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China TV Grows Racy, and Gets a Chaperon

By **EDWARD WONG**

NANJING, China — Wang Peijie’s idea for what would become the most-talked-about show in China was simple: Throw a spotlight on this country’s bright young things as they court each other on stage to pop music and audience applause.

The men boasted of their bank accounts, houses and fancy cars. The women were svelte and sassy, dousing suitors with acid putdowns. But mixed into the banter were trenchant social issues that urban Chinese from their 20s to 40s grapple with, if not always so publicly: living together before marriage, the unabashed pursuit of wealth or the government’s one-child policy.

“Through this show, you can tell what China is thinking about and chasing after,” said Mr. Wang, a veteran television producer.

The show, “[If You Are the One](#),” broke ratings records in the first half of 2010. More than 50 million people tuned in. The sauciest contestants became sensations — [one aspiring actress](#) famously rejected a man offering a bicycle ride by saying, “I’d rather cry in a BMW.” The show attracted huge interest from Chinese overseas; some students on American campuses even filmed their own versions. It increased the nation’s cultural influence, which China’s leaders crave.

But reality television proved too real for the censors. Disturbed by the program’s revealing portrait of Chinese youth and the spread of copycat shows, they threatened to cancel it. Producers raced to overhaul the show. They brought on older contestants and added a third host, a matronly professor from the provincial Communist Party school. “We’ve had more restrictions on expressions on the show, to eliminate remarks that could have negative social impact,” the wiry Mr. Wang, 45, said one morning as dozens of screens flickered behind him in a control room here in Jiangsu Province.

Then regulators formulated [a sweeping policy](#) that takes effect on Sunday and effectively wipes out scores of entertainment shows on prime-time television. The authorities evidently determined that trends inspired by “If You Are the One” and a popular talent show, “[Super Girl](#),” had gone too far,

and they responded with a policy to curb what they call “excessive entertainment.”

That a dating show could help set off the toughest crackdown on television in years exposes the growing tension at the heart of the Communist Party’s control of the entertainment industry. For decades, the party has pushed television networks here to embrace the market, but conservative cadres have grown increasingly fearful of the kinds of programs that court audiences, draw advertising and project a global image not shaped by the state. Television, after all, occupies a singular position in the state’s media arsenal: with its 1.2 billion viewers and more than 3,000 channels, it is the party’s greatest vehicle for transmitting propaganda, whether through the evening news or staid historical dramas.

“A conflict has arisen: On the one hand, they’re pushing for the building of a commercial industry, but on the other hand they wonder if this commercialization has led to an overall decline in cultural quality and moral cultivation,” said Yin Hong, a professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing who studies television.

The party’s definition of “entertainment shows” encompasses game shows, dating shows and celebrity talk shows. As in the West, they are cheap to produce but earn high ratings and advertising revenue, which is critical since stations get little or no government subsidies. Now, the new rules, which were announced in late October, are forcing television executives and producers at 34 satellite stations across China to cut many entertainment shows from their lineups to limit what regulators describe as “vulgar tendencies.”

The tightening of television is at the fore of a major new effort to control culture overseen by President Hu Jintao that is also permeating film, publishing, the Internet and the performing arts.

Government regulators issued the television guidelines right after the party’s Central Committee made culture and ideology the focus of a meeting in October. Mr. Yin, who advised officials in the prelude to the meeting, said cadres had originally intended to issue a paper that would push cultural industries closer to the market. But starting half a year ago, he said, senior officials began growing more worried about “social morality,” so they steered the policy toward the control of culture. Regarding television specifically, he said, “many old comrades” frequently complained about entertainment shows and “the idolizing of celebrities.”

Under the new rules, each television station can broadcast only two “entertainment shows” during prime time each week. Only nine can be shown nationally per night, down from an official estimate this fall of 126 per week. A panel convened by regulators will decide which ones will remain if the

stations do not trim. Ideas for new shows must be approved by censors. Satellite stations are also expected to increase their news programming and broadcast at least one show that promotes traditional Chinese virtues and the “socialist core value system.”

