Original Article

An (un)romantic journey: Authentic performance in a Chinese dating show

Donna Chu [iD]
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract
This article examines the production and negotiation of 'authenticity' in reality television through a case study of a popular Chinese dating show *If You Are the One*. The study reconstructed the various stages of the show and collected perspectives from participating bachelors and production people. The ethnographic approach has enabled a relatively thick description of what happened on-screen and off-screen. Primarily, it details how four ordinary male participants entered the show and made sense of their experiences. It describes and discusses how they maintained a strong sense of authenticity while delivering anticipated performance on television. It uncovers the dynamics and interaction between the participants, producers and audiences and highlights the invisible scripts underlining the show. The recurring debates about authenticity, scripting and ordinariness in reality television are addressed with a renewed understanding of how the seemingly paradoxical 'authentic performance' and 'extraordinary ordinariness' work in the process.

Keywords
Authenticity, China, construction of reality, dating shows, FCWR, gender, participation, reality television

Introduction

This study examines the production and negotiation of 'authenticity' in a prominent reality dating show in China. Since the early 2000s, reality TV has become a prominent programme genre on television around the world, partly as a result of the changing political economy of the television

Corresponding author:
Donna Chu, School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2/F, Humanities Building, New Asia College, Shatin, Hong Kong.
Email: donnachu@cuhk.edu.hk

and entertainment industries (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). It is commonly observed that the reality of 'Reality TV' is after all a product of construction: the programme often follows certain 'invisible scripts', and the participants are indeed collaborators in this 'procedural authorship' (Andrejevic, 2004), making them more like 'actors' performing for their 'scripted roles'.

This critique on 'authenticity', however, misses two interrelated points. First, it seems to ignore the point that ordinary people also need to 'perform' in everyday life (Goffman, 1956). A participant of a broadcast dating show needs to perform for the TV audience; a person going on a blind date in 'real life' also needs to 'perform' if she or he wants to leave a good impression. Second, 'being in a performance' and 'being true or authentic' may not be mutually exclusive. The need to perform in front of the blind date does not obliterate the need to also reveal some truths about oneself. More generally, people always have to prevent themselves from being seen as pretentious. Similarly, the fact that the participants are appearing in a television show does not necessarily rule out the possibility of 'moments of authenticity' even though they may also be performing one way or another.

Therefore, this study does not treat authenticity in reality TV shows merely as a façade. Understandably, reality shows, despite the 'reality' claims, are to a large extent constructed. It is particularly so for reality dating shows, which involve 'scripting' and various forms of manipulation. While this study will examine the underlying scripts of the programme concerned, the analysis would emphasise the perspectives of the male participants of the dating show, which show that the participants themselves actually saw their own performances as authentic. It will discuss how the paradoxical 'authentic performance' unfolded during the production process. It also examines instances when the participants refused to follow the scripts of the programme, and thereby creating 'moments of authenticity' for the programme. These moments of authenticity are what making the reality TV show look/feel real.

The following begins by reviewing the current literature on reality television, especially on how issues of authenticity, scripting and ordinariness were addressed. The article then introduces *If You Are the One* (FeiChengWuRao, hereafter as FCWR), the programme analysed in this study. The methodology is then described and the findings presented.

Authenticity in reality television

Reality television has become a standard provision in today television which format, content and ideology have kept changing over three generations (Kavka, 2012). Despite great variations in theme and format (Mast, 2016), it has once been stated that reality television refers to unscripted entertainment involving ordinary people (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002). The two keywords here, 'unscripted' and 'ordinary', are both closely related to a sense of authenticity. Authenticity generally refers to the 'quality of being real or true' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Unscripted entertainment is assumed to be 'real', while ordinary participants should be 'truthful'. It has to be stressed that the meanings of 'authenticity' and 'ordinary' can be highly contested. It becomes even more complicated as the genre changes over time. Celebrities and professionals are increasingly visible in these shows, for example, talent shows featuring well-known artists. These participants are certainly not so 'ordinary', but while going through rituals in the shows, their 'ordinariness' is often highlighted. Conversely, ordinary participants eventually take on 'extraordinary' qualities throughout their participation in the shows. How participants understand these often conflicting and confusing notions of authenticity and ordinariness is a major focus of this case study.

