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### **Behind the Laughter: Mediating Hegemony through Humour**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# Behind the Laughter: Mediating Hegemony through Humour

Heidi, Ningkang WANG

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## ABSTRACT

In 2012, the Spring Festival Gala (SFG) of China Central Television had the world-wide largest domestic audience rate. This inspired the research into the significance of the SFG. Short Sketches (or Chinese mini comedic dramas) are at the heart of this study as the most popular performances in the SFG.

Existing literature adopts the framework of ideology to investigate the SFG's content. This research, however, focuses on *how* the ideology is *disseminated* and *received*. Therefore the Gramscian concept of hegemony is used to theorise the phenomenon of the SFG, instead of ideology. Hegemony is more concrete than ideology and there is a theoretical gap between the notion of hegemony and its application in China. To comprehend how the broadcast short sketches delivers the hegemonic message via humour, this research also uses the concept of mediation to investigate this process. It asks how humour is utilised to serve or resist the hegemon in the mediation process. The toolkit to operationalise the theoretical framework is Critical Discourse Analysis. Two short sketches are focused upon, from the 1999 and the 2006 SFG. The sample allows an in-depth analysis and exposes the hidden power struggles between dominant and dominated class.

The study concentrates on three hegemonic strategies during the mediation process using humour. First, the hegemon establishes an intellectual leadership by using humour to downgrade the intellectual capability of the masses. Apart from that, the constructed memory is employed to remember what favours hegemonic interest and to forget what is harmful to the hegemon. The third finding illustrates that the tension between structure and agency, is manipulated by the hegemon to legitimise its rules and institutions, while at the same time disenfranchising the masses. In conclusion, this research clearly demonstrates that the humour presented during the SFG benefits the hegemon rather than resist it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Around thirty years ago, a Chinese tradition was re-written by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From 1983 onwards, the Chinese start celebrating the most important holiday by watching the televised official Spring Festival Gala (SFG) organised by the official broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV). Over the time, the SFG has established itself as the most popular television show in China. It is no secret that the gala is a propagandist instrument, yet it is a secret *why* the propaganda receives such audience attention, measured not only by the large audience share but also by becoming an integral ritual of Chinese New Year or Spring Festival celebrations. In 2012, the SFG beat the US Academy Award Show and the Super Bowl football game, winning the title by the Guinness Book of World Records as the television event with the largest domestic audience rate (China Internet Information Centre, 2012).

Through its fame, the SFG has established itself as an integral part of China's popular culture, yet it is a celebration organised by the government. Previous research (Xu, 2007; Wang, 2010; and Zhao, 1998) concludes that the SFG is a means to propagate the official CCP ideology. According to Xu (2007) and Zhao (1998), popular culture is useful for disseminating ideological content because few people are aware of the underlying values and ideas of the regime. Yet they do not explain in concrete terms how the hidden facets of ideology are distributed. Martín-Barbero (1988: 448) has rightfully pointed out that when scholars focus on ideology, "the ideological' is mere a sketch, an outline...we are left without any specificity". He therefore uses the concept of hegemony to explain how ideology is transmitted through popular culture. The concept of hegemony allows for a comprehensive analysis of the subtleties of the SFG which is much more differentiated than a blunt ideological propaganda event.

The SFG features dance and music performances as well as aerobics and mini dramas and comedies. In the case of the SFG, the most popular parts of the performances are always the short sketches (*xiaopin*) or mini comedic dramas. Yet as suggested by Davies (2007), in an authoritarian regime, satire and humour are dangerous and hence often prohibited, especially in the communist regime. The fact that government allows humour during the SFG sparks an examination of its role in China. Indeed, in China, humour is only utilised to circulate ideological content. Because humour can be implicit, the audience can rarely be aware of ideology. Consequently, officially endorsed humour exercised in Chinese popular culture fits well into the concept of hegemony. Interestingly hegemony is utilized to label countries such as United States and Great Britain as superpowers (Deng and Wang, 1999).

Bocock (1986: 121) states that little is known regarding the application of hegemony in China, and this is particularly true since the Open Door and Reform Policy of the late 1970s<sup>1</sup>. The ensuing chapter is an analysis of previous research on the SFG and it will lead to the introduction of the key concepts of hegemony, mediation, and humour. A conceptual framework is built upon the theoretical discussion, followed by research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Liu (1997) acknowledges the relevance of the hegemony concept in the Chinese context. However, his case is limited to a specific historical era, that of the so-called “Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976). The dissertation focuses on a different time period and tries to explore the hegemonic discourse in a time when China begins to perceive her as a rising power.

## THEORETICAL CHAPTER

### Previous research on the Spring Festival Gala

Zhao (1998) presents a general history of the SFG and analyses the event as a case study for the importance of television in connecting families to the state. Zhao discovers that the SFG translates official propaganda into a well-liked form. The rationale behind this strategy is linked to the Open Door and Reform Policy<sup>2</sup> which de facto challenged prevailing socialist ideology through the introduction of the capitalist market economy (Zhao, 1998: 50). To avoid the dominance of market forces over the ideology and party line, top officials in China are careful to censor every single performance of the SFG (Zhang, 1998: 51).

Following Zhao's narration, Wang (2010) uses content analysis to examine performances in thirteen SFGs. He discovers a great visibility of propaganda and educational content. According to his findings (2010: 400), almost one third of all performances are directly linked to explicit political agenda such as praise of the CCP and patriotism. The reference to national pride without openly mentioning party leadership, occupies twenty six percent of all the performances. Wang further concludes that the "entertainment-education" is a "subtle persuasion" (2010: 145) which has the capacity to function better than direct propaganda. Wang's important contribution is that he manages to illustrate the effectiveness of culture in terms of persuasion and transmission of the principles set by the party, through the case study of the SFG.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research on the SFG is done by Xu (2007). She focuses on the question of national space and the image of a united China to compare galas of 1984-86 and their successors after two decades. She discovers that the main actors on the SFG include "workers, peasants [and] military servicemen" (Xu, 2007: 91). Symbols, such as the Yangtze River and the Great Wall, are mobilised to represent the greatness of the motherland. Tracing the changes of the SFG, Xu detects an increasing role of the CCP in SFGs. Yet the eternal theme of a united China remains constant.

All three studies have revealed the political nature of the SFG. Yet their narrow focus on ideology misses the process of the successful transmission of this ideology, as well as many of its nuances. Past research has failed to explain *how* the CCP persuades the masses into

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<sup>2</sup> It is an economic policy to introduce capitalism market to China while officially subscribing to the socialist nature of China. It began in 1978 (Naughton 2007).

following its rule and what strategies are used to sustain its dominance. These unsolved questions are best addressed using the concept of hegemony.

