

# A Taiwanese Chat Show Hit in Mainland China: Kangxi laile (Kangxi Coming) and the Rhetoric and Politics of Private Life and Body

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**Abstract:** Taiwanese entertainment shows are noted for their vulgar and erotic features that are replete with body contact, pornographic rhetoric and sexual connotations. Taking *Kangxi Coming* as a typical example, this paper examines how the sensual and perverse relationships between the Taiwanese public and political leaders, and between commoners and celebrities have opened the eyes of mainland spectators, enlightening them that there exists this kind of casual, relaxed and sometimes even disrespectful attitude of the general public towards their political leaders and their idols which is unimaginable in the mainland region. This unexpected finding reveals to the mainlanders what a democratic society looks like; and also that a recreational program can be both informative and political, and entertaining. *Kangxi Coming* is a typical example of a Taiwanese entertainment show and it is a very popular chat show hosted by Little S and Cai Kongyong. Its arrival on the mainland via network video sites not only heralds a new pattern for entertainment shows, but also teaches a lesson to the austere, solemn, and rule-abiding mainland amusement programs, that the more a show becomes transparent and ‘democratic’, the more successful it will become and the larger audience it will attract.

**Keywords:** Kangxi Coming, Little S, chat show, vulgar, privacy, aesthetic public sphere, democracy, critical viewer

*Kangxi Coming* (hereafter *Kangxi*) is a popular chat show from Taiwan, and is so far one of the most successful and most enduring entertainment talk shows on the island. The program is broadcasted from 10 to 11pm during weekdays on the CTI Television Corporation’s integrated channel (Zhongtian zonghetai). The name of the show is the combination of the middle characters of the names of the two hosts Cai Kongyong and Xu Xidi, (who is usually referred to as Little S in contrast with Big S, her older sister who is an actor and also a host). *Kangxi* is, coincidentally, the same name as one of China’s greatest ancient emperors, Kangxi of the Qing dynasty, who, even more coincidentally crushed a rebellion in Taiwan. Ten years ago, when the program’s producer invited Cai Kongyong (an overt gay) to be the host of the show, Cai recommended Little S to be his partner host, as he believed that her lively and humorous personality, her zany behavior and her satirical style would complement his own intellectual and refined manner, which together makes *Kangxi* an entertainment chat show that is thought provoking and flippant at the same time.

In recent years, the internet has increasingly played a significant role in the production and consumption of popular culture works on the mainland and other regions of China, and numerous online literature and video websites were established to cater to the growing demands for entertainment generated by Chinese viewers. Consequently, the internet portals have become a most important venue where people, particularly those born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, can read bestsellers and cyber original literary works, watch popular film and television drama serials, and consume other entertainment programs such as variety

shows, chat shows and reality programs. In recent years, due to its huge success in Taiwan, *Kangxi* was purchased by many online entertainment video sites such as Tudou, one of the oldest and most influential online video sites in mainland China, and has gained popularity among the virtual audience. Replacing the old-style media technologies which were popular during the early opening up period, such as the cassette recorder, the television and the VCR, internet has extensively enhanced the accessibility for the general public to a wider range of media products, and makes it faster for cross-regional migration of TV shows or other entertainment programs.

From the end of the 1980s, Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture (e.g. pop songs and TV dramas) had an enormous impact on the mainland audience. New popular culture icons, such as pop singers and film stars from Taiwan and Hong Kong, replaced the Party leaders. These imported popular culture works brought the greatest exposure to the outside world for their mainland audience who longed for a faster-paced and prosperous life which also led to the new fashion of “going abroad” (Yang 2002, p. 300-301). According to Mayfair Yang (2002, p. 301), the Hong Kong and Taiwanese TV shows and pop songs led the mainlander to identify with Hong Kong and Taiwanese people, internalizing a different kind of Chinese culture not so affiliated to a statist imaginary, and inserting into their mindset a discourse of love and sexuality. Furthering the influence of the Taiwanese popular media programs upon the mainlander audience, the present-day imported talk shows such as *Kangxi* illustrate several new traits which have an even larger impact on the political, social and cultural lives and imaginations of their mainland viewers.

Many reasons contribute towards *Kangxi*'s popularity on the mainland, and several features distinguish it from indigenous mainland talk show programs. One example is Little S's improvisational dialogue with guests, most of whom are celebrities from across the Sinophone entertainment world, and politicians from Taiwan. The show is well-known for its in-depth investigative style that probes into the private life and other personal issues of its guests, which include many Taiwanese politicians. The host's questions, especially Little S's, frequently focus on the profane aspects of the guests' private and family life, and this is often a cause of extreme ‘embarrassment’, however it is this ‘nakedness’ of the guests that attracts the gigantic audience. Another factor that causes the show to stand out from other chat shows is Little S's exaggerated flirtatious style that she employs when interviewing the guests. This has become her signature hosting style and is much admired by her many fans. For example, she will sit on the lap of the male guests, hug and kiss them, touch their muscles and other body areas like chest and hips, in a coquettish manner. Her antics are enjoyable to the viewers as they have an opportunity to have virtual “intimate contact” with public figures and their idols.

