop over beroemdheden : we weten bijna alles over hun privé levens. Anderzijds blijkt dat de wens om deze mensen persoonlijk en direct te ontmoeten alles behalve verminderd is. Verschillende studies tonen dat de interesse naar het ontmoeten van beroemdheden in de mediasector zelfs is gegroeid in de afgelopen jaren. Deze beroemdheden zijn bijvoorbeeld zangers (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2014; Stever, 2016), acteurs (e.g. Ferris & Harris, 2011; Bolling & Smith, 2014; Williams, 2016; Lam, 2018), en zelfs nieuwslezers (Ferris, 2010).

Deze onderwerpen worden steeds populairder in de wetenschap, en dan voornamelijk onderzoeken over ontmoetingen tussen gewone mensen en mediapersoonlijkheden. Maar er zijn twee aspecten die nog weinig academische aandacht hebben gekregen. Ten eerste zijn de meeste studies uitgevoerd in Westerse landen (e.g. Couldry, 2000; Ferris, 2011; Reijnders et al., 2014; Lam, 2018). Tegelijkertijd zien we dat de media industrieën buiten het Westen aan het groeien zijn, en aan relevantie winnen. India, Zuid-Korea en Japan hebben ieder een van de grootste filmindustrieën ter wereld. Mediagerelateerde studies vinden vaak plaats in lokale, sociale en culturele contexten (Elliott & Boyd, 2018). Het is dan ook van belang om meer onderzoek te doen naar media-ontmoetingen in een niet-Westerse context. Dit kan namelijk empirisch bewijs leveren om de bredere toepasbaarheid van media-ontmoetingen en mediarituelen te testen. Door dit te doen, wordt er ook een diepere betekenis gegeven aan mogelijke verschillen tussen mediaculturen over de wereld.

Ten tweede is er weinig kennis over de productie van media-ontmoetingen. De meeste onderzoeken leggen de focus op het perspectief van de fan (e.g. Ferris, 2011;

Reijnders et al., 2014; Stever, 2016). Dit perspectief is relevant en interessant, vooral voor onderzoekers die zelf ook fan zijn van hun onderzoeksobject, maar het is belangrijk om te weten dat dit maar één kant van het verhaal is. Media-ontmoetingen zijn niet slechts een fan-fenomeen , maar ook machtsinstrumenten van mediaproducenten. Zij vormen een cruciaal onderdeel bij het opbouwen van de 'myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry, 2003). Door media-ontmoetingen van het perspectief van de fan én van de mediapersoonlijkheden te analyseren, kan er een holistisch perspectief worden gegeven over de rol en de betekenis van hedendaagse media-ontmoetingen.

Dit proefschrift is geschreven om meerdere perspectieven over ontmoetingen tussen gewone mensen en mensen in de filmindustrie te beschrijven. Hierbij wordt de focus vooral op media-ontmoetingen in China gelegd. Het stelt de volgende hoofdonderzoeksvraag: Wat is de rol en de betekenis van 'onbemiddelde' ontmoetingen met de mediawereld in de huidige Chinese samenleving? Dit proefschrift onderzoekt niet alleen hoe deze media-ontmoetingen georganiseerd en ervaren worden, maar ook de verdere impact die zij dragen.

Voor dit onderzoek is gekozen om de aandacht op China te vestigen, omdat deze filmindustrie het afgelopen decennium een grote groei heeft meegemaakt. Naar verwachting zal deze markt de meeste omzet maken en de meeste kijkcijfers hebben vóór het einde van 2020 (Deloitte, 2017). Voor dit onderzoek is het bovendien interessant dat de afgelopen vijf jaar de kans voor het Chinese publiek aanzienlijk is vergroot dat zij mediabekendheden in het echt tegen kunnen komen. Deze media-ontmoetingen zijn nu nog een weinig onderzocht fenomeen binnen de Chinese mediastudies. Dit proefschrift levert daar een bijdrage aan en kan helpen om de groeiende Chinese filmindustrie beter te begrijpen.