### **The concept of hegemony**

The foremost thinker connected to the concept of hegemony is the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Based on a humanistic reading of Marx, Gramsci develops the notion of hegemony, which has despite its fragmented nature and historic specificity, become extremely influential (Hall, 1986: 6). Hegemony is used to signify the control of one social class over others, including both coercion and consent (Gramsci, 1929-1935/1971). While coercion is a synonym for violence, consent refers to the “the social values and norms of an inherently exploitative system” (Stoddart, 2007: 201). Scholars interpreting Gramsci and hegemony have different accents on his focus and contribution. Bocoock (1986) illustrates that Gramsci uses the notion of hegemony to bridge the gap between base and superstructure. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) discuss the relationship of ideology and hegemony in-depth, and stress the dynamic of power struggles. They present two well-accepted contributions of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. The following theoretical discussion foregrounds the superiority of hegemony to ideology, and the connection between base and structure.

Mouffe (1979: 169) argues that Gramsci breaks the Marxist myth that superstructure mechanically reflects the material base and that ideology is fixed. Stoddart (2007: 193) makes it explicit that whereas ideology assumes a “unidirectional flow of power”, hegemony detects the struggle involved “in constructing networks of power through discourses”. Hegemony, therefore, is dialectical and a constant battle between dominant discourses to achieve consensus. Mouffe (1979: 182) defines Gramscian hegemony as “the ability of one class to articulate the interest of other social groups to its own”. The hegemonic class articulates its interest in a neutralised way, so that the dominated classes perceive themselves as its ally. The interest of a certain class referred to by Mouffe is not objective and pre-determined, but rather, is constructed. It is simply because the dominated class are not aware of their material interest but have to form conceptions of them (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 183). The temporality of dominance stressed by Laclau and Mouffe is echoed in the work of Martín-Barbero. Adding the viewpoint of culture, Martín-Barbero (1993: 74) treats hegemony as a “lived process” built on “shared meaning and the appropriation of the meaning of life”. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) further develop the fluidity of hegemony and power struggles. While Gramsci argues that the hegemonic centre is monopolised by the dominant class, Laclau and Mouffe contend plural hegemonic centres. Yet this idea of multiple hegemonic centres is too early to be applied in China. This is because the current Chinese media can be

described as having “one head, many mouths” (Wu, 2000: 45). Even though there are diverse voices presented in the Chinese media, these must be in accordance with the party line and serve the interest of the authoritative regime. Hence in the Chinese case it is evident that the hegemonic centre continues to be monopolised by the CCP.

The crucial question is how a party can achieve and sustain a shared consensus for one fifth of the global population. Mouffe (1979: 181) highlights the intellectual and moral dimension of Gramsci’s concept, which supplements the abstract notion of ideology. The intellectual and moral leadership is according to Gramsci used to create a “collective will” (Mouffe, 1979: 184) and innate the hegemonic articulation into desires of individuals. The application of moral and intellectual dominance is required to sustain the hegemonic power, as “society is the (fundamental) battle over the minds of the people” (Castells, 2007: 238). Therefore, the superstructure does not simply reflect the economic base. However, it does not lead to the simplistic conclusion that Gramsci rejects the importance of material base.

Bocock (1986: 33) argues that Gramsci in fact bridges economic base and superstructure. Even though Gramsci abandons economic determinism, “the economic”, referring to material production, remains the cornerstone of comprehending hegemony. Hegemony therefore possesses both material and cultural facts. Built upon these two sides of hegemony, Hsia and Cheng (2006: 10) view hegemony as an institutionalised method to persuade people. Abandoning economic determinism creates space for agents, while recognising the relevance of the material aspect reminds the limitations of the structure. Hegemony, therefore, allows a profound investigation on the dynamics of structure and agency. The idea of agency is to “express the degree of free will that is exercised by the individual in their social action” (Walsh, 1998: 33). In comparison, from a Structuralist perspective, society exists in its own right and social relationships are pre-determined. The borderline between structure and agency, however, is blurred considering the mutual influence between them. This eroded boundary is addressed by Giddens concept of “structuration”. Structuration (Giddens, 1984: 25) refers to “conditions governing the continuity or transformation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of social systems”. Similar with Gramsci, Giddens disregards the assumption that structure is pre-determined because the structure can be reproduced. The relationship between structure and agency is not external and isolated, but intertwined and mutually constitutive. Agents can be the resources for the reproduction of social structure. The condition for agents to influence the structure is knowledge and consciousness. Giddens (1984: 297) claims that structure has duality, that is to say, it enables as well as restrains. The agency can influence the structure, while at the same time it is influenced by the structure. When applying Gramscian hegemony in this dissertation, the theme of *tension between*

**structure and agency** operationalises the interplay between base and superstructure. The moral and intellectual leadership is understood as the goal of the hegemon to maintain its dominance through achieving consensus. If the end of the hegemon is to achieve moral and intellectual leadership as suggested by Gramsci, then the means to achieve this could be best analysed

### **The concept of mediation**

Since the exercise of hegemony is subtle and hidden, it is important to track these processes of exerting hegemony and investigate how messages are mediated. Cammaerts (2012: 118) states that mediation as a concept to comprehend dynamic discourses is understudied, and this is particularly the case in China regarding the interaction between the media and the government<sup>3</sup>. There are two models of communication, namely the ritual model and the transmission model (Carey, 1992: 15). They correspondingly lead to two views on mediation. The transmission view of mediation is concerned with how technology tides over geographical and chronological obstacles and delivers the message. The ritual model, in comparison, accentuates power relations in the mediation process and how messages travel into people's experience, imagination, and memory.

Representative of the transmission model is the seminal scholar Joshua Meyrowitz. Meyrowitz (1985) uses television as a case study and develops a concrete understanding of mediation. As the title of his book *No sense of place* implies, he theorises that television as a technological development transcends the limitation of time and space and restructures social relationships (Meyrowitz, 1985: 119). Meyrowitz compares print electronic media and argues that the latter yields a more diverse presentation of symbols than the former. Inspired by the study of Watzlawick and his co-researchers (1967) on symbols, Meyrowitz dichotomises symbols into "digital" versus "analogic" categories (1985: 97). Digital symbols pertain to disconnected data like numbers, while analogical ones disseminate relationship information which needs interpretation. Television, according to Meyrowitz, facilitates the communication of both digital and analogic symbols, while print can only circulate the digital ones. It is true that symbols are of great relevance, but Meyrowitz offers only a thin understanding of symbols. He offers a largely descriptive analysis, which lacks an interpretation and explanation of the connotation carried by symbols. To enrich the understanding of symbols, it is thus necessary to link symbols with power. Bourdieu (1991:

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<sup>3</sup> One competing and yet overlapping concept adjacent to mediation is mediatization (Krotz 2008, Hepp 2011). The reason mediatization is not used is that mediatization places an accent on technology and ignores the role of the state (Livingstone 2009).