These outstanding features of *Kangxi* have garnered it much admiration among the mainland audience. This is because ordinary mainlanders rarely have a chance to view their leaders, (high-ranking government officials and politicians), in private and casual occasions such as those created by *Kangxi*, let alone to listen to them talk about their daily life and other private matters. However, *Kangxi* has interviewed many of Taiwan's most important politicians, such as the former head of the Nationalist Party Lian Zhan, and the current Nationalist Party chief and current president of the Republic of China, Ma Yingjiu. The in-depth inquiries and expositions of celebrities' and politicians' private lives also reveal the hidden, other side of public and celebrity figures, thus satisfying the curiosity and interest of the audience. Another feature of the show is the ‘rude’ and ‘lewd’ body contact and language used by Little S which ‘de-sublimates’ and ‘de-politicises’ the entertainment and cultural spheres of present-day mainland China, at least on the virtual venue available on the internet.

The significance of *Kangxi* and other entertainment programs such as *Super Girl* (a Chinese singing contest for female contestants, organized by Hunan Satellite Television

between 2004 and 2006), is that they facilitate the emergence and development of an 'aesthetic public sphere' in contemporary China's media context, a place which is established and dominated by the audience of the media texts. Entertainment programs and cultural products were originally disparaged by Habermas (1989) and the Habermasian scholars, as they lacked political function and importance; instead they advocated for a true functional 'political public sphere'. Entertainment programs and cultural products merely direct the mass's attention to consumption and entertainment instead of focusing on serious civic issues. They fail to enhance civic education and they decrease the viewers' time for involvement in civic activities (Postman 1986; Putnam 2000). However, in response to Habermas's opinions, Wu (2011) echoes Jacobs (2007; 2011) by urging a revision on the concept and function of the public sphere. Through merging and blurring the line between fact and fiction, and between news and entertainment, there emerges the foundation for the notion of an 'aesthetic public sphere' (Wu 2011, p. 49). According to Jacobs (2007 cited in Wu 2011, p. 49-51), entertainment programming correlates people's aesthetic experiences to their discussions about common concerns and serious social issues, which explain people's strong moral investment in cultural texts, and in this way people, constitute their most significant civic practices.

Bernard Timberg (2002, p.18), points out that in every national election of America since 1992, 'talk shows have increasingly become sites where news, entertainment, and political power converge', and the television talk show is conceived 'as one of the last truly national centers of public opinion in a market-segmented public sphere'. Moreover, Horace Newcomb (2002, p. xi) argues that television and talk shows have 'at least assumed a rightful place in the "public sphere"... and they "are sometimes hailed as democratic and progressive...'. Western talk shows have 'brought into the spotlight what those at the "bottom" or on the "fringes" of "civil society"', such as talk shows that expose sexual variation and institutional collapse, want to hear about. Taiwanese talk shows such as *Kangxi* however, re-configure and reform the mainlander's imagination of how popular media's representation of political leaders could be. They demonstrate that contact between the general public and their leaders in a democratic political society could be 'disrespectful' and that there could even be 'body intimacy' between the public and their political representatives. In other words, how the aesthetic and cultural public spheres function in a democratic atmosphere is revealed to the mainland viewers and this I argue helps to undermine the ideological control and surveillance of the CCP.

This paper provides a textual analysis of several of the most representative episodes of *Kangxi*. These include episodes with interviews of Taiwanese politicians such as Lian Zhan and Ma Yingjiu, influential intellectuals like Li Ao and Chen Wenqian, and two with well-known mainland director Chen Kaige and Hong Kongese star Andy Lau respectively. By analyzing the content of the conversation between the hosts and the interviewees, plus their intimate body contacts and the sexual rhetoric exposed during the interviews, and through a close examination of the unintended consequences evoked by *Kangxi* among the mainland online audience, the paper fulfills its two main objectives.

First, it reveals how 'disrespectful' questions and comments to political leaders, ribald dialogue with public intellectuals and celebrity, and flirtatious body language between the hosts and their interviewees in *Kangxi* demonstrates the democratic facet of Taiwanese popular culture in particular and the Taiwanese political atmosphere in general. The second objective is to show how *Kangxi* performs as the conduit of an 'aesthetic public sphere', in that it generates retrospective and thought provoking discussion among its online audience about the control, surveillance and monopoly of the CCP over media products and narratives in present-day China. An audience review of *Kangxi* reinforces the textual critique and helps map out the full range of social effects connected to this particular talk show. The main

consequence of this examination is, I argue, is that it undermines the ideological control of the CCP and it cultivates a potential for citizens to develop a democratic society on the Chinese mainland.

While the choice of the sample episodes used as analysis in this article is not large, it is representative and systematic. The examination of the Lian Zhan and Ma Yingjiu episodes focusses on the political arena and illustrates the equality of the relationship between Taiwan's general public and their political leaders, thus highlighting the democratic nature of Taiwan's political system. The Li Ao and the Chen Wenqian episodes signify the conversations with intellectuals (such as investigative journalists and independent writers) and demonstrate how public opinion is formed and guided on certain public issues and social topics in the conversation with the social elites via the 'aesthetic public sphere'. The comparison between the Chen Kaige episode and the Andy Lau episode focusses on celebrities and highlights the differences between the degree of openness in Taiwan society as compared to the mainland with its totally different political system. These analyses will help illustrate why *Kangxi* enjoys enormous approval and popularity on the mainland, and why it fascinates the mainland audience and enlightens them simultaneously. Here, the concept of the active viewer helps explain how the mainland viewers have been transformed by *Kangxi* from being the duped, brainwashed and manipulated, to being an experienced and sophisticated viewer with critical and independent thinking: in other words, the 'critical' or 'active' viewer (Livingstone 1990 cited in Livingstone and Lunt 1994). Further, the critical response from the 'active' viewer 'positions viewers as public citizens rather than private consumers, and so may result in a critical public opinion, with consequences for the involvement of ordinary people in public argument...' (Livingstone and Lunt 1994, p. 91). Gamson (1999, p.191) adds that:

[T]he experience of viewing talk shows is rarely all that much of an intellectual challenge; they are superficial television culture. But their peculiarities and amusements can take us surprisingly far.