Scripted or unscripted

Scripted or not, it has long been noted that certain 'scripts' are pervasive as normalising discourses in shows (Sears & Godderis, 2011). Instead of scripts in the conventional sense, reality television often perpetuates dominant ideology through presentation techniques, recurring messages and stereotypical representations. Using pop-up supertext, for example, would frame and constrain the messages in the show that served to reinforce existing ideologies (DeRose et al., 2003). Certain narrative elements and rhetorical strategies were consistently found to be used to appeal to audiences, as in the case of the dating show *The Bachelor* (Shedd, 2013).

More specifically, an analysis of the content of *Blind Date* (UK, first aired in 1985) revealed a tendency to punish deviations from dominant conceptions. The show endorsed recurring hegemonic messages and reinforced stereotypes related to appearance and financial situations. Rather than using the opportunity to give marginalised groups a voice, the potential of participatory reality shows was being undermined by their policing of differences (DeRose et al., 2003, p. 186). Likewise, Teurlings (2001) explicated the tactics used on love game shows to reproduce familiar gender discourses and identities.

The stereotypical representations and portrayals of women also affected the 'scripting' (c.f. Zhang, 2011). Ferris et al. (2007) listed three dominant themes in reality dating shows: (1) women are sex objects, (2) dating is a game and (3) men are sex-driven. Despite the 'choices' in the hands of the women, it remains debatable whether women enjoy more freedom and independence through participation as revealed in the case of FCWR (Luo & Sun, 2014). Findings consistently pointed to the function of reality television as a platform to uphold certain hegemonic masculinities (Luo, 2017). In short, the same old stories about men and women are told and retold in this genre that hails 'reality' as a defining characteristic.

Scripts could vary across different societies and cultures. Despite the striking similarities between *Take Me Out* (UK, first aired in January 2010) and *If You Are the One* (China, first aired in January 2010), Shei (2013) found that the two dating shows differ markedly in their dating ideology, noting that the successful match rate in the Chinese version is far lower than in the UK show. Shei argued that this could be because Chinese participants take dating far more seriously. Regarding the general ethos of the show, Shei noted that the Chinese hosts and contestants often get into serious discussions about gender and marriage, society and country, environment and livelihood, whereas the UK version is characterised by a light-hearted and humorous manner. A recent study by Yang (2017) used the case of FCWR to examine changing norms and ethos regarding dating, which pointed out a calculating mind-set behind the mate-selection process.

These scripts do change over time, as in the case with 'effeminate masculinity' (Zhang, 2019). Still, the hegemonic and ideological messages serve as 'invisible scripts' that ultimately set the tone, direction and content for the show.

Ordinary or extraordinary

Considering that they are after all 'invisible scripts', how do programme makers make sure that participants would act accordingly? Are participants aware of such scripts? How do they contribute, or rather not, to this 'scripting' process without compromising their quality of being real and true? It is important to emphasise again that authenticity is much valued in reality television. Hall (2009) found that audiences often look for attributes that reflect the true character, skills and personality of the participants. The viewers' perceptions of the cast's uniqueness, representativeness,

candour and producer manipulation all will influence their involvement in and enjoyment of the show. It does not mean that audiences were unaware that it was indeed a mixture of both authentic and inauthentic elements (Rose & Wood, 2005), yet the viewing pleasure often came from such paradoxical epistemology of reality television, which contained both 'real' and 'not-real' aspects in viewing, forming an experience Cloud (2010) called 'irony bribe'. By being 'ordinary', participants are fulfilling the expectations of being real. How do they negotiate with the 'not-real' aspects?

The recruitment of ordinary people to participate in reality television has once given rise to an expectation about the 'democratisation of entertainment' (Riegert, 2007, p. 84), which envisages an 'age of ordinary' when everybody is now given a voice (Teurlings, 2001). While it sounds hopeful, it is dubious whether participants can freely express who they are and what they believe when they are on television. Certain conventions and formats are often adopted to foster a kind of authenticity, for example, monologues are used to create a 'confessional voice' (Aslama & Pantti, 2006). However, as an auto-ethnographic account of participation in *Big Brother* vividly showed, a participant would (un)willingly perform certain identities, albeit stereotypical, to fit in the narratives of the show (Fox, 2013). The 'confessional voice' was not necessarily authentic as one assumed. Dubrofsky (2007, 2009) also found that expressions of strong emotions were often exhibited in dating shows, especially from female participants, which she dubbed as 'a pornography of emotion'. They sound more like performance than authentic expression of ordinary people.