165) identifies three major capacities of symbols – reality construction, communication tools and justification of dominance. Symbols have the ability to construct reality, because they are the units which enable people to know, to interpret and to understand the world. Through manipulation of symbols, the dominant class establishes a seemingly objective world and the authority to interpret it. Symbols are also tools for communication, because they are coded with logic and meaning. The existing consensus regarding the logic and meaning allows them to function as a vehicle of communication. Yet symbols justifies hegemony, due to the silence and passivity of the dominated class, vis-à-vis the symbolic system advocated by the dominant class. This leads to a “false consciousness” (Bourdieu, 1991: 167) of the dominated class which underestimates the political mission behind simple symbols. Ultimately symbols have the power of “making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world” (1991: 170). The idea of symbolic power as advocated by Bourdieu connects hegemony with mediation. Therefore, **construction of symbols** is identified as another theme in the conceptual framework.

However, the transmission model is criticised by the ritual model as being too technologically deterministic. As a key thinker of the ritual model, Silverstone views mediation as dialectic concept, discarding the unidirectional control of technology over the communication process. Instead, he adds power relations into the mediation process. Mediation is to persuade the recipient of the message to conform to the existing power (Silverstone, 2000). This emphasis on power relations is furthered by Bottomore. By locating the notion of mediation in Marxist thought, Bottomore (1991) argues that the message is intentionally mediated to provide justification for the knowledge, rules and procedures which benefit the economically dominant class. Indeed, this process is done in a hidden way (Williams, 1977: 97). Highlighting power relations foregrounding the process of mediation dilutes the significance of technology suggested by the transmission model. It is true that accordingly, technology can overcome the *limit* of time and space. However, technology cannot stop the hegemon from distorting the *sense* of time and space in the mind of dominated class. It is therefore required to manage the mind of the dominated class and control its memory, imagination and experience to persuade it to accept hegemonic control. Silverstone (2000: 197) claims that messages are mediated to distort the memory, by privileging forgetting over remembering, and to plant passivity and apathy in the recipient of the information. A solid illustration of manipulating times and space in mediation is given by Chouliaraki (2008). She finds that the manipulation of time and space in instances of distant suffering will lead to different senses of urgency to act, experiences of places far-removed from our own, and even a moral disengagement from the outside world. It has become apparent that hegemonic control in the mediation process requires a strategy of **remembering and forgetting**, which is used as

the third analytical theme. Eventually both mediation models are combined to track the change of the mediation process. Since these two models are not fundamentally conflicting, but possess different emphasis, this study will incorporate both emphases and draw upon the abovementioned two themes accordingly.

### **The debate regarding humour/political humour**

In *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2012), humour is defined as “communication in which the stimulus produces amusement”. Before introducing the academic debate on humour, it is necessary to clarify the usage of humour and political humour in this paper. It is acknowledged that there are differences between humour and political humour. Koller (1988, 215) states that political humour puts special attention on social conflicts. Nevertheless, Speier (1998) argues that there is not a fundamental feature for “political humour” because any humour can be political in a certain context. The blurred border between humour in general and political humour is evident in the Chinese SFG. As an event orchestrated by the CCP and censored by its cadres, the context for any humour presented is deeply politicised. Therefore, humour and political humour are used interchangeably.

There is an academic debate concerning the role of the political humour in an oppressive society. One school of thought, such as Zlobin (1996) and Pi-Sunyer (1977), argues that political humour functions as protest and resistance. The assumption is that humour is an outlet of anger and dissatisfaction. The mechanism of humour is especially important in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes because other ways to express dissatisfaction are blocked. Political humour is the best place to find the social problems and political tensions, especially in countries under dictatorships. This echoes Orwell’s (1968: 284) optimistic claim that “every joke is a tiny revolution”. Davies has pointed out the significance of humour in an authoritarian society when he writes “Jokes were used under communism as a means of conveying insight, far more than they are or ever have been in other kinds of society” (2007: 293).

A competing school of thought, represented by Draitser (1989), Rose (2001-2002) and Speier (1998) challenges the effectiveness of humour in voicing dissent. Instead, it is argued that humour is used by the repressive government to survive. Speier (1998) makes explicit the underlying assumption for this argument. He stresses that “jokes can victimize not only prominent wielders of power or those who abuse that power; they often make the weak and unknown into laughing stocks” (Speier, 1998: 1353). Supporting evidence for this pessimistic view of political humour is the existence of official humour. As its name indicates, official

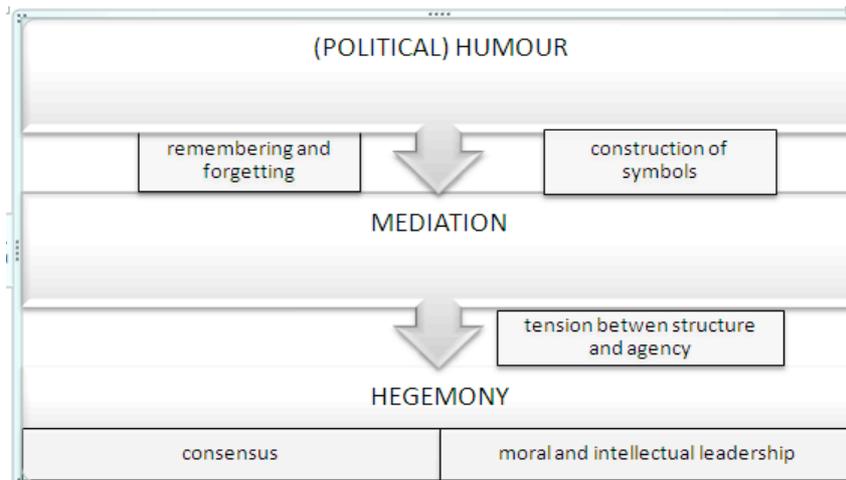
humour is used to serve the authority. Benton describes how the political humour serves the ruling class. According to Benton (1988: 33), political humour reflects citizens' reaction and response to the hegemonic class's attempts to "standardize their thinking and to frighten them into withholding criticism and dissent".

In short, the academic debate about the function of political humour is whether humour per se can be used to resist or to legitimise, to serve the ruled or to serve the ruler, and to defend or to attack the unsatisfactory reality. Applying the debate to China and taking into consideration of the role of Chinese media, humour in the SFG has bigger potential to serve the ruling party than to resist it. Lee (2000: 22) argues that the role of the media in China is to transmit the ideology of the CCP and persuade the masses via propagandist education. In the eyes of the ruling party, the media is a reliable and responsible tool to maintain its dominance. The process of how humour is used and popular culture in general serves the ideological goals of an authoritarian regime can be clarified through the concept of mediation.