### **Vulgarity Remains Taboo in Mainland Censorship**

One of the biggest selling points of *Kangxi* is its focus on delving into the most private and sensitive life experiences of its guests. For instance, it explores their erotic trysts, their first kiss, their first sexual experiences, right down to their favorite underwear colour and pattern. The great appeal of these loutish, anti-privacy topics for the mainland audience is largely due to their taboo status in the region. China, under the reign of the CCP, has a continuous tradition of enlisting morality as an effectual means to manipulate and discipline the Chinese people and to maintain its authority and achieve social cohesion. In Maoist China, particularly during the heydays of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people's sense of sexual desire and sexuality was sterilized and almost obliterated through coalesced intimidation, conciliation, propaganda and edification (Gong 2010, p. 296). Devoid of sexual enjoyment and elimination of gender discrepancy, the socialist revolution in Mao's era was very austere.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, the introduction of the Opening Up reforms, and the engagement with modernity in the form of Western culture and thought, there came about a gradual maturity of Chinese thought. This change or maturation saw an awakening of human desires and sensualities, and a more tolerant public ethos emerged toward the subject of sexuality and love (Gong 2010, p. 298). As a result of this liberation of thought, writers, filmmakers and other artists started to challenge the orthodox ideas and expectations of desire, body and sex. Using these new weapons they questioned the rationale of the CCP's political, social, and moral values, in particular the constraints, monitoring, and oppression it

applied to individual choice and ethics, especially in relation to sex (Cai 2014). However, after the campaign by the CCP to boycott Western spiritual pollution and the aborted democratic demonstrations at the Tiananmen Square at the end of the 1980s, a shift in cultural and ideological control occurred, resulting in tighter political surveillance and censorship.

Vulgar and sexual expressions and innuendos in cultural works and other programs still invite bans and other impositions from the government propaganda institutions. For example, as noted by David Barboza, in 2003, ‘government officials pulled the plug on a slightly erotic weather show that featured several scantily clad beauty pageant winners cooing the weather forecast while lying on a sofa or bed’ (Barboza 2003 cited in Zhu 2012, p.199). From 2004 to the present, government censorship also resulted in numerous crackdowns on what they classed as ‘unhealthy’ and ‘harmful’ literary and cultural materials, such as erogenous serialized novels on Chinese websites. The main goal of these campaigns is not only to eliminate the vulgar, but also any morally and politically sensitive content. Even the traditional folklore performing arts style *xiangsheng* (crosstalk) is targeted by the government. They consider that the recent resurrection of this traditional folk-art form by the emerging *xiangsheng* master Guo Degang has resurrected once popular vulgar elements, such as risqué jokes and innuendo, which is inherited from traditional *xiangsheng* pieces that were originally modified and removed by a group of *xiangsheng* performers during the early days of socialist China (Link 1984, p. 97; Xue 1985, p.124).

In 2005, many state-run entities such as China Central Television (CCTV) and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), strongly criticized *Super Girl*. This show was generally seen as the unofficial mainland Chinese version of the global television franchise *Pop Idol* and one of the most popular entertainment shows in the country. It was branded as ‘a rogue program’ produced by ‘the rogue broadcaster’ (Zhong 2007 cited in Zhu 2012, p.199) and it was labelled as a vulgar product. The leaders in charge of censorship of the Party complained that ‘there were too many low-quality and lowbrow reality shows that catered to the least common denominator and that the government had to strengthen supervision of entertainment programs’ (Feuilherade 2007 cited in Zhu 2012, p.199). In 2011, the Chinese government banned *Super Girl* from airing, claiming the program to be too lengthy and SARFT told the Hunan station that *Super Girl* broke time rules for this kind of program. This apparent over-reaction was, really only an excuse to sanction the show.

Besides tightening its supervision on entertainment television programs, the CCP propaganda institutions also increased their monitoring of reports on privacy of celebrities. In 2006, CCTV decided to ‘ban reports about celebrities’ private lives as part of an in-house campaign against “vulgarity on the screen” and lowbrow programs. With rhetoric reminiscent of the anti-spiritual pollution campaigns, CCTV pledged to adhere to its objective of “spreading advanced culture” and to “actively advocate mainstream values in line with the times” (Zhu 2012, p.199). In July 2010, the then CCP Chairman, Hu Jintao, explicitly excluded the “Three Vulgarities,” which refer to coarseness/*disu*, uncultured vulgarity/*yongsu*, and obsequiousness/*meisu* from the cultural domain of contemporary China (Hu Jintao: *tuidong shehuizhuyi wenhua dafazhan dafanrong* 2010). In August the same year, the CCP’s Propaganda Department launched a new cultural campaign: Counter the Three Vulgarities. It is not difficult to imagine that in such a tightly controlled media environment there would be little room left for any mainland-based television stations or cultural companies to chance their luck in terms of presenting vulgar and erotic programs, let alone those with explicit sexual references such as *Kangxi*. *Kangxi*’s popularity among mainland Chinese viewers serves as a foil to the all-encompassing ethical and ideological control of the CCP propaganda organizations over China’s cultural and media sphere. As the Chinese people have long been distanced and segregated from the uncouth elements and materials embedded

in those ‘problematic’ and ‘unhealthy’ cultural products, most people now desire them even more, out of curiosity and a wish for difference and stimulation.