To programme makers, reality television was neither fictional nor purely factual. Rather, producers believed that they were handling a kind of 'managed reality', which was a result of the interaction of format, simulation and narrative (Mast, 2016). An informant argued that reality television was about anticipation: they were predicting what would reasonably happen as events unfolded. To manage a particular version of reality, events have to be first set in motion (Couldry, 2002; Scannell, 2002). The key is about setting the 'right' events in motion. Andrejevic (2004) described the production process as a form of procedural authorship, completed by the collective efforts of participants. Syvertsen (2001) also noted how participants negotiated with the production people and hence created the 'invisible scripts' throughout the process.

To ordinary people, 'being on television' is inevitably an extraordinary experience, especially so when 'stars' are actually made out of such shows (Cui, 2017). Cui and Lee (2010) argued how reality television could turn the ordinary into extraordinary and back to ordinary again. Echoing the work of Couldry (2000), their study highlighted how the reality show *Super Girls' Voice* exerted power by creating differences between media people and non-media people. Couldry asked what happens when non-media people enter places of media? In his original study, he looked at how ordinary people acted as pilgrims or witnesses when they stepped into the media world. For the former, the media world was a 'sacred' place where pilgrims go for worship. For the latter, by 'being there' was authenticating the otherwise surreal media experience. Through naming, framing, ordering, spacing and imaging, the symbolic power of media was (re)affirmed every time when the differences between the media world and the ordinary world were emphasised. In the case of reality television, the ordinary people were not only pilgrimages and witnesses but they were actively participating in the production process and experiencing the extraordinary journey. How would they act and react in the seemingly different 'media world'? How would they navigate between the expectations of authenticity and performance? This article aims at probing into such dynamics through an ethnographic case study of FCWR.

The case: FCWR

There have been tremendous changes in Chinese entertainment and media industry in the past few decades (e.g. Cheung, 2017; Gilardi et al., 2018; Keane & Zhang, 2017; Liang & Shen, 2016). The case in study is arguably the best known dating show in China. While its official English name is *If You Are the One*, a direct literal translation of the Chinese title should be 'leave me alone if you are not sincere' (FCWR). Produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV and premiered on 15 January 2010, it was reported to have attracted up to 50 million viewers (Wilkinson, 2015). The production and ensuing controversies have told much about the rapid development of the Chinese television industry in mid-2000s (Keane, 2015). While the actual ratings are not publicly available, there is no disputing the widespread attention and heated debate it has generated. The question 'how real can you get' (Kilborn, 1994) remains a key concern here. There have been constant doubts about the genuineness of the participants. In Internet forums, queries about the 'real identities' of participants as ordinary people or actors were never in short supply. These doubts reiterated the divide between media and non-media people. Opinions expressed in the show, however, have been heavily criticised for violating social norms and affecting public morality (Chen, 2017). One of the most famous quotes came from a 20-year-old female participant who said she would rather cry in a BMW than smile on the back seat of a bicycle. In June 2010, the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued an official paper stating that dating and matchmaking shows must guard against cruel, biased, shallow and materialist talk. The wide circulation of similar quotes and the official reaction posed an interesting question: could these opinions actually be so 'authentic' that they spoke some sorts of 'truth' that alarmed the state? The show nonetheless survived after modifications. The dating show has undergone some major changes throughout the years, including a change in Chinese title due to a copyright issue. Two words, 'yuan lai' (緣來), were added before FCWR, which now emphasised the aspect of 'yuan' (broadly referring to fate and destiny). Yet the themes on love and marriage remain unchanged. Follow-up stories about couples who got matched in the show can be easily found in the Internet, in which 'true love' was celebrated.

FCWR has generated a variety of research about female individualisation (Wu, 2012), representation of women (Zhang, 2011), gender politics and marriage crisis (Sun, 2014) and regulations of manhood (Song & Hird, 2014). Most studies about FCWR either used a text-centred approach, often with a focus on the representation of women, or analysed the ideological processes in play (Guo, 2017). However, the perspectives of participants and the production mechanisms behind the show have not received greater research attention.