Theoretisch en methodologisch kader

Het theoretisch hoofdstuk geeft de theoretische achtergrond van dit proefschrift weer. Hierin worden de theorieën omtrent mediarituelen besproken en de relevante

toepassingen hiervan in het geval van China. Volgens Couldry (2003) zijn mediarituelen geformaliseerde acties die georganiseerd worden rondom belangrijke mediagerelateerde categorieën als een 'mediapersoon/ding/plek/wereld' (p. 29). In mediarituelen wordt dus een categorisch onderscheid gemaakt tussen wat 'in' de media is, en wat niet. Dit impliceert een hiërarchie van 'media' personen/dingen/werelden boven 'gewone' (buiten de media) personen/dingen/werelden. Couldry's benadering naar mediarituelen deconstrueert krachtige mythes die ontstaan zijn rondom de speciale status van de media. Deze benadering legt echter te veel de nadruk op de versterking van de symbolische macht van media-instituties. Hierdoor is er weinig ruimte om de betekenis van mediarituelen voor verschillende groepen mensen te onderzoeken.

Het huidige onderzoek laat het perspectief van andere groepen mensen zien, zonder dat het perspectief van de producenten wordt buitengesloten. Het onderzoek gaat in op de betekenissen die deze verschillende groepen geven aan mediarituelen. Het richt zich op één type mediarituеel, namelijk 'onbemiddelde' ontmoetingen met de media, en bespreekt de meerdere manieren van betrokkenheid. Bovendien introduceert dit onderzoek een nieuwe categorisering van media-ontmoetingen. Deze categorisering is gebaseerd op het idee dat de opzet en ervaringen van deze ontmoetingen variëren van context tot context. Iedere casestudy onderzoekt dan ook een verschillende categorie.

Dit onderzoek heeft als methode een fenomenologische benadering gehanteerd. Er zijn kwalitatieve interviews, 'non-participant' observaties en 'participant' observaties gebruikt om de onderzoeksvraag te kunnen beantwoorden. Om het fenomeen media-ontmoetingen beter te begrijpen heb ik een multiperspectieve benadering aangenomen, waarbij de diverse perspectieven van producenten, deelnemers en het publiek zijn inbegrepen. In totaal zijn 61 semigestructureerde interviews uitgevoerd. De respondenten bestaan uit 15 personen uit het dagelijks publiek, 15 mediabeoefenaars, 16 filmfestivalgangers en 15 figuranten. Bovendien heb ik tijdens de media-ontmoetingen observaties waargenomen als een toevoeging aan de interviews.

Empirische casestudies

Om de meningen van het algemene publiek te onderzoeken richt Casus 1 zich op de verschillende opvattingen over mediaberoemdheden, bezien vanuit het perspectief van jongvolwassenen en volwassenen van middelbare leeftijd uit het stedelijk gebied van China. Deze casus behandelt een hypothetische vraag: hoe voelt het publiek zich over een mogelijk toekomstige ontmoeting met bekende mensen en in welke mate zouden zij dit waarderen? De meeste respondenten spraken zich uit over de mate waarin zij beroemdheden waarderen. Beroemdheden zouden een sterke werkethiek en sociale verantwoordelijkheid moeten hebben. Alleen dan 'verdienen' ze het recht om als beroemd te worden gezien. De waarden die het publiek heeft met betrekking tot beroemdheden komen sterk overeen met de dominante waarden die rondgaan in de huidige maatschappij. Deze waarden komen ook deels overeen met het waardesysteem dat gepromoot wordt door de Chinese overheid.