### Rhetoric and Politics of ‘Privacy’ and Body

Individualism has never carved out a space for itself in socialist China, and this was particularly true during Mao’s reign, and more generally so during the embryonic stage of the Opening Up era. As scene in a famous film, *Romance on Lushan Mountain* (*Lushanlian* 1980), shows, when the male and female characters want to show their fondness for each other, they do not express their feelings in a personal manner, instead, they confess their affection in a circuitous way through voicing their love for the country. Also, Scar Literature, which emerged in the late 1970s not long after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), bemoans the lack of individual concerns during the chaotic socialist revolutionary time.<sup>1</sup> Jia Zhangke, one of the most noted China’s sixth generation underground directors, has declared that his original motive for making movies was merely to find an aperture for his feelings and perceptions about life and human relationships, and when he began making films, he could discern no space in Chinese films that could transmit individual feelings (Veg 2010, p. 58). As Jia puts it, ‘When I studied at the Beijing Film Academy, I watched official Chinese films for many years and never saw anything related to my life. So I did feel I had to film our lives’ (Veg 2010, p. 62).

In the late 1990’s, China’s cultural-media sphere began to carve out more private space, and this may be seen in the sixth generation filmmakers’ works, (such as works of Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yuan), beauty writers’ semibiographical ‘body’ and psychological writings, (such as novels of Zhou Weihui and Chen Ran), the post-1980s and post-1990s generations’ rebellious literature and subculture, (such as writings of Mianmian and Chunshu). These works share one common feature, and that is that they delve into the most private parts of an individual’s life experiences, exposing the hidden stories and feelings to the broader public. These hidden stories are concerned with topics such as the most intimate knowledge about family members and friends, any peculiar habits and desires, sexual needs and suffering, and any mental frustrations and traumas. Although they cater to the needs and tastes of a certain range of readers and viewers, all of these works endure a somewhat underground status and confront irregular censorship and bans from the CCP government. Therefore, overt, unconventional, and non-conformist contents and pursuits such as the private, the vulgar, the erotic and the sexy are still viewed as sensitive elements and taboos that must be subject to official supervision and discipline.

Party ideology still plays an important part in the thoughts and lives of the Chinese people. Of course, the situation has changed considerably, since the era of Mao when art and culture served political ends, in contrast with present times where the Party has been steadily, but very slowly, loosening its control over the manufacture of cultural products. The Party now wants cultural products to be less political and more commercial, and this is a stereotypical symptom of post-totalitarian society. However, the Party’s purpose in regard to commercializing the cultural products is to transfer the concern of the public from worrying about politics and society, to caring about personal economic and life well-being, and it has little to do with making the cultural products serve the recreational needs and desires of ordinary folk. It is obvious that the Chinese people are still the target of the government’s manipulation and surveillance.

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<sup>1</sup> Scar Literature was meant to be cathartic and to help those sent-down youths, marginalized Party cadres, and intellectuals heal their psychological wounds inflicted upon them during those tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, and of the socialist revolutionary period generally. Scar Literature is mainly stories and personal accounts of their persecution, beatings, and denunciations, and in some cases the execution of friends and family members, which is introspective and melodramatic.

The above mentioned avant-garde literary and cultural works, in their own different ways, engage with the rhetoric and politics of privacy and body, and turn them into a fertile ground in terms of articulating individual opinion, appealing to regulation and suppression, questioning social and moral establishments, and challenging the official discourse and the party ideology. Due to this engagement these works, and many other similar works enjoyed by a wide range of the Chinese population, deservedly gained the applause and admiration of those Chinese people who see and understand the political, socio-cultural and ethical constraints laid on them by the CCP administration. *Kangxi*, to some extent, plays a similar role to those avant-garde works in enlightening the Chinese audience and allowing them to ultimately reach an understanding. The audience is aware that those cultural materials and themes described by the CCP regime as vulgar and unhealthy, are actually not wrong and not problematic in content, and that they just convey the inherent instinct of human beings such as eat, drink and have sex, and that they do, in a genuine sense, “serve the people.” To put it another way, *Kangxi* prompts the mainland viewers to muse on the reasons why, in their own region, this kind of entertainment show is prohibited.

One of the most interesting episodes of *Kangxi* is the one with Li Ao, a well-known contemporary Taiwanese liberal intellectual who was jailed for his critical and anti-government stance. Li is a scholar of history, of both China and the world. He has published around a hundred books with most of them being banned by the Nationalist Party regime under reign of Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo. Li claims that in the past five hundred years of Chinese history, he is the author who best uses the vernacular language in writing. Undoubtedly, Li’s mastery of the Chinese language and his broad collection of archival materials and chronological files, plus his sense of humour, have made his explanations and arguments about historical events and disputes extremely convincing, fascinating and entertaining. Li hosted a show on the influential Hong Kong based Phoenix satellite TV called *Li Ao Has Something to Say* (*Liao youhuashuo*) from 2004 to 2006. In this popular show he would talk about famous or controversial historical events and stories, mainly about China, which captured the interest of the highbrow audience across the Sinophone world. Due to this program, many mainland viewers were introduced to him and he became very popular, and was nicknamed “Master Li” to highlight his dexterous handling of historical data.