Methods

A rare research opportunity occurred one weekend a few years ago, when a young friend living in Beijing sent me a message about his admission to this hugely popular dating show. Having known him for over a decade, I was sure that he was a 'genuine' participant. He told me in excitement and disbelief about the upcoming filming schedule. I asked whether it would be fine for me to join the filming as a friend. After seeking permission from the film crew, I flew to Beijing to accompany him during the shooting of video segments. During the 2 days of production, I had the chance to talk not only to my friend but also to others who participated in the process, including the director, the cameraman and others who agreed to be interviewed on camera. One month later, I flew to Nanjing where the show was being recorded in a studio. I got a ticket and joined the general audience for the 4-hour recording session. That evening, I was invited to join a dinner gathering with a

few participants of the show. On this occasion I made contact with three other male contestants. Individual interviews were arranged and scheduled 2 months after their episode went on air.

It was during this insider journey that I came to reconstruct the various stages of the show and to collect perspectives from participating bachelors and production people. The ethnographic approach has enabled a relatively 'thick description' of what happened on-screen and off-screen concerning this show. Primarily, this study details how four ordinary male participants entered the show and made sense of their experiences throughout the process. It describes and discusses how the videos about the participants are produced, and it uncovers the dynamics, interactions and negotiations in the production process. The 'voices' of these participants provided a first-person lens for one to reconsider authenticity, performance and ordinariness.

Content and format

Before reporting the findings from the field, here is a summary of what generally happens to each male participant in the show. Each standard episode of FCWR features 24 female and 5 male participants. When the show begins, the 24 women walk onto the stage in a row, and each goes to her respective cubicle. The women are usually addressed as numbers, with number 1 on the far left and number 24 on the far right. Each cubicle is equipped with a microphone and a light device, which each woman turns on or off to indicate whether she is interested in a particular male contestant. When all the women are settled in their respective places, the host, Meng Fei, greets the audience, while two other guest hosts are usually present to advise and interact with the participants.

The five male participants appear on stage one after another, with each segment typically lasting for up to 15 minutes. An elevator 'delivers' the man to the stage, and as the doors open he walks to centre stage. At this point, the 24 women can already indicate their preferences by keeping their lights on or putting them off immediately. The house rule is that if the man makes a successful match, the couple will receive a free trip to a popular tourist destination if at least 22 lights remained on when the man first came onto the stage.

The hosts start with some small talk with the male contestant, who is then asked to choose 'the one' from 24 pictures on a tablet. The first video segment, which introduces the man's background and current status, is then shown. It is immediately followed by another lights on-or-off session. The host then invites the female participants to ask questions or express their views, creating some interaction with the man. The second video segment tells the love stories of the man on stage, including reconstructed scenes with former lovers, after which there is another round of lights out, chit-chat and small talk. The third video segment follows, featuring supportive words from friends and relatives of the male contestant, and one last chance for the women to turn off their lights. At this point, the decision is in the hands of the man. Those women whose lights are still on become the final candidates for the man to choose from. When he makes up his mind, he either takes the hand of the lady he has chosen and they leave the stage together, or he walks away without choosing any of them. In instances where all the lights are out by the third round, the man makes a sad, quiet exit on his own. The same cycle is repeated with the other four contestants.

Findings and discussion

Ordinary but not too ordinary

In this article, I refer to my four informants as Mr. A, B, C and D. To ensure their complete anonymity, I have deliberately removed all mentions of dates and years and some most noticeable traces. In

sum, all four participants could be classified as young urban professionals. They were in their late 20s to early 30s and lived in big cities. Despite rumours about participants were actually actors and actresses in disguise, they said that they were 'genuine' and were not paid a cent for their television appearance. For one thing, they all had to attend interviews arranged by agencies operating dating websites in their respective cities. These agencies acted as gatekeepers for the television station and recommended participants for the show. In the most extreme case, participant A had been to five such interviews before he finally got shortlisted. B was first referred by a friend working in a television station, who believed that he had the camera face for the show. Yet, he failed in the first screening. With the benefit of hindsight, he believed he had acted 'too ordinary' in this screening:

> I think I didn't perform well the first time'. (Perform well on what?) 'The interviewer chats with you to see if you come up with anything striking . . . after all, why is the show so hot? Their participants raise explosive talking points. If you don't 'have it', meaning that you're really pale and ordinary, he won't let you in. (B, personal communication)

Participant B quickly realised that in order to be selected, he had to be ordinary but not too ordinary. It required some sort of performance. He modified his presentation in the second interview and got admitted. Participants C and D were admitted immediately after one interview. The fact that C and D were quite good-looking and both were working in the financial sector suggested that they had a higher chance of success. They both had the camera face and decent professional background which were after all not so ordinary.