De eerste casestudy toont ook aan dat een groot deel van het publiek geïnteresseerd is om beroemdheden in het echt te ontmoeten. De reden hiervoor is dat deze ontmoetingen hen helpen om zich beter te herkennen in hun rolmodellen. Deze bevindingen vergroten onze kennis over hoe het Chinese publiek de 'celebrity culture' in het dagelijks leven waarneemt. Bovendien leggen deze bevindingen een verband tussen het verlangen van het publiek om beroemdheden te ontmoeten en hun mening over de content die deze beroemdheden maken. Door met 'gewone' mensen te praten over hoe zij tegen celebrities aankijken en hoe het zou zijn om deze celebrities te ontmoeten, ontstaat een beter beeld van wat precies de aantrekkingskracht is van dergelijke celebrity-meetings.

Casus 2 onderzoekt de productiekant van populaire media ontmoetingen. In het bijzonder worden de motivaties en geritualiseerde technieken van Chinese film roadshows onderzocht. Dit zijn promotie-evenementen die sinds 2015 erg populair zijn geworden in China. Roadshows geven het publiek de kans om regisseurs en hoofdrolspelers face-to-face te ontmoeten. Deze casestudy concludeert dat roadshows worden neergezet als geritualiseerde evenementen, waarbij de uitvoering van een symbolische grens tussen binnen en buiten de media centraal staat. Deze studie ontcijfert ook het dynamische ritueel van de Chinese filmroadshow. Aan de ene kant

nemen mediabeoefenaars geritualiseerde strategieën aan om het evenement te besturen. Aan de andere kant moeten ze wel flexibiliteit en spontaniteit behouden. Deze aspecten zijn cruciaal voor het 'onbemiddelde' imago dat roadshows hebben.

Daarnaast laat de tweede casestudy zien dat roadshows, die zelf aangeven dat de ontmoetingen 'onbemiddeld' zijn, veel social media gebruiken. Hierdoor willen ze het bereik van het evenement uitbreiden naar mensen die digitale platformen gebruiken. Deze bevindingen compliceren het concept van populaire media-evenementen (Hepp, 2003), door te laten zien dat de evenementen 'gespeeld' zijn. Bovendien suggereren deze bevindingen dat media ontmoetingen in China strategisch zijn en openstaan voor veranderingen. Hiermee reageren zij op de groeiende behoefte naar nieuwe mediarituelen in de digitale wereld (Couldry, 2012).

Om het perspectief van live publiek te onderzoeken, bestudeert Casus 3 gesprekken op één van de grootste filmfestivals in Oost-Azië. Hierbij wordt gekeken naar de motivaties van festivalgangers om naar het festival te komen en hun ervaringen met face-to-face ontmoetingen met filmprofessionals. De resultaten tonen dat de meeste festivalgangers dezelfde motieven delen om naar het festival te gaan. Deze motieven behelzen dat ze hun meningen over filmprofessionals willen bevestigen en dat ze hopen unieke kennis te verkrijgen over hun favoriete films en het onderliggende productieproces. Wat opvalt is dat het onderscheid tussen mensen 'binnen' en 'buiten' de media niet wordt opgeheven, maar juist wordt herhaald en benadrukt tijdens festival meet-and-greets. Dit onderscheid wordt echter niet als een probleem ervaren door de meeste festivalgangers, maar juist gewaardeerd. De meningen van festivalgangers over ontmoetingen met filmprofessionals onthullen een aantal gedeelde waarden die betrekking hebben op werkethiek en creativiteit. Deze komen deels overeen met de waarden die zijn beschreven in Casus 1. Deze bevindingen suggereren dat verschillen tussen het publiek en mediamensen niet per se als negatief worden beschouwd. Bovendien dagen deze bevindingen de ideeën uit over de namelijk veronderstelde symbolische grens tussen wat binnen en buiten de media is. Iedereen heeft een andere mening over wanneer je 'binnen' de mediawereld bent.