Another reason for Li Ao’s popularity is that he participated in the 2011 Taiwan president election as a candidate representing a small political party. Although he was not successful, his performance during the election campaigns won him lots of media attention. Li is also notorious for his openness about his sexual encounters with a dozen beautiful women, which incidentally became the subject of a book titled *Li Ao and His Women* (*Li Ao he ta de nurenmen*). Li’s mastery of the Chinese language is frequently revealed by his inventive use of erotic and sexual words and phrases to imply political issues and national events. For example, in his show *Li Ao Has Something to Say*, he mocks the Nationalist Party’s political policy as it ‘masturbates Taiwan, and mentally rapes the mainland’. By ‘mentally rapes the mainland’ he means that the Nationalist Party lost the mainland to the CCP in 1949, however, it still harbors the dream of striking back and retaking the mainland; and by ‘masturbates Taiwan’ he refers to that the island is currently under the ‘corrupt’ rule of the Nationalist Party. In another instance, when Li was jailed by the Nationalist Party regime for his anti-Party writings about freedom of speech on the island, he adopted a self-mocking manner and says ‘the big head’, (here a metaphor for his thought and action), makes mistakes, and the ‘small head’ (here refers to the male sexual organ) suffers, which clearly explains his suffering of the sexless time in prison for his open challenge to the dictatorship of the Nationalist Party under the rule of the Chiang family at his time.

In the Li Ao episode of *Kangxi*, knowing that Li is a womanizer, Little S sits on the arm of

the sofa in which Li sits, gently touching his face and making flirtatious eye contact with him. Then she asks Li, ‘When you look at me, do you have the impulse to develop a relationship with me?’ Li answers, ‘You are very attractive to men’. More erotic and bold conversation ensues when they talk about Li’s capacity to make love after his prostate was partly removed due to prostate cancer.

Little S: Did you give up sex after the operation?

Li Ao: I give up only by 10 percent. In other words, I lost 10 percent of my mistresses.

Cai Kangyong: Did this operation make you lower your head (surrender to the destiny)?

Li Ao: A part of my body lowers its head (means his sex organ could not work perfectly).

...

Cai Kangyong: Are women still satisfied with you sexual competence?

Li Ao: Absolutely.

Later in the show, when Little S imitates a woman’s movements during orgasm while alluding to sex with Li Ao, Li comments, ‘You just imitate their body movements, but there is no sound’. Upon Li’s request, Little S screams out imitating female’s reaction during lovemaking, Li then comments humorously, ‘Your voice could make a man become impotent’. Little S and Cai Kangyong also probes into a matter that Li confessed in *Li Ao and His Women*, which was when a newly married woman wanted to have an affair with him and she took the initiative to undress him. However, when Li starts to undress her, she suddenly changes her mind and runs out of the apartment. Li chases her outside only to find that he is naked. Li Ao wittily admits that he merely breaks this kind law in his life (indicates to have adultery with other men’s wives). Here, the extramarital affair is openly recounted as part of the privacy of Li Ao on *Kangxi*, something which is unimaginable and much condemned in the mainland region as people are still not open enough to publicly talk about these types of ethically degrading, guilty secrets.

‘Third party’ has become a popular phrase in the cultural lexicon of present-day China. The regular Weibo (microblog) expositions of the ‘illegitimate third party’ in the love and marriages of many CCP cadres, celebrities and other public figures, has made this phenomenon an obvious feature in the social and cultural domains of mainland region. Likewise, within the broader societal environment, ‘third party’ seems to have emerged as an unavoidable problem for many lovers and couples. However, to openly talk about these ‘third party’ antics by oneself on a public media platform, and to willingly expose and share one’s dishonor with the general audience is still shunned by mainlanders. For example, the so-called most famous fifth generation director Zhang Yimou never openly talks about his affair with the actress Gong Li, (who starred in many of his internationally awarded films such as *Red Sorghum/Honggaoliang* and *Judou*), not even about what happened almost twenty years ago and what is widely known on the mainland. Here, I argue that the reason is not due only to Zhang’s reluctance to share his secrets with the public, but also because of the derogatory moral connotations inflicted on him and Gong by their immoral extramarital affair. In other words, Zhang considers that the Chinese people’s psyche is still steered by orthodox morality as disseminated by the government, therefore they would not be generous enough to pardon his mistakes. Further, the self-imposed silence about his private life indicates the power and politics of privacy in the Chinese social-cultural public space.

Besides the privacy issue, in Taiwan the freedom to articulate openly about sex is much greater than it is in mainland China. As shown in the Li Ao episode of *Kangxi*, the conversations between the hosts and Li constantly render explicit references and implicit innuendos about sex organs and intercourse. These, at-best thinly-veiled talks about sex, are

viewed with contempt by the conservative and mainstream cultural practitioners and critics in the mainland, yet they stir the “emotional hot-pot” of the viewers of the program, in particular those of mainland China, as they have little chance to watch these kinds of ‘socially irresponsible’ and ‘morally disparaging’ shows produced in their own region. Thus, *Kangxi* fulfills its enlightening function for the mainland viewers as it demonstrates that a chat show can serve as an aesthetic public sphere where private and lewd sex may be discussed and shared. Here, the sex lives and extramarital affairs talked about by the guest interviewees on *Kangxi* might form an ‘emotional public space’, where emotion is at the forefront of the need to ‘tell the truth, to get it off your chest, free your speech, the talk show ideology goes – not surprisingly, since it is by getting people to talk revealingly and personally that the shows attract an audience... [which comes] from American values of free speech’ (Gamson 1999, p.195).