Although all being 'authentic', they entered the show with different motives. Syvertsen (2001) found that participants of dating shows were driven by three major motives. They might want to win a prize, or to experience something unique or to enjoy the dazzling experience of being on television.

In the present case, all four participants had instrumental motives other than finding love. B and D both admitted they were not especially keen about the matchmaking part of the show. B was looking for some fun and a meaningful experience, while for D, the idea of taking part had first come from his colleagues. They said he was already 29 and it was time that he got married. But to D, who was working in a new start-up, it was far more realistic to see this as an opportunity to draw some attention to his company. Television was taken as a platform which would bring the participants wide exposure.

Participant A had two main motives in his mind. First, he wanted to appear on television to show how an ordinary person from Hong Kong living in the mainland was like:

> I really want to show the mainlanders some different faces from Hong Kong. Not all Hong Kong people are materialistic or instrumental. I am here to learn and to work, earning little money, but I don't mind that at all. (A, personal communication)

In addition, A had longed for the chance to appear on the stage of *FCWR* because he wanted to put on a little personal show: 'I have adored a girl for a long time, and I really want to sing the song I wrote for her on television' (A, personal communication).

Participant C admitted that he entered the show with the aim of winning an overseas trip with his girlfriend:

> Okay, do I need to confess here? Well, I actually already have a girlfriend'. (I thought you had to sign an agreement beforehand?) 'Yes, but my girlfriend was in the studio, watching me on stage. Is this very

shocking? The truth is that she participated in the show a few months earlier. She got matched with someone and won a trip. So if I also got matched with someone, I could go to the same destination with her. We actually ended up travelling there together with our prizes. (C, personal communication)

Prior to joining the show, all participants had to sign a statement confirming that they were single and not in a romantic relationship. If this was found to be untrue after the show, the television station would demand a refund of RMB50,000 to cover the expenses incurred during production. C had kept it confidential and had certainly not disclosed to the one he got matched with in the show.

In summary, four ordinary men came to the show with different motives. One Hong Kong participant wanted to break some stereotypes while expressing his love to someone who might be watching him on television. One entrepreneur wanted to promote his new company. One wanted to have some fun to be on television, while one aimed to win a trip so that he could travel with his girlfriend. Whether they got matched or not in the end was clearly not a real concern.

Managing the invisible scripts

'After all, it is television . . .'

Like other reality shows, *FCWR* is unscripted. All four informants, however, could see how an invisible script has underlined the whole production process. In the introductory video segments, they quickly observed how certain aspects were highlighted, while others were downplayed or ignored. C said the way he was presented was somehow exaggerating, yet he believed it was inevitable: 'They wouldn't film us eating a meal and drinking water, would they?' (C, personal communication).

Participant D had studied abroad and returned to China to join a start-up company in finance. His introductory video was apparently made with more special effects and moody background music. Well-dressed in a suit, photographed at stylised angles and driving an expensive car, he was presented as a successful entrepreneur: 'I asked people if they could tell the brand of the car. No one really knows. I wouldn't have borrowed it from my boss if I'd known no one would notice'. (Is it not your car?) 'No way, I can't afford that car!' (D, personal communication).

The second video appeared to have a standard structure. All four participants noted that regardless of their actual number of past romances, the producers would at most reconstruct three relationships. B had had seven or eight girlfriends but only two were included in the short video. He was told that his first love would be stressed and also the long-lasting one. Despite not being a completely accurate rendering of what had actually happened, B saw it as a necessity for television to tell only the most dramatic parts. Yet through reconstruction, elements of different relationships might be blended in such a way that it was not clear which girlfriend was being referred to. B later received calls from ex-girlfriends asking whether they were the ones featured in the video.

Unlike B, A had been in a romantic relationship only once. He said they broke up because his ex-girlfriend was spending too much money. On the day of filming, he invited a friend to pretend to be his ex-girlfriend. The producer interpreted that the girl was materialistic and so A could not meet her demands. To present this idea, the crew wanted to film their conflict in a glamorous shopping mall. However, without prior permission, they knew they would be expelled, so they ended up in a modest-looking mall outside the city centre. The producer wanted to emphasise that the girl

was a shopaholic and decided to film a scene in which they would quarrel over a pile of credit card receipts. I hastily contributed receipts from my own wallet for the filming to make it look 'real'.