### **Conceptual framework**

Briefly summarised, the conceptual framework illustrates that political humour is mediated to establish the moral and intellectual leadership of the hegemon. The incorporation of mediation and hegemony allows an in-depth exploration of how the message is mediated and how hegemony is constructed. One reason for the hegemon to use political humour is because humour compensates for the boredom of official language. Political humours have the capability for the hegemonic class to articulate their interest in a funny and sometimes persuasive way. In the process of mediating hegemony, three themes are focused on: ***construction of symbols, remembering and forgetting, and tension between structure and agency***. These themes are interconnected and present how the hegemon achieves consensus and establish moral and intellectual leadership. The following graph visualises the core concepts and the logical flow of the conceptual framework.

**Graph 1 Conceptual Framework**



**Source:** Compiled by author

This visualised conceptual framework shows the process of creating hegemony. Political humour initiates laughter. The raw material is further processed and packaged by mediation. Political humour, in the process of mediation, is tailored to serve the hegemon through the mechanism of symbol construction, manipulation of remembering and forgetting, and tension between structure and agency. The final stage in this process is to establish the moral and intellectual leadership of the hegemon, and to achieve consensus so as to maintain its power.

The objective of the research, therefore, is to investigate *how political humour is mediated to serve the interest of the hegemon in China*, the CCP. This dissertation has two potential contributions. First, it transplants Gramsci and his Western concept of mediation and hegemony to China, enriching the Western understanding of Chinese hegemony. Second, it further develops the understudied Gramscian idea of moral and intellectual leadership. Most importantly, this leadership is expressed in the form of political humour, which offers a unique perspective. The conceptual framework results in three concrete research questions.

1. How is humour mediated to serve or resist hegemony, through the construction of symbols?
2. How is humour mediated to serve or resist hegemony, in the process of remembering and forgetting?
3. How is humour mediated to serve or resist hegemony, reflected in the tension between structure and agency?

There are three prepositions in this dissertation. The first assumption is that the hegemon always intends to maintain its power. The second assumption is that humour can function to

serve and resist hegemony. The third assumption is that the interest of the hegemon and the interest of the people are opposite and conflicting. This framework is intended to operationalise the overarching framework of mediation and the fragmented concept of hegemony. It is acknowledged that moral and intellectual leadership is broad and culturally specific. It is hence difficult to make a generalisation about moral and intellectual leadership and equally difficult to measure it. Therefore, the following methodological chapter will introduce a qualitative method with a special focus on how it is possible for the hegemon to reach consensus and obtain moral and intellectual leadership.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CHAPTER**

### **Research strategy**

The following section discusses the rationale for the adopted research methodology, based on the objective of the dissertation and its theoretical research questions. This dissertation's objective is, to quote Chouliaraki (2008: 674), "to comprehend 'culture from within', providing the cultural analyst with a concrete objective of investigation-the text". Consequently, neither power relations are quantified, nor is a generalised conclusion drawn. Instead, the qualitative approach aims to track processes and explore the question of *how*. As a result, two core criteria for selecting a suitable methodology emerge. The first criterion is efficiency in answering the *how* question, while at the same time focusing on the power relations and process. Therefore, following Schroeder (2003), methodologies related to the *why* questions and causal relations, such as experiments, are excluded. The second criterion is that the methodology must be appropriate to deal with the concept of hegemony or more broadly, power relations. Since hegemony includes both consent and force in the form of explicit as well as implicit power relations, it would be inappropriate to pursue a numerical analysis and to quantify hegemony. This means that quantitative methods such as surveys and content analysis (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991) would be ineffective in capturing the sophistication of hegemony. A potential competing methodology is the interview. It would allow for comprehending the *how* question, while also revealing power relations to a certain degree. Yet the following practical concerns render the interview methodology unfeasible. For the purpose of this dissertation, the producers of humour as well as the officials censoring it would be ideal interviewees. However since the questions would focus on hidden strategies, considered as so-called state secrets, such research would be too sensitive to conduct in China. In an authoritarian state, the tactic to maintain a repressive regime is to keep the masses as ignorant as possible. Hence this method is likely to yield little for this research.

Having rejected the methods of survey, content analysis, experiment, and interviews; discourse analysis is considered the most feasible option and thus is selected. A detailed justification for this choice follows in the succeeding part.

### **Justification of Critical Discourse Analysis**

This section will clarify the choice of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the concrete methodology for this dissertation. It will become apparent that CDA is closely linked to the key theoretical concepts of hegemony and mediation. It furthermore allows the inspection of the specific context, hence providing the best methodological choice for this research.

CDA evolved from discourse analysis. A broad definition of discourse is provided by Fairclough (1993: 138) as “language use conceived as social practice”. The choice of a particular type of discourse analysis is not as straightforward as it seems. Indeed Gill (2000) points out, that there are fifty-seven varieties of discourse analysis. For this particular research, focusing on conversations, Conversation Discourse Analysis could also be a possible choice. Yet the major difference between CDA and Conversation Analysis is their understanding of power relations. Conversation Analysis presupposes a symmetrical power relation, while CDA acknowledges the asymmetry of power relations (Fairclough, 1992: 17), which is critical to this study. Fairclough’s argument is supported by Van Dijk (1993, 252) who claims that the focus of CDA is on dominance and inequality. Recognising that power and unfairness is often sustained and legitimated by the hegemon, CDA specialises in unmasking concealed values and strategies (Paltridge, 2006: 178). Both Fairclough (1992) and Van Dijk (1993) stress the linkage between hegemony and CDA. As hegemony is for managing the mind of the dominated class and create consensus to sustain the power of dominant class, this process is largely achieved by articulation and discourses. Van Dijk (1993: 255) addresses the hegemonic class as *power elite* who are privileged to make decisions and manage others’ minds. The power base for these elites is composed of symbols, as introduced in the theoretical chapter with Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power (1991).

Apart from CDA’s close theoretical proximity to hegemony, CDA possesses crucial practical advantages, which makes it the appropriate methodology. CDA allows an in-depth analysis grounded in particular circumstance, as it is contextually specific and “historically-sensitive” (Chouliaraki, 2008: 674). In fact this historical and contextual concreteness links it directly to Gramscian hegemony. CDA helps in analysing the nuances of hegemony through multi-layered framework. As CDA starts from text and concludes with socio-political discussion, Fairclough draws upon three steps of analysis. They are “*description* of text” or the textual

dimension, “*interpretation* of the relationship between text” or discursive dimension, and “*explanation* of the relationship between interaction and social context” or social dimension (Fairclough, 2001: 91). The combined three dimensions enrich an understanding in forming power relations through discourse.