In other episodes of *Kangxi*, such as the one where it interviews Chen Wenqian, (who is widely acclaimed as the most intelligent woman in Taiwan, and the host of a well-known news reporting show), and Andy Lau (one of the so-called Four Heavenly Kings of the Sinophone entertainment world), vulgar, once-private and blatantly open sex and other taboo subjects are also explored. For example, Little S questions Chen if she dares to break wind during a formal conference and whether or not she swears or curses when she is in bad mood. She also asks Chen that if Ma Yingjiu (the current head of the Nationalist Party of Taiwan) and Chen Shuibian (the former chairman of the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan) both confessed their affections for her at the same time, which one will she pick? Chen responds with a startling answer, ‘If I want to get married, I will choose Cai Kongyong (a homosexual man); if I need to have sex with someone, that person would be Ma Yingjiu’ (Ma is handsome, charming and charismatic, she does not mention Chen Shuibian as he is not good-looking and attractive to women).

Similarly, in the interview with Andy Lau, Little S takes advantage of the opportunity and performs a Latin dance with Lau. While she and Lau are dancing together, she touches Lau’s neck, chest and hip. However, in the episode where the show invites the mainland based fifth generation director Chen Kaige and his wife Chen Hong (a mainland actress), there is rarely any intimate body or sex-related topics during the interview. Both of the hosts just ask some general questions about film and directing, and Chen and his wife respond with regular answers. Here, it is not difficult to discern that Little S and Cai Kangyong might think that overt inquiry about Chen’s private life and sex subjects will make their mainland guests feel uncomfortable, even though Chen and his wife both work within the comparatively liberal film circle. Thus, the power and politics of privacy and sex mastered by Little S could not be applied to Chen and his wife as they have been so long immersed in the rigorous and orthodox social-cultural milieu of the mainland and their behavior and thinking bear an ineradicable mark of that specific rhetoric and ideology. Of course, the clever audience is able to spot the differences between the conversations and contents of the normal episodes of *Kangxi* and those ones that focus on the mainland guest celebrities such as Chen Kaige and his wife. In other words, the political and moral enlightening functions of *Kangxi* is castrated when it has mainstream guests from the mainland.

However, many Chinese public intellectuals have noticed that the imported vulgar, shallow and commercial popular culture programs, have the potential to challenge the state culture (Yang 2002, p. 310). According to Lan Tian (cited in Yang 2002, p. 310):

This wave of another type of Chinese culture is a relief from the ‘linguistic violence’ or ‘rape’ (*yuyan qiangbao*) that people were subjected to before... Popular culture threatens both ‘official discursive power’ (*guanfang huayu quanli*) and ‘central core culture’ (*zhongxin wenhua*).

However, every coin has two sides. Traditional Habermasian scholars insist that ‘talk shows are another piece of evidence that commercial television, to say the least, edges out whatever rational-critical debate is taking place’ (Gamson 1999, p. 202). Further, the excessively commercialized and sensationalized popular media such as *Kangxi* on one hand shows its democratic facet to the mainland viewers in terms of showcasing the freedom of expression and the equal relationship enjoyed by the general public with their political leaders, whereas on the other hand, the vulgar and sexualized popular media in Taiwan also has an anti-democratising impact in the region. Scholarly research on similar talk shows in the West may be useful in explaining *Kangxi*:

[T]he most fundamental, and most useful thing to consider are those criticisms that focus on the damage these shows do to democracy by posing as democratic public fora but gutting themselves of almost everything but ratings-driven exhibitions, and on the symptoms they expose of a liberal public sphere severely eroded and impoverished by its central driver, commercial television, where quick emotion displaces rational deliberation. (Gamson 1999, p.191)

Other criticism targets the making public of private, personal and sexual desires which should be kept out of public discussion (Gamson 1999, p.199). For example, as Gamson (1999, p. 200) points out:

The public display of ‘private life,’ especially sexuality, is not something classy people do. When one puts one’s life on full display, one opens oneself up fully to publicity in ways others are bound to find quite uncivil, in part because a certain barrier – Hannah Arendt would call it the boundary of shame – is blatantly breached (Elshtain 1996, p.176 cited in Gamson 1999, p. 200).

### **Sexualizing and ‘Making Fun’ of Politicians**

Due to the liberal political system and subsequent open cultural backdrop in Taiwan, *Kangxi* is aired on an influential commercial television channel, however, it can only be viewed on-line at entertainment video sites on the mainland. There are two reasons why *Kangxi* has trouble with the authorities on the mainland. First are its blatant sex-oriented conversations, and second is that it demeans and makes fun of the Taiwanese politicians. It is widely known that in mainland China, leaders of the CCP, especially the high-ranking ones in the Politburo, are only seen in the China Central Television’s (CCTV) program *News Bulletin* (*Xinwenlianbo*), and they also occasionally appear at the festival celebration galas which are broadcast via the core channels of CCTV, serving as the mouthpiece of the Party. Although in recent years, with the advent of the social media apparatus such as Weibo (microblog), Chinese officials began to communicate with the masses via this internet-based communication platform in order to garner the opinions and criticisms of ordinary Chinese people. However, there is seldom any chance for the Chinese people to know the private life of their leaders, let alone to listen to them talking about love and sex on entertainment programs such as chat show.