During my observation, I could see that the producer had constructed the sort of daily routines which she imagined A might have. She had an invisible script in her mind after a long and detailed off-camera interview. She asked him to read, to wander in a courtyard and to pose as if he was thinking. He did whatever she asked without objection. When I asked A whether he actually did what was being filmed in his daily life, he shook his head with a smile, saying that he would not read in such a strange pose if it wasn't for television. In one film sequence, he was asked to walk between two points many times. I asked the producer what she was filming. She said she wanted some general shots of him walking: 'But his walking style isn't okay. It's a bit odd. I want him to walk with more confidence'.

All four informants were exceptionally understanding of the dramatic treatment they received. They either saw it as necessary to enhance the drama or they believed this was how television was supposed to be. They did not consider it to be 'fake' because they were more or less based on fact. There was a recurring remark in our interviews: 'After all, it is television!' That television has a different set of aesthetics and production constraints is a normalised judgement that all participants, including the producers, tacitly agree to and comply with.

'You gotta perform on stage . . .'

The studio recording showed a more subtle form of scripting. When on stage, they were asked to choose the girl they liked. While standing facing the 24 female participants, they could not really see them from that distance but only browse through the tablet to decide who to choose. Because of their heavy make-up, none of them could tell how the girls looked, yet it was imperative that they choose one then and there:

> All the girls wore make-up and the photos were touched up. I just picked one randomly'. (How randomly?) 'Just by browsing for a brief time, I couldn't spend too long anyway . . . Someone told me that when I choose, I have to do it slowly to show respect. So you should start from right to left, and then go left to right. You shouldn't just focus on one and choose her. If you do, the other girls will get upset and turn their lights off. (D, personal communication)

What followed was to be free exchanges among the hosts and the male and female participants. While it was not scripted beforehand, there were predetermined topics. The main host, for example, would bring up sensational topics and stir up debate. In the particular episode under study, B received the most airtime. He believed it was because of the sensitive nature of the topic which the host had started. He somehow got stuck in a discussion about sex and marriage. He felt like a 'backdrop' for this topic to emerge, instead of the other way round.

Participant A was in a bad mood after the studio recording because of his perceived poor performance in this segment: 'I wanted to show my humour by cracking a few jokes with the host. It just did not work'. We talked about it again a few months later. 'My original intention had been to show a different face for Hong Kong people'. (Did you succeed?) 'No, I didn't perform well' (A, personal communication).

Being on television was a dazzling experience for all four participants. They were aware that they had to put on a certain performance and could not just 'be themselves'. Before they went on stage, the crew asked them to swallow a mouthful of Chinese white wine, which is around 50% alcohol by

volume. They were told it would calm them down and make them less nervous. C said he was usually a good chatterer, but the wine together with the stage lights made him so dizzy he could hardly recall what he had actually said. D believed the alcohol did make him less nervous and that in some instances it could even spice up the mood: 'Imagine if someone got drunk and picked a fight with the host . . . then the show would be fun' (D, personal communication). Once again, for the sake of a good show, choosing 'the one' did not really matter as much as the name of the show suggested. Instead, it was more important to give their best performance once they were on stage.

'It is all about anticipation . . .'

Mast (2016) found that producers understood their actions in reality shows as anticipating reality rather than manipulating it. Their anticipation led them to make various arrangements on stage accordingly, including the order of appearance of the male contestants, the numbered positions allotted to the female participants and even the ones to be chosen. During both my field observations and interviews, my informants enthusiastically shared their 'insider knowledge' of such arrangements.

Participant D got along exceptionally well with the crew during the filming of video segments. He was told that there was an unspoken rule on their show. Most of the time, the first male contestant will not find his match. His function is to warm up the show. The second one will succeed because then the audiences can see a contrast there. He was advised to avoid being presented as the first one.

The numbering of female participants was also not a random outcome:

> The producers told me to choose the ones with middle numbers. Number 1 is generally the odd one. Number 2 is typically a girl doing cosplay. Number 23 is a bit too tall and Number 24 is overweight. (D, personal communication)

Such tacit understanding in turn informed how participants should anticipate and act:

> Before all the discussion with the others and the girl I got matched with, I used to think it was us, the men, who did all the calculations in choosing the one. But that's not the case. These 24 girls were planning together a lot. First, they discussed among themselves whether to help keep their lights on for certain candidates. Second, they manipulated the number of lights to determine if we would win an overseas trip. And they told me that if they really wanted to date someone, they didn't need to leave the show, but just get in touch with the guys they liked afterwards. It wasn't a must to get matched right there right now. I felt bad for a long while after realising all these little tactics. (D, personal communication)

These tactics allowed the female participants to stay on the show for longer periods. In one case, the host mocked a lady who had taken part in more than 70 episodes, asking if she really wanted to find the one or just regarded the show as a job. In this regard, Shei's (2013) observation about a lower matching rate in *FCWR* could actually be due to more practical and unromantic reasons but not a more serious attitude towards love.