### **Problems of discourse analysis, solutions, and limitations**

A general problem which affects all varieties of discourse analysis is that the data is not representative; therefore no generalisations can be made (Gill, 1996: 155). As a solution, researchers need to explain the selection of data explicitly and justify its value. The purpose of this dissertation is not to generalise, but to deconstruct power relations by interpreting the discourse used to build up a specific power hierarchy. Another criticism towards CDA is its perceived lack of objectivity, and therefore it is regarded as not being scientific enough. Widdowson (1995: 160) argues that CDA is biased by nature through its basis on presumption and selection of data. Although this problem cannot be solved, it could be minimised by providing transparency of the research and the explanation of the sample selection criteria. A specific limitation of this research is the issue of translation, particularly regarding humour. Humour is very much linked to a specific socio-linguistic context. Therefore it is extremely difficult to maintain fully both originality as well as the humorous quality of a certain piece of humour in the process of translation. The original text used as data is in Chinese, and is translated by the author into English. To minimise the limitations imposed by translation, a professional Chinese-English translator was invited as the proof reader of the English translation<sup>4</sup>. Translation of words has been done literally with extensive explanations of the points of laughter, ensuring highest possible clarity.

### **Sampling of data**

Since data is highly selective and context-specific, the selection criteria are outlined in detail to address the non-representativeness of the sample. Empirical papers from Fairclough (1993) and Chouliaraki (2000) emphasise that the basic criteria for selecting data is that the data must be a) empirically interesting and b) theoretically relevant. At the same time it is acknowledged that this set of criteria is contextually sensitive because “there is no typical CDA way of collecting data” (Meyer, 2001: 23).

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<sup>4</sup> Information regarding the translator can be found in the acknowledgements

The selection standard of “empirically interesting” is fulfilled, as the data derives from two award-winning short sketches in the SFG which were given the title of “My favourite performance of the Spring Festival Gala”<sup>5</sup>. The first sketch named *Zuotian, Jintian, Mingtian* (Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, or YTT), is presented in the 1999 SFG. The length of this short sketch is seventeen minutes. The popularity of YTT prompted a comeback of the same performers acting in a similar setting in the 2006 SFG. The name of this 2006 mini-drama is called *Shuo Shi'r* (Talk Show of Little Cui, or TSLC). This name is derived from a real television talk show on CCTV. The 2006 short sketch lasts for eighteen minutes. The setting for both sketches involves a rural couple from the north-eastern part of China who are invited to a well-liked talk show at China Central Television. The host (*Cui Yongyuan*) asks the couple how their life in their village is and how it changes under the leadership of the CCP. In the short sketch, the village wife is called *Baiyun* (White Cloud), and her husband is *Heitu* (Black Soil). These two roles are played by China’s famous and reputed comedian *Zhao Benshan* and *Song Dandan*. The length of the transcript for YTT is 4003 words in Chinese. The TSLC transcript contains 4297 words.

The data is furthermore theoretically relevant, because it is derived from officially staged performances which are part of the officially sanctioned discourse. The main themes analysed in this research are ***construction of symbols, remembering and forgetting***, as well as the ***tension between structure and agency***. Necessarily the research thus requires the examination of official language employed, following Wodak’s (2001: 10) assertion that “language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use of powerful people make of it”. Meaning is also produced through censorship<sup>6</sup>, since this determines what is allowed to be broadcast nationwide. This strict censorship is also intended to manipulate remembering and forgetting. As the name of one short sketch suggests, it is about yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The Party aims at manipulating what to remember and forget in the past, via the usage of humour. Yet the manipulation requires the assistance of two farmers and a television show host, which provides an interesting combination of agents. The host represents the city, and his position in CCTV reflects the position of the central government. The two village farmers represent the rural class. The rules and regulations in the talk show function as a symbolic structure. It is therefore evident that each short sketch in itself covers all aspects of the three themes under examination and hence provides valuable data for analysis.

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<sup>5</sup>Zhao Benshan Official Site, “Achievements in Art”, <http://www.zhaobenshan.cc/honour.html> (accessed on July 8, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Indeed Zhang (2006) has examined the elaborate censorship regime applied to the SFG. It involves four ranks of leaders, including those from CCTV, from CCTV’s Centre for Culture and Art, from the State Administration of Radio Film and Television, and those from the Communication Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.

## Design of research tools

The research toolkit is based on the three dimensional analysis advocated by Fairclough. Fairclough (2001: 239) recommends the three dimensional model when an analysis uses conversations and television programmes. The three dimensions are textual, discursive, and social perspectives (2001: 240), this will be combined with his 1989 work suggesting the *roles* of various dimensions. The procedures are outlined below.

1. The texts are read line by line and colour-coded thematically.
2. The three dimensions are analysed in an integral way.
  - a) Suggested by Fairclough (1989), the *textual level* could be understood as description. The focus of the textual level is on vocabulary (e.g. wording and metaphor) and grammar (e.g. active or passive sense, tense of sentence, logical connectors between sentences).
  - b) *The discursive level* (Fairclough, 2001) is linked to interpretation (Fairclough 1989). The core elements include cohesion (e.g. the usage of “but”, “therefore”), order of discourse, and genre. Genre is explained as “a regulative device which controls what goes with what and in what ordering” (Chouliaraki, 2000: 297). For example, the genre of the selected texts is short sketches presented in the SFG on CCTV. The regulative device includes the regulation of the talk show, the conventional expectation of the SFG, and the censorship of CCTV.
  - c) The *social level* of Fairclough’s later work reveals explanation (Fairclough, 1989). It covers struggles and conflicts, historical factors, knowledge, and a constructed reality. Because the social level is necessarily broad and hence the choice of certain explanatory social events is more subjective, this study will draw upon a wide array of resources, ranging from academic texts to legal documents.
3. A logical flow and analysis is conducted based on the three dimensions. It will be narrated thematically and all three dimensions are intertwined in each theme.
4. Theoretical reflections will be conducted under each theme so as to evaluate the conceptual framework.

## FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

### Theme I: construction of symbols

#### *Silliness and overestimation*

The first theme draws upon the transmission model's emphasis on symbols and indeed the symbols are used by the hegemon to establish intellectual leadership. The construction of symbols is indicated by discursive resources (Van Dijk, 1993: 255), which in this case is humour. In both short sketches of 1999 and 2006, the staged laughter<sup>7</sup> occurs at the same occasions. These are when the performers, in the role of farmers Black Soil and White Cloud, appear to be silly while also overestimating their intellectual capabilities. The dominant class establishes its intellectual supremacy through mobilising the resource of humour. The superiority of the dominant class is contrasted with the simple-mindedness of the farmers.