The situation in Taiwan is totally different. After the Chiang family gave up their absolute dominance in politics in Taiwan, and with the advent of the multi-party system, the political and cultural atmosphere has been much freer. For instance, there are many variety and talk shows focusing on politics and politicians in Taiwan. Most of these shows such as *Sisy’s Show* (*Wenqian xiaomeida*, presided by Chen Wenqian), and *Celebrity Imitated Show* (*Quanminzuidadang*), openly critique and discuss the policies of different parties, often mocking, ridiculing and attacking government officials and politicians. Likewise, in an

entertainment show like *Kangxi*, government bureaucrats and leaders are treated in a similarly casual and flippant manner. However, different to political talk and variety shows, the focus of *Kangxi* is more on private, and sexual matters rather than news, politics and national events.

In the Ma Yingjiu episode of *Kangxi*, the voice over introduces him as: ‘the most sought after object of sexual fantasy, and has been voted sweetheart lover in dreams, the most sexy man, and he is also our respectful mayor of Taipei (Ma was then the mayor of Taipei when he was attending *Kangxi*, now he is the president of The Republic of China and the current Chairman of the Nationalist Party of Taiwan), even Little S is obsessed with him’. At the beginning of the show, in order to express her appreciation for Ma, Little S again sits on the arms of the sofa on which Ma sits and puts her arm around Ma’s neck and asks him, ‘Mayor Ma, can we French kiss?’ Little S passes on her elder sister’s (Big S) message to Ma, which says that she wants to have an affair with him, and she does not mind to be the third party and she is willing to do anything for Ma. Of course these words are just spoken in jest and we should not take them seriously, however, they again symbolize the free thinking atmosphere in the political, social and cultural contexts of contemporary Taiwan. During their conversation, Ma is also asked about his private life, with questions such as, does he flirt with his wife and how does he do it; how does he chase girls; how many girlfriends did he have before marriage; what did they do during dates; when was his first kiss and how did it happen; what was his first lovemaking experience. Ma is not embarrassed by these questions and answers them honestly. He not only does not become angry with the hosts, in particular Little S who shows extreme curiosity about his love and sex encounters, but also he praises her as a lovely person and a good host who brings lightheartedness to the audience and is liked by the entire Taiwanese, mainland and diaspora Chinese viewers of *Kangxi*. In this way, Ma demonstrates a gentle, unpretentious and generous personality for a politician, and because of the contrast with the situation in mainland China, it casts a satirical light of those mainland political figures who wear a solemn look and talk only in official rhetoric and clichés.

In the episode with Lian Zhan and his wife Lian Fangyu, (Lian was the former Chairman of the Nationalist Party before Ma Yingjiu), the focus of the show is totally on his private life instead of politics. Lian is in his seventies and has a traditional and stern look. He is however, not a conservative thinker and has a good sense of humour. At the outset of the show, when asked by Little S about the style and colour of his underwear, he answers the questions in detail without showing any sign of discomfort, and then he praises *Kangxi* as a show with a good standard. Later Lian is queried about his private love life with questions such as what was his criteria for selecting girl friends when he was young, and were there any female students who worshiped and fell for him when he was teaching at university. Lian copes with all the questions and shows his sharp sense of humour. He says that his standards for choosing a suitable partner are that, ‘First of all, she must be a female, and better she is a Chinese. When I first met my wife, I felt that she was so pretty (Lian’s wife was a pageant queen) and cute and I had to pursue her’. His wife complements Lian and says that he is still very romantic even now and he will say sweet words to her and give her flowers on the Valentine’s Day. When responding to a question asking him if he swears when he is angry, Lian confesses that he sometimes uses the word ‘bastard’, however, he adds that there are not many people today who deserve this specific wording, which shows his sense of humour.

When Little S asks if she is good enough to be their daughter-in-law, (it is obviously only a rhetorical question as she is married already and has three children), both Lian and his wife humbly express their fondness for her, and that it would be fortunate for them to have a daughter-in-law like her. In both the traditional and elite culture of China, it is dishonorable and unthinkable for a son who comes from a family that has produced public officials to marry an actress or celebrity figure, as they are regarded as belonging to the humble

professions in ancient China, and a signifier of ‘unknowledgeable’ in modern China. However, the Lian couple do not show a condescending manner towards Little S, and conversely, they express that Little S is so beautiful and popular and therefore she might be a little out of their league. The intimate and ‘perverse’ relationship created by *Kangxi* between the high political figures and the general public reflects the casual atmosphere within the Taiwanese civil and cultural domains, which also poignantly and sardonically serves as a foil to the ascetic and lofty nature of the party-political and social compasses of mainland China. Just as *Super Girl* realizes Chinese commoners’ dream of voting (voting for their favorite singers) in democratic political systems (in a political sense), *Kangxi* allows them to experience the fun of teasing political leaders, which would be impossible in the mainland region. As observed by the author, this kind of ‘perverse’ and ambiguous relationship between the people and their leaders will only shorten the psychological distance between these two groups instead of leading the later to feel they are offended or profaned by the former. Under the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao administration, the Chinese people have shown a tendency to get close to their leaders by nicknaming Hu as Brother Hu, and comparing the looks of Wen with the famous Hong Kongese actor Tony Leung Chiu Wai, and nicknaming Wen as ‘Best Actor Wen’. However, the endeavors to get closer to their leaders are only elementary when compared to those in *Kangxi*. Thus, there is still a long way to go for the Chinese people to realise their civic rights in terms of freely enjoying this type of entertainment, however vulgar and unhealthy these programs are when they focus people’s private lives and their sexual secrets.