Moments of authenticity

Although participants were mostly following the invisible scripts, there were instances when they would rather not perform but stay true to their feelings. Some 'moments of authenticity' are behind the scenes and go unnoticed by the audiences while some are broadcast.

According to all my informants and my own observations, it took 4 hours to record a 1-hour episode, and the female participants had to stand for most of that time. It was amusing to see some of the women just sitting idly or leaning against something when the cameras were not focused on them. I saw ladies doing their make-up and taking selfies between recording segments.

In both informal conversations and formal interviews, the question of 'fake' versus 'genuine' participation arose repeatedly. My informants all shared hearsay about other 'fake' participants. D said he was told by another female participant that the women in the first 100 episodes were all paid. Behind the scenes there was plenty of gossip that could not be verified. All participants were added to different WeChat groups. D found it very disturbing to be bombarded with chats that seemed to go on forever, and eventually quit these groups. He would rather be left out from these newly formed communities so that he could 'be himself' again.

The most telling 'moment of authenticity' came from B. Before B went onto the stage in the studio recording, a member of the production team directly asked B whether he would choose a girl who had been on the show for too long. The show wanted her to leave. B did not like her, but as he felt nothing for any of them anyway, he finally agreed to help by choosing that girl when he was given the tablet on stage. Eventually, when all of his lights went out, he was supposed to leave. At this point, the host told that girl, who obviously had not put a light on for B, that B had chosen her and asked whether she wanted to go with him:

> 'As soon as he said this, I had to make it clear that I was doing it to offer her some encouragement; I didn't intend to take her with me. I know it hurt her feelings, but frankly, I don't like her. I needed to be more selfish'. (So this show is fake after all?) 'Well you can't say it's entirely real. It's a show, after all. When there's a show, there's a script. That's how it is'. (B, personal communication)

Throughout the production, B had obliged almost every request from the producers, and viewed them as necessary to the television production. B understood very well that the show wanted to get rid of the girl. He also knew that even though he got matched with the girl, he did not have to develop any relationship with her after the show. Yet, in this final moment, he could no longer oblige as it really went against his feeling. 'She is not my type. I don't like her'. Only this final refusal enabled him to reflect his truest feelings during the whole process.

An extraordinary journey

Albeit not in the very forefront, audiences also contributed to the 'procedural authorship' process. As one of the audience members during the recording, I experienced quite a few boring moments during the 4 hours in the television studio. Generally speaking, however, the audience was in high spirits and a carnival atmosphere prevailed, especially when lining up to enter the studio. The sight reminded me of Couldry's (2000) study about media pilgrimage. Waiting in the crowd, I was curious about where these people came from, as I gained no clues from their clothing and appearance. China is a huge country, after all, and *FCWR* has been an extremely successful show which became the common factor that brought us together.

It was said that entrance tickets were not sold but given out by the television station, but when I asked A for a ticket, he said he could not get any but we could always find one on the online forum. I ended up paying RMB200 for my admission. Ticket holders were asked to be ready an hour before admission to the studio. There were security guards shouting orders to the audience, asking people to line up properly and ensuring that no one entered the studio with bags. No food

and drink was allowed, not even bottled water. As soon as the audience was seated on stools, which were packed together like sardines, a woman producer announced from the stage that this was the last chance for people to go to the washroom. No one would be allowed to leave their seats after 5 minutes. Quite a few people sprang up from their stools and made their way to the toilets outside the studio. Others were taking photos and selfies with the stage as a background.

When the audience was finally more or less settled, the woman producer asked everyone to take out their mobile phones and take pictures of her. She then announced that this was the last chance for anyone to use phone cameras with flash. She warned, in a stern voice, that anyone leaving their seats without prior permission, or taking pictures with flashlights, would be asked to leave the studio at once. I found her tone annoying, but no one, including myself, made a public objection. After setting the house rules, she asked the audience to clap and cheer a few times when the studio cameras hovered or panned over the audience. All the reaction shots that would be used in the television programme were then taken.