The evidence supporting silliness of the farmers can be found in the very beginning of the 1999 short sketch. The host introduces the topic of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. The implied meaning of this topic is past, present and future. However, White Cloud and Black Soil interpret it literally and fail to comprehend the connotation. Even though the host hints that **"I wanted you to talk about the time a little bit earlier than [the real] yesterday"**. The response given by White Cloud is, **"Oh, the day before yesterday, we were informed of the invitation by the village office [about this interview]"**. It is only when the host explains clearly that the topic is about past, present, and future, do Black Soil and White Cloud finally understand. The fact that this cited text is located in the beginning implies that the hegemon's top priority is to establish intellectual leadership by laughing at the illiteracy of the farmers. This leadership is constructed by denying others' intellectual capacity.

The intellectual inferiority expressed on the textual level leads to the audience's judgment that the farmers overrate themselves. The textual and discursive dimensions prompt viewers to experience a sense of overestimation of the farmers' capabilities. An example is given in the YTT. When White Cloud expressed her desire to write a book, Black Soil says **"Hold on. Forget about it! You cannot even read a book"**. The word "cannot" is an "expressive modality" (Fairclough, 2001: 105). This is intended to reveal Black Soil's credibility to convey the reality. In reality, White Cloud as an illiterate is unable to write books.

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<sup>7</sup> The indicators of staged laughter are its high volume and very long duration.

The verdict that White Cloud overvalues herself is transferred from textual dimension to the discursive dimension in 2006. Despite the portrayed limited intellectual capacity of White Cloud, she publishes her book in the 2006 mini comic drama. This published book contradicts the previous claim that White Cloud is incapable to write. The lack of cohesion in the discursive dimension generates a sense of empowerment of White Cloud as an individual. The basis of her power resides largely in her perception. Yet White Cloud self-perception as a celebrity is not matched by her status in reality. Evidence can be found on the textual level when White Cloud says “[He] **should have treated me as a celebrity! How arrogant and impolite [in local dialect] is CCTV!**” On the surface, this sentence is subversive. This is because White Cloud criticises the spokesperson of the hegemon and the usage of local dialect symbolically challenges the central government, as the promotion of standard Chinese (Mandarin) is enshrined in the Constitution (Constitution of People’s Republic of China, article 19). However, on the discursive level, White Cloud is laughed at because she undermined the legitimacy of her own reputation, which is in fact based on the invitation by CCTV. The object of humour is therefore the overestimation of her capabilities, which is transferred from the descriptive textual dimension to an interpretive discursive level.

Comparing the 1999 and 2006 short sketch on the construction of symbols, it is nevertheless surprising that White Cloud is allowed to openly criticise the spokesperson of the hegemon in 2006. The 1999 mini comedic drama laughs directly at intellectual inadequacy to establish the intellectual leadership of the hegemon. In 2006, the change is that it makes a symbolic gesture to criticise itself and allies the dominated class with populist claims. This can be explained through the socio-political dimension, as suggested by Fairclough. The year 2005 witnessed rising social problems, followed by tightening party control. Compared to 1998 which is the backdrop of YTT, the social and political atmosphere in 2005 is constrained (Saich, 2006). The dominant role of the party is more and more stressed. Populist policies and claims are employed as part of a hegemonic strategy to persuade the masses to decrease political activity and conform to CCP rule (Saich, 2006: 38). The SFG is intended to channel anger, hence addressing the mounting dissatisfaction of the people. The direct criticism of White Cloud against CCTV is highly symbolic, to create a false impression of openness and representation of the dominated class’ voice. Humour, therefore, is mediated in such a way that it construes a popular image on the textual level, while defending the hegemonic intellectual leadership on the discursive dimension.

*Reflection on Theme I*

Drawing upon the conceptual framework, the strategy of laughing at individuals who overvalue their competences highlights the intellectual leadership of the hegemon. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) emphasise the value of moral and intellectual leadership. This theme has a particular accent on intellectual leadership and how the strategies to establish intellectual leadership evolve. Comparing these two texts, it is evident that the intellectual leadership is increasingly symbolic. It transforms a descriptive dimension to an interpretive dimension. This indicates that symbols are more and more mediated to cater to the hegemonic logic of appearing benign but actually reinforcing suppression. This is specifically the case in 2006. What is noted is a reflection on methodology, the sample selection for this theme creates an erosion of the boundary between discursive and social dimension. Because these two texts have a chronological order, the former functions not only as a text for comparison, but also as a social background of the short sketch in 2006.

**Theme II: remembering and forgetting**

The second theme derives from the theoretical debate of the transmission and ritual views of mediation. This theme assists in the investigation of whether the sense of time and space is manipulated, or if memory is manoeuvred. It also provides an analytical tool to examine how this control over memory is exerted.

*The present is better than the past*

The second theme is divided into three strategies, namely, contrasting the present with the poorer conditions in the past, selection of memories, and filtering unfavourable information with justification. The first strategy attempts to establish an imagination that the past is marked by poverty, and the present by affluence. On the textual level, metaphors are used to contrast the past and the present. In YTT, Black Soil says “**We met each other approximately in 1958**”, closely followed by White Cloud’s comment “**Around winter**”. These two declarative sentences associate the year of 1958 with the season of winter. The metaphor of winter conveys a bleak and desolate feeling. The usage of this rhetoric can be elucidated on the social and historical dimension.

The year of 1958 is the beginning of the so-called Great Leap Forward and the following Great Famine<sup>8</sup>. The official discourse regarding the history of the Great Famine is that it occurred as a consequence of adverse weather conditions, such as a long lasting drought. The Great Famine in Chinese is also called “three-year natural disaster”<sup>9</sup>. However, Dikötter (2010) contends that the disaster was largely man-made and a result of a series of disastrous policies implemented by the CCP. In the short sketch, the association between 1958 and winter echoes the official discourse that the Great Famine was a natural disaster. The absence of the failed policy of the CCP indicates the preference of forgetting over remembering, hence avoiding addressing accountability of the hegemon.

The reason for the hegemon to reveal the poor past is to highlight the good life in the present. As emphasised by Gramsci, hegemony is temporal and needs to be constantly maintained. The discursive level reveals the efforts of power elites to uphold their dominance at that point of time. For example, the metaphor for the present is “**the spring breeze of reform**” in the 1999 short sketch. In 2006, White Cloud says, “**Primroses grow up in the spring**” to project her current life experience. The choice of the spring season links the existing time with hope, pleasant feelings, and comfort. The pleasant feeling at that moment derives from the material or economic base, and evidence for this connection can be found on the discursive level. In the 1999 sketch, both White Cloud and Black Soil underscore their dire poverty. White Cloud says “**I wanted to give him [Black Soil] a pullover. At that time, [I was] too poor to afford it**”. And the only electric appliance that Black Soil had when they got married is an “**electric torch**”. The absence of pronoun “I” in the sentence “**too poor to afford it**” reveals that poverty was widespread, and so common that everyone had the same problems. This grammatical pattern is again observed when they describe the present. “[We] **get rich after the Open Door and Reform Policy**”. In a similar vein, this tactic is used to indicate that an improved quality of life is now enjoyed by many people. The direct explanation for the farmers to get rich, as expressed in the sentence, is the “**Open Door and Reform Policy**”. This is a eulogy to the government and the CCP. The eulogy, however, is not detected very obviously in the 2006 short sketches.