In aansluiting op de twee relatief veelvoorkomende typen media-ontmoetingen die gediscussieerd werden in Casus 2 en 3, onderzoekt Casus 4 een intensievere manier van betrokkenheid met de media: de lange-termijn deelname van figuranten in mediaproducties bij China's Hengdian World Studio's, 's werelds grootste openlucht filmstudio. De studie richt zich niet alleen op de motivaties en ervaringen van figuranten, maar ook de diepere persoonlijke meningen die zij hebben over hun deelname aan de media.

De interviews tonen dat veel figuranten streven naar een kans om achtergrondacteur te worden, omdat ze graag mee willen doen in mediaproducties. Daarbij hebben ze de hoop om transformationele levenservaringen op te doen. De studie identificeert een driedelig stappenplan dat de meeste figuranten ondergaan. In eerste instantie denken zij dat de mediawereld veel kansen biedt en alleen maar positiviteit voortbrengt. Hun ervaringen in de mediawereld zorgen er echter voor dat dit ideaalbeeld over acteren in producties snel afneemt. Een belangrijke reden hiervoor is 'insider knowledge'. De andere reden is het hiërarchische systeem dat ervoor zorgt dat professionele acteurs eerder worden gekozen dan figuranten. Degenen die uiteindelijk blijven, hebben de neiging om die hiërarchie te accepteren.

Met deze bevindingen beargumenteer ik dat deelnemers die in de mediawereld voorkomen niet meteen veel macht hebben. Het acteren zelf, de interactie met productieteams en andere figuranten zorgen er echter voor dat de figuranten betekenisvolle ervaringen opdoen en mogelijk hun persoonlijkheden transformeren. Ook laten de bevindingen zien dat er veel grenzen en machtsverschillen zijn in de Chinese media-industrie. Dit nuanceert en differentieert de moeilijke dichotomie tussen 'binnen' en 'buiten' de media.

Conclusies

De volgende conclusies zijn gemaakt op basis van de diverse casestudies. Ten eerst valt het op dat ontmoetingen met 'media-mensen' in China sterk zijn geritualiseerd en volgens een vast protocol zijn opgesteld, maar dat er binnen dit protocol steevast wel

ruimte open wordt opengelaten voor onverwachte wendingen en gebeurtenissen. Deze flexibiliteit verhoogt het spontane en authentieke karakter van dergelijke ontmoetingen.

Ten tweede is er geen duidelijke symbolische grens tussen 'binnen' en 'buiten' de media zijn. Dit onderzoek toont aan dat er verschillende gradaties zijn voor 'insiderness'. Deze zijn verdeeld door veel genuanceerde grenzen en waardesystemen. Een voorbeeld hiervan is dat een regisseur eerder wordt gezien als iemand met gezag door filmfestivalgangers dan beroemde acteurs. Een ander voorbeeld is dat figuranten de symbolische macht van de media ervaren. Deze macht is sterk aanwezig in de dagelijkse mediasystemen.

Ten derde is de betekenis van media-ontmoetingen in de huidige Chinese samenleving divers en de ontmoetingen doen meer dan alleen de symbolische macht van de media versterken. Face-to-face ontmoetingen zijn voor producenten het moment om te laten zien hoe oprecht ze kunnen zijn in een schijnbaar 'onbemiddelde' omgeving. Daarbij zorgen deze ontmoetingen voor een winstgevend resultaat. Het publiek kan deze ontmoetingen zien als een manier om persoonlijke meningen en waarden te bevestigen. Daarbij kunnen ze het gevoel krijgen dat ze erbij horen in een veranderende samenleving. De waarden die deelnemers hebben over (het ontmoeten van) mediapersoonlijkheden geven weer hoe het huidige China vastzit tussen groeiende individualisatie en traditioneel collectivisme.

Het onderzoek heeft vier empirische casestudies over media-ontmoetingen in China ontwikkeld, waarbij is gekeken naar het perspectief van de producent en van het publiek. De bevindingen van dit onderzoek zijn gebonden aan deze context en kunnen niet makkelijk overgenomen worden voor andere niet-Westerse landen die een snelgroeiende economie hebben. Daarvoor is meer onderzoek nodig over media-ontmoetingen in niet-Westerse landen om media-ontmoetingen in verschillende contexten te kunnen vergelijken en om connecties te identificeren tussen media-ontmoetingen en mediasystemen.