The agency regulating the industry, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, or Sarft, is not shy about imposing limits on dramas, either. Last year, it expressed disapproval of spy dramas and time-travel shows. In late November, it surprised the industry by mandating that as of January, commercials cannot be shown in the middle of television dramas. “The whole point here is that Sarft is trying to get TV station presidents back to the roots,” said a person once involved with “If You Are the One,” who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “What are the roots? TV is supposed to be the mouthpiece of the party in the country. You’re supposed to broadcast propaganda instead of sensationalistic content.”

The Role of Money

Reining in television is not just ideological, but is also tied to advertising money, people in the industry contend. Officials at Sarft are close to those at China Central Television, or CCTV, the state-run television network that is the largest in the country. CCTV still dominates the industry, but it has ceded market share to provincial satellite stations because they are producing the most popular entertainment shows. CCTV and Sarft have a revolving-door relationship: In November, a former vice minister of Sarft, [Hu Zhanfan](#), took over as president of CCTV. The network also remits a fraction of its annual revenue to Sarft. From 2001 to 2005, it gave the agency \$675 million, according to statistics from CCTV. By contrast, provincial stations remit revenue to local authorities, who have little incentive to censor successful shows.

So Sarft’s crackdown on entertainment shows is partly aimed at enriching CCTV, industry observers argue. The announcement of the new order in October may already have yielded benefits for the network. On Nov. 7, at its annual auction for advertising spots in 2012, CCTV earned \$2.2 billion, a 12.5 percent increase over the previous year. Sarft and CCTV officials did not respond to multiple requests for an interview.

Tightening the vise could backfire. Some analysts say that the more television is regulated, the more viewers will watch shows on the Internet, over which Sarft wields much less power.

“If You Are the One” dropped in ratings after censors forced it to change its format last year. But Mr. Wang and his crew have found ways to keep it the top-rated variety show. When the parent station, Jiangsu Satellite Television, held its 2012 advertising auction in November, “If You Are the

One” earned an astounding 82 percent of the station’s total haul of \$345 million.

Jiangsu wants desperately for censors to allow the 90-minute show to remain in its Saturday and Sunday prime-time slots. The station is cutting a half-dozen other entertainment programs, Mr. Wang said, and is developing shows that promote “social responsibility.” But some wonder whether censors will show leniency. People’s Daily, the party’s mouthpiece, ran a commentary in October that lamented the negative influence of two shows. One was “Super Girl,” an influential talent show that had been repeatedly punished for being “vulgar” since its 2004 debut on Hunan Satellite Television. It was suspended in September. The second was “If You Are the One.”

“Some programs seek novelty as their objective,” the article said. “They rely on peering into the privacy of others to achieve that, and they hype money worship and pleasure-seeking, which have aroused the antipathy of the audience.”

Clashes Between Ideas

At a recent taping of “If You Are the One” in a Beijing studio, a male contestant, Wang Yan, 23, told the women on stage that he appreciated women who wore silk stockings. The women grilled him, to the delight of the audience. That turned into a discussion of the sizes of women’s legs.

“Do you prefer S- or M-sized women?” asked one of the female contestants, Zuo Teng’ai, a single mother.

“I’m sorry, I really have no idea about the difference between the two,” Mr. Wang said. The main host, Meng Fei, chimed in: “Is she asking whether you like S-and-M?”

“I didn’t ask him about S-and-M!” Ms. Zuo said. The audience laughed and applauded. But the exchange was excised from the episode that aired Nov. 12.

Sharp dialogue was once the show’s hallmark. One of its original goals was to push the limits of what could be discussed on Chinese television. “We hoped there would be some clashes between different ideas,” Mr. Wang said.

The show was conceived in cigarette-fueled talks between Mr. Wang and Xing Wenning, a media entrepreneur now with the Hearst Corporation. In the fall of 2009, Mr. Xing, a graduate of Harvard and Columbia, was working for [FremantleMedia](#), owned by Bertelsmann, and his task was getting Chinese stations or production companies to buy the rights to adapt foreign television shows. One of FremantleMedia’s properties was “[Take Me Out](#),” a dating show popular in Britain.

Mr. Xing approached the two most adventurous stations, Hunan and Jiangsu.

Mr. Wang at Jiangsu was receptive. He had worked at the station since the late 1980s and had witnessed the industry's transformation. In 1997, satellite television was established, allowing some provincial stations to broadcast nationally and compete with CCTV for advertising money. CCTV and provincial stations had increased production of entertainment shows around that time. "Competition is fierce among the top few stations," Mr. Wang said.