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<sup>8</sup>The so-called Great Leap Forward was launched by Mao Zedong in 1958. The purpose was to develop China’s economy in a rapid fashion in order to overtake leading capitalist countries, mainly the United Kingdom and United States. However disaster unfolded when blind political belief overtook commonsense and science. The Great Leap Forward ended with the tragedy of the Great Famine. At least 45 million people died in the largest man-made famine, according to Dikötter (2010, 333).

<sup>9</sup>This is based on Zhang and Fan’s report, see from Zhang, Sai and Fan Baojun (eds.) (1996), *1949-1995 Report of the Damage Caused by Disaster in China*, Beijing: Press of National Bureau of Statistics of China.

Yet there is the acute danger for the hegemon that the strategy of using the history to emphasise today's good life is, might backfire. The audiences could locate the responsibility for the catastrophic history with the hegemon. Therefore the second strategy, selection of remembrance, is applied.

*The individuals are always guilty, and the state innocent*

One way for the hegemon to counter the danger of backfiring, when mentioning unfortunate history, is to develop the understanding among the dominated class that individuals, not the state, are to blame. The most straightforward evidence can be found in a 1999 short sketch. White Cloud wanted, in the old days, to present Black Soil with a pullover. However, she could not afford it. Her solution was, **"I discovered that the sheep lost hairs. So I started plucking the hair. In the evening when I returned home, I made it into wool. In the morning, I started weaving a pullover, herding sheep, and plucking again the hair."** However, her secret plan was discovered. **"In the end... the production team found out. They not only confiscated the pullover, but also organised a public meeting to criticise and denounce me."** She mentions an accusation of **"dig[ing] the socialist corner [undermining socialism]"**. The accusation for her is **"pluck[ing] the socialist sheep's hair"**. The revolutionary wording of **"production team"**, **"public meeting [to denounce individuals]"** and the accusation of **"dig[ing] the socialist corner"** depicts the guilt, embarrassment, and humiliation of Chinese as individuals suffering because of the state. These feelings, however, are not associated with violations of universal human rights. Even the benefactor, Black Soil blames White Cloud. He says **"She is too single-minded. Look, at that time she herded fifty sheep. She plucked hair from only one sheep...Everybody can tell."** This comment possesses a clear agency of **"she"**, and it bestows responsibility to White Cloud for her suffering. **"Single-minded"** indeed becomes a reasonable explanation for being denounced in public. The reasons behind the general backwardness of China are deliberately omitted to cover up the failures of the CCP's economic policies.

Blaming individuals and using them as scapegoats are not unique in 1999, it also occurs in a 2006 short sketch. Black Soil and White Cloud are talking about cutting ribbons for the opening of a big chicken farm as one of their activities as celebrities. Black Soil follows, **"Yes, immediately after she cut the ribbons, the avian flu burst out. On the second day, more than ten thousand chickens died. Later on, she is nicknamed as 'the fatal scissor'"**. A simplistic logical association between White Cloud and avian flu is established through two simple sentences. This remark diverted attention from the problem

of avian flu and the inadequate response of the government, by blaming individuals for innocently cutting a ribbon. “**The fatal scissor**” is translated into a sense of blame on individuals.

Yet blaming individuals could also backfire. When the issue is so controversial that the hegemon cannot prevent a person from investigating who is to blame, a new strategy is needed to eliminate alternative and resistant discourses. This leads to yet another strategy – the filter mechanism regarding remembering and forgetting, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

*What to be forgotten is filtered with reasonable justification*

Controversial issues are mentioned in both 1999 and 2006 short sketches. The manipulation strategy of the hegemon is to filter information with the help of humour. In a 1999 short sketch, White Cloud mentions “**laid-off**”. The word “**laid-off**” is potentially insubordinate because it refers to the problem of the state-owned enterprise reform launched by the government. As reported by Fewsmith (1999: 103), workers in these enterprises are laid off *en masse*. This leads to widespread dissatisfaction among workers, resulting in social protests. Yet the usage of this word by White Cloud is irrelevant to the concrete social and political context. White Cloud uses the language “**laid-off**” in the sentence “[my] **two white teeth are gloriously laid off**”. White Cloud associates “**laid-off**” with “**teeth**”, implying a sense of irrevocableness and equating being fired with a natural phenomenon. This association dilutes the responsibility of the hegemon and engenders a sense of determinism for the laid-off workers. The adverb used in the sentence is “**gloriously**”, contradicting the social unrest in reality and whitewashing of the problem of state-owned enterprise restructuring. White Cloud’s remark is in the interest of the hegemon, and therefore she is given extra attention as the host says “**She knows the word of ‘laid off’ and uses it here. Uncle and Aunt, well, I ask one by one. Aunt first.**” This “**Aunt first**” is a symbolic reward for her.

Whereas attention is the incentive for those who speak for hegemonic interests, ignorance is the punishment for those who speak against it. In the 2006 short sketch, White Cloud appears as if she is a hegemon and Black Soil a “dissident”. White Cloud has listed several justifications for excluding disharmonious voices. The first justification given by White Cloud is “**Don’t take him seriously. He has a very tiny mind**”. The usage of “**tiny**” mirrors the extent of significance of the speaker as well. The logical linkage between these two simple sentences is a causal relation. The second validation is blackmail. The logic is that as long as A has evidence against B; it is not B’s interest to speak against A. This strategy of blackmail is

aimed to make the person vulnerable and untrustworthy. The best example is in the following dialog between White Cloud and Black Soil.

White Cloud: Does it kill you if you shut up?

Black Soil: That can drive me crazy.

White Cloud: Why are you so annoying?

Black Soil: Tell a little bit of the truth.

White Cloud: I really don't want to talk about your stupid things, to save your face. I really want to talk about him [to the host]. He is so fond of singing in front of crowds. His throat is not born to sing. One day, he went to the home for older people. There are seven old men. The moment he started to sing, six fainted."

Black Soil, as the person who speaks the truth but harms the interest of White Cloud (in the role of a hegemon), is attacked by White Cloud. The weakness White Cloud uses against her husband is not only his poor singing ability, but also that he harms older people. As quoted in White Cloud, "**Other people charge money for singing. He [Black Soil] charges life.**" By saying this, White Cloud has exaggerated Black Soil's poor singing ability to the extent of hurting people. This elevation of a trivial disadvantage to a serious level has devalued Black Soil's persuasive capability. However, even after using this strategy, Black Soil enlists evidence against White Cloud, generating a third justification used by White Cloud, mental instability.