As the audience members were seated so close together, I inevitably saw what others were doing and overheard their conversations. I saw people sharing pictures on social media and happily discussing their own participation in the show. No one seemed to have the slightest interest in the male and female participants. The fun and excitement was all about being on television. The actual matchmaking seemed irrelevant, and love and romance were clearly absent.

Love behind the scenes

It seemed to be quite a different matter for many who watched the show on television. All of my informants received emails and messages from strangers after the show. Participant A got 400 emails. While most were requests to become friends with him, a few were bold love letters asking for love and even marriage. The same happened to B, C and D. C found some of this enthusiasm puzzling:

> 'Some wanted to fly over from Beijing to see me. One came from Hebei. Why come over? I'm living with my girlfriend, I can't meet these people. Some sent gifts. One sent me an online red pocket, RMB200 . . . I was really astonished when I received 99 roses'. (Your first time receiving flowers?) 'Yes. I was shocked'. (What did you do?) 'I wrote back and thanked her, but my girlfriend blocked her from my contact list'. (C, personal communication)

Participant A read all his emails in detail:

> A gay man wrote me saying that he felt a pure love for me. A woman said it had taken all her courage to write to me because I am the most authentic man she has ever seen on the show. (A, personal communication)

The ordinary participants, after being seen on television, have acquired a new 'extraordinariness'. With the unexpected participation from the invisible audience, the aftermath of reality television moves beyond the screen.

Conclusion

This study has sought to uncover the dynamics behind the production of an episode of *FCWR*. Combining fieldwork and interviews, the researcher reviewed and reconsidered a recurring

question about reality shows. Are they fake or authentic? By showing how reality is managed by producers, participants and audiences, this study argues that *FCWR* has facilitated a kind of authentic performance informed by dominant ideology about gender and intimate relationships in today's China. Different parties voluntarily collaborated to uphold the invisible scripts.

The notion of authenticity is a key aspect of reality television. Even though it is widely understood that all media are constructions, the involvement of ordinary people often prompts one to ask how real these people are. In the present research, all participants considered themselves as genuine, although they were ready to make various modifications, if not concessions, in accordance with the demands from the producers. From the very beginning, they had to meet certain expectations in order to be selected. Characteristics that were deemed interesting, dramatic or desirable were highlighted. They had to find their own 'talking points' and strengths that would be seen as being compatible with the logics of television.

This study has also shown that this dating show, like other reality shows, is highly structured and formulaic. Hegemonic messages about romance, marriage, gender roles and expectations are embedded in different segments. First love was always the most memorable, and failed relationships could be attributed to various individual and circumstantial problems. Such taken-for-granted assumptions were never explicitly communicated but tacitly shared between different parties. The hosts facilitated talks and exchanges between the male and female participants in accordance with their backgrounds. The reality was managed by anticipating how ordinary people would behave and react in particular situations, and thus it ended up supporting the dominant beliefs about how single men and women should behave, and what romantic relationships are essentially about. Romance as such is a social event on reality television which is subject to a clear trajectory.

Participants were fully aware of all these tendencies. They readily and happily delivered the anticipated performance while maintaining a strong sense of authenticity. Authenticity was not a yes or no dichotomy. Authenticity and performance could co-exist in reality television. One can perform as long as one feels 'authentic'. A notable exception occurred when B was asked to take the hand of a girl on stage. In our interview, B expressed his wish to find a partner he can share his life with ever after. He could not agree to publicly accept a girl if he did not have romantic feelings. This left the most authentic remark in his quest for 'the one', and surprisingly, a 'rebellion' against the media power.

Couldry (2000) argued that media exert power by setting boundary that separates the media world and ordinary world. Despite the tremendous changes in media environments, television remains to be a major medium. This study shows how ordinary people stepped into the media world as both 'pilgrims' and 'witnesses'. As pilgrims, they were often more than willing to do what producers told them to, even though they might not be completely 'real'. As witnesses, they observed what was going on and maintained a critical distance. The case thus illustrated how authentic performance and extraordinary ordinariness intertwined in a television genre that claims and strives to be 'real'.

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ORCID iD

Donna Chu [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3214-6883

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Author biography

Donna Chu, currently Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, works on research about youth media culture, gender and media literacy. She obtained her PhD in the University of Hong Kong.