Portfolio

Training at Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities

Doing ethnography

Analytic storytelling

Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)

Advanced research methods 1: qualitative data analysis

Introduction to participatory research method: Photovoice

Doing the literature review

How to survive your PhD

Presentations

Presentation, the 8th Global Communication Forum, ICA Post-conference, May 2018

Guest lecture / Presentation, NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands, May 2017

Presentation, ERMeCC Seminar, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands, May 2017 Presentation, Locating Imagination: Popular Culture, Tourism, and Belonging, April 2017

Presentation, Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap 2017 (24 Hours of Communication Science), January 2017

Presentation, PhD Winter School on Participation and Communication, IAMCR, December 2016

Presentation, Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap 2016 (24 Hours of Communication Science), February 2016

Poster presentation, the 22nd Asia Pacific Tourism Association Annual Conference, June 2016

About the author

Min Xu (1986) is a PhD Candidate at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. She graduated from University of York, UK with a Master's Degree in Cinema, Television and Society in 2010. Before studying in the Netherlands, she spent nearly five years working in the media and a university in Shanghai. Since September 2015, she has been conducting empirical studies on the ritualised practices in the Chinese film industry. Her research interests include media encounters, cultural events and special interest tourism.

Publications related to the PhD project

Journal articles

Xu, M., Reijnders, S., & Kim, S. (2019). Inside the movie roadshow: a critical approach to media events in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication,* 1-17. DOI: 10.1080/17544750.2019.1653341

Xu, M., Reijnders, S., & Kim, S. (2019). '*Mingren* are the respectable ones': an analysis of everyday engagements with contemporary celebrity culture in China. *Celebrity Studies*, 1-18. DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2019.1611461

Xu, M., & Reijnders, S. (2018). Getting close to the media world? On the attraction of encountering film industry professionals at Shanghai International Film Festival. Participations, *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies, 15* (1), 84-104.

Book chapter

Xu, M., & Reijnders, S. (2018). Inside the Chinese Film Industry: On the Motives and Experiences of Extras at Hengdian World Studios. In S. Kim & S. Reijnders (Eds.), *Film Tourism in Asia* (pp. 171-184). Springer.

This research focuses on media encounters: the desire and related practices among 'normal people' to experience a close physical proximity to objects, places or people from the 'media world' . Encounter with the media is important because it is a major type of media ritual, through which the symbolic power of the media is constructed and reinforced (Couldry, 2003).

Despite an increasing number of studies on media encounters, most research until now has been conducted in Western countries (e.g. Couldry, 2000; Ferris, 2011; Reijnders et al., 2014; Stever, 2016; Williams, 2016; Lam, 2018). Moreover, little is known about the production of media encounters. Therefore, it would be fruitful to study media encounters more holistically in the booming media industries outside the West, such as those in the Chinese film industry, one of the fast-est-growing media cultures around the world.

Focusing on media encounters in Mainland China, this dissertation poses the following main research question: What is the role and significance of 'unmediated' encounters with the media world in contemporary Chinese society?

To answer this question, 61 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 15 everyday audiences, 15 media practitioners, 16 film festival goers, and 15 extras. In addition, observations have been carried out as a supplement to the interviews.

The research has contributed four empirical case studies of media encounters in China, looking at both the production and audience perspective. The results suggest that the symbolic boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the media, a central aspect of the media ritual, is far from clear-cut in the Chinese context. Media encounters are ritualised and yet have become strategically situational and open to change. For producers, face-to-face encounters are the moments to show their sincerity in an apparently 'unmediated' space while they ensure profitable outcomes. For audiences, these encounters can be a way to anchor personal meanings and values and to seek a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing society.