### **An Audience Critique of *Kangxi***

This section is an analysis of the audiences’ comments and discussion about *Kangxi*. As recent audience studies suggest, scholars of media studies would fail in decoding the thorough social effects of popular media products if they relied exclusively on textual criticism. Thus, case studies on the audience complement this inadequacy of textual analysis as the sole means of analytical critique (de Certeau 1984; Radway 1988; Ang 1990; Yang 1994; Yang 2002). Here I examine a post entitled ‘Why do the mainlanders love to watch *Kangxi* so much?’ as it gets hundreds of audience replies. The post was published in December 2012 on Douban Web, one of China’s largest on-line reading and discussion clubs for fans of literature and culture. The comments about *Kangxi* from the netizens are generally positive. Some members of the audience are purely attracted to the show by the hosts, whereas some others prefer the relaxed, hilarious and ‘genuine’ atmosphere created by *Kangxi*. One reply indicates that after watching *Kangxi*, many people realized that Taiwanese people enjoy a full freedom of speech in contrast to the talk show programs produced in the mainland because of the tight control of the propaganda departments and institutions. Another reply points out that it is the program’s democratic features, such as openly teasing and ridiculing the political and social elites which makes it extremely popular with the mainland viewers. The ‘disrespectful’ attitude of the Taiwanese people towards their leaders contrasts with the humble disposition of the mainlanders towards their own leaders, and demonstrate that different political systems and social routines cultivate, or allow to be cultivated, different personalities and values of people. The mainland audience may conclude that their own popular cultural programs are continuingly under the monitoring and censorship of the CCP government.

Some of the more humorous replies by netizens even mock the CCP propaganda as being boring and lofty in its opinion of itself. One reply reads: ‘If I do not watch *Kangxi*, do you want me to watch *News Bulletin* (the official news reports aired at the prime time on CCTV)?’ The other netizen’s reply attributes the motive of watching *Kangxi* to support the unity of the mainland and the Taiwan regions. Here, the learned loftiness of the audience serves as an

ironic revelation as to how deep the CCP education has penetrated into the everyday life of the common people, while providing a logical explanation to the huge popularity *Kangxi* enjoyed among the mainland audience.

In summary, by conducting a close examination of the unintended consequences evoked by *Kangxi* among the mainland online audience, together with the textual analysis of the conversations between the hosts and interviewees, I argue that *Kangxi* serves as a good example to show how popular media products create an aesthetic public sphere, and how the cross-regional migration of talk show programs helps to enlighten the mainland audience about a developing democratic society, just as in a similar way the imported Taiwanese TV dramas of the 1980s and 1990s did to the mainland viewers in terms of introducing a more prosperous and desirable outside world. Therefore, the social and political function of *Kangxi*, is to undermine the control of the CCP, and to cultivate citizens for a democratic society. Furthermore, *Kangxi* contributes and facilitates the transformation of the former brainwashed and manipulated mainland audience to the experienced, sophisticated, critical and independent viewers and thinkers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

From the beginning of the PRC, private and erotic sexual topics have been used by the CCP as a moral constraint for controlling the Chinese people. Ethics, especially in relationship with sexual matters, has been used to denounce and insult people, not only during the revolutionary heydays, but also in today's China. The phenomenon of 'illegitimate third parties' (mistresses) and 'second wives' of the CCP officials, has emerged as an effective force to combat corruption in the Chinese officialdom by exposing the morally corrupt conduct of the CCP cadres. Morality, as an ideal, and sexual issues, as an example, have thus become the most effective political tool for the CCP to both govern and monitor Chinese society. Even in contemporary China, strict censorship and bans are still adopted by the Chinese government to filter out those programs which it considers to contain apparent 'pornographic', 'vulgar' and 'unhealthy' elements. Consequently, the majority of mainland citizens, in particular the older generations, are still confined in a 'pure' and 'clean' atmosphere beyond moral deterioration and pollution.

The situation in Taiwan is the opposite. Along with the development of its democratic politics, the control of the government in the cultural and artistic domains is becoming more and more liberal and generous. Neither political news, nor variety and talk shows, exhibit a downturn in terms of including more vulgar content and the mocking and teasing of public figures such as politicians and celebrities. *Kangxi*, is a stereotypical example which illustrates why this particular program is warmly embraced by the Chinese mainland viewers. This paper has suggested an alternative view on censorship within China and shows how the CCP government makes use of the moral and sexual discourses as useful devices to regulate and restrain its people. These moral discourses have removed the Chinese people from the world of mundane and secular pleasures, such as talking about erotica and sexual delights in the public cultural sphere. Therefore, the emergence of the Taiwanese entertainment shows on the Chinese internet has satisfied the curiosity and recreational needs of many Chinese netizens, especially the younger generation which constitute the majority of China's online population.

Through watching *Kangxi*, the sensual, erotic, and 'perverse' relationship between the Taiwanese public and their political leaders has opened the eyes of the mainland audience, enlightening them to the fact that there exists this kind of casual and relaxed attitude and a 'disrespect towards loftiness' by the general public towards their government heads, a position which is unimaginable in the mainland region. This revelation provides the mainlanders with an indication on what a democratic society might be like, what the normal

relationship between the ordinary people and its political leaders could be, and how this relationship undermines the control of the CCP. Consequently, *Kangxi* reveals that the function of a so-called recreational program, besides recreation, is to cultivate a critical and active audience for a developing a democracy in the mainland region. Further, the dialectical relationship between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, which is reflected particularly in the Taiwanese popular culture's influence on the mainland audience, sheds light on the social effects and significance of the cross-cultural and cross-regional migration of cultural products in today's globalized world.

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