Mr. Wang said he wanted a new dating show to capitalize on the concept of "leftover girls" and "leftover boys," career-oriented people without a partner, a hot topic in China. The show, too, would be a window into the lives of the "rich second generation," the children of China's new money.

Hunan beat Jiangsu in the bidding for "Take Me Out." But Mr. Wang pushed ahead with his version, which Unilever had wanted to sponsor.

"If You Are the One," called "Fei Cheng Wu Rao" in Chinese, is set up like a tribunal. Twenty-four single women stand behind brightly lighted podiums and pepper a potential male partner with questions. Directing the talk is Mr. Meng, a bald, witty former news anchor. His sidekick is Le Jia, a younger, slimmer (but also bald) man dubbed the show's "psychological analyst."

The first episode aired Jan. 15, 2010, and set the tone. "Any woman who comes with me won't have to worry about her livelihood," said the first male contestant, Zhang Yongxiang, 23. His family ran a factory with more than 1,000 workers. A video showed off his large apartment, white sedan and endless rows of clothing. Other male contestants had their incomes advertised in graphics on their videos.

Later in the episode, a female contestant in red, knee-high vinyl boots and a tight black dress performed a chair dance that would not have looked out of place in a strip club.

But serious issues wormed their way into the talk. Women interrogated Mr. Zhang on why he clung to a traditional mentality of wanting to sire at least one son.

"Today's youngsters dare to express themselves," Mr. Wang said. "You can't be authentic if you don't dare to express yourself."

Spare No Dignity

The show's notoriety surged after one contestant, Ma Nuo, rejected a man with her "cry in a BMW"

remark. Ms. Ma got thousands of messages from fans and critics alike. Supporters said she was only publicly voicing what many women think.

Ms. Ma, 23, said in an interview that producers had told the women not to spare the dignity of the male contestants. After the BMW comment, “Because they saw that I was outspoken, they wanted me to say more controversial things,” she said.

On another episode, Zhu Zhenfang brushed off a suitor by saying that any man who wanted to shake her hand had to pay 200,000 renminbi, almost \$32,000, because “my boyfriend must have a monthly salary of 200,000” renminbi. Another woman, Yan Fengjiao, made the headlines when nude photographs of her appeared online.

Viewers swarmed to the show. By May 2010, its ratings were second only to those of the CCTV evening news, which all satellite stations are forced to carry. China Daily called it “morally ambiguous and visually electrifying.” Copycat dating shows sprang up, ones that were even more explicit.

Censors were not amused. In June, the heads of the Jiangsu and Hunan satellite stations were both called to Beijing for a meeting with Sarft officials. “They were quite harsh,” said one person briefed on the meeting. The message was simple: Tone down the shows or face cancellation. The agency issued two edicts. One said: “Do not humiliate and assault participants in the name of dating; do not discuss vulgar topics involving sex; do not hype materialism and other unhealthy, incorrect viewpoints on marriage; and do not air the show without censorship and editing.”

Zhejiang Satellite Television canceled a dating show. For a time, it looked as if all stations might have to do the same. One person on the set of “Take Me Out,” the Hunan show, recalled a producer telling the entire cast and crew: “I might get a phone call at any minute, and all of you will have to pack up and go home.”

Fans of “If You Are the One” immediately noticed the changes when the June 26 episode aired. Most obvious was the addition of a third host — Huang Han was a mother who taught psychology at the local party school. All the female contestants had been replaced. The new ones were more subdued. So were the male contestants. And there was no mention of their incomes. “We started to choose older participants who have a stronger desire for marriage,” Mr. Wang said.

Each episode now had to be reviewed at least six times in-house before broadcast, one person said. The producers still asked the hosts to steer talk toward social topics, but more subtly. “The comments made by contestants weren’t as incisive as before,” said Guo Wei, 34, a longtime fan.

Mr. Wang said he hoped the censors, when they whittle down the entertainment shows, keep in mind that “If You Are the One” made changes when asked. The show now tries to win ratings not through fiery dialogue, but by promoting itself online and bringing on overseas Chinese contestants. On the show’s Web site, all the episodes from the show’s first half-year have been deleted. “Our show,” he said, “is one that obeys the rules.”

Li Bibo and Edy Yin contributed research.

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