Black Soil responds to White Cloud by listing the weakness of White Cloud in giving a public speech. As narrated by Black Soil, "**You show off and gave a speech to the mental hospital...It went on for the whole day...The doctors went insane**". In this sentence, the institution of a mental hospital is referred to. The reason of mentioning the mental hospital can be located in the social dimension. In reality, it is apparently common practice that regime critics and dissidents are sent to mental hospitals<sup>10</sup>. On the discursive level the usage of mental hospital is highlighted. As White Cloud reacts to Black Soil's criticism against her, "**Why are you so irresponsible? Cui [the host], don't take him seriously... [To Black Soil] [You] suffer from Alzheimer, and forget to take medicine.**" The absence of "you" in this sentence functions as a generalisation of this justification. It is targeted at every individual and not limited to Black Soil. The logic is that those who are labelled as mentally ill cannot be trusted under any circumstances. Challenging the dominant discourse is labelled as "**irresponsible**", and through its association with "**Alzheimer**" also as a disease. The word use of "**irresponsible**" draws upon the social context. The association between responsibility and humour reflects the legacy of the Soviet model of media, which emphasised education and expects the media to function as a responsible instrument

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<sup>10</sup> In the award winning documentary *Petition* (2009) directed by Zhao Liang, petitioners are put into mental hospitals. Their efforts to ask for justice are regarded as madness, defined by the authority.

(Schramm: 1976). Broadcast humour has to be responsible as well. Hence humour in state television like Chinese Central Television (CCTV), has to follow these lines and will therefore lose its subversive nature and instead increase the potential to be utilised by the hegemon. The description of being irresponsible depreciates the power of any alternative or resistant discourse, and defends the dominant one. The verb “**suffer**” is in simple present tense. This grammatical feature functions as modality because it is a “categorical commitment of the producer to the truth of the proposition” (Fairclough, 2001: 107). This categorical commitment means unconditional and absolute certainty of the produced truth and signals the efforts to make the produced truth objective. The usage of simple present tense contradicts the objective fact that Black Soil has no Alzheimer and only gets Alzheimer when he speaks against White Cloud. However, it is this declarative and simple present tense that shortens the distance between objective reality and the perceived reality in favour of White Cloud. In this instance, the boundary between an objective reality and the construed reality by the hegemon is blurred by the lexical usage of discourse.

### *Reflection of Theme II*

This theme attaches itself to the discussion of the two models of mediation, as introduced in the conceptual framework. In the transmission model, the *material restriction* of time and space is indeed not as significant as before. But the *sense* of time and space is still relevant. The core of this debate between *material* and *sense* is whether the *material* aspect can travel to the plane of *sense*, which is intangible. This question renders the idea of hegemony significant since it bridges base and superstructure. As Gramsci suggests (1929-1935/1971: 258), economic development is “elevated [to] a given cultural and moral level, a level or standard which corresponds to the needs of development of the forces of material production and hence to the interests of the dominant classes”. This elevation is supported in the finding. White Cloud was associated with culpability because she was too poor to afford a pullover and so “**single-minded**” that she deserved the accusation of “**pluck[ing] socialist sheep hair**”. It is true that the *sense* is intangible but yet to be manipulated by the hegemon. The hegemonic strategy engages institutions, such as the “**mental hospital**” as analysed before, to defend the dominant discourse. Therefore, the *material* perspective emphasises the transmission model with a focus on *sense*, experience, and memory in the ritual model are reconciled with the notion of hegemony.

In this theme, another caveat for the hegemon emerges, which is that people might also not trust the government because the hegemon as an abstract concept is constituted by individuals. In Theme II, White Cloud was used by the hegemon to justify censorship.

However, she is also likely to be unreliable. Therefore, she is distanced from the hegemon through the classification of structure and agency, which is the last theme to be covered in the analysis.

### **Theme III: the tension between structure and agency**

The previous theme pointed toward the blurred boundary between structure and agency. It is in the hegemon's interest to defend the frontier of structure to maintain its dominance. As introduced in the conceptual framework, Giddens' idea of duality of structure (1984: 374) suggests that the structure is part of and constitutes the actions of agents. The structure constrains, but simultaneously enables. The agent can be powerful to challenge the structure, yet he can also be powerless to conform to rules in the structure. The resource of agents' power, according to Giddens, is knowledge. The hegemon tries to undermine the power of agents, and strengthens not only the restraining capability of structure but also reinforces the obedience of agents to the hegemonic structure.

#### *Constraining structure outweighs power of agents*

As suggested by Giddens (1984: 282), the practice of positioning agents in the structure is important. Hence the first step of the hegemon is precisely this positioning of agents with respect to the structure, locating them in a social hierarchy. One piece of evidence of this positioning practice can be detected from the comments of Black Soil in the 2006 mini comedic drama. When White Cloud emphasises her significance saying **"I, White Cloud, am a celebrity anyway,"** Black Soil responds by positioning White Cloud. The remark of Black Soil is **"Why the heck are you boasting! You, White Cloud, are more a name than fame. Why are you behaving like that! Last time when we participated in the interview, why does it do such harm to you? We are just an old couple from a village. Why do we need to write a book? Look, you took seven days to write down six words."** On the textual and discursive level, the comment of Black Soil demonstrates the efforts to position him and his wife. The pronoun of **"you"** in the sentence **"You White Cloud are more a name than fame"** uses both the name and the pronoun. The double usage of subjective in a sentence associates the impersonal **"you"** with his wife **"White Cloud"**, pointing at the triviality of his wife as an ordinary individual. The usage of **"we"** in the sentence **"why do we need to write a book"** engages Black Soil himself in the positioning practice. The metaphor for structure in this sentence is **"the interview"** and **"village"**. The village functions as a formal institution and the interview as an informal institution which makes both Black Soil and White Cloud visible and thus empowers them.

The interview demonstrates the enabling facet of the structure. However, the empowering structure is actually doing “**harm**” to the agents. This judgment decreased the necessity of the enabling nature of structure, and on the other hand, justifies the constraining properties of structure. The village, as the spatial institution, resembles the performers’ origin, but also their lower position in China’s social hierarchy. The wording of “**just**” to describe “**an old couple from the village**” connotes the insignificance, the powerlessness, and the humble attitude expected from this old village couple. The conformity is rephrased in the form of good virtues of being “**down-to-earth and honest**”. On the textual dimension, being obedient is framed as being “**down-to-earth**” and “**honest**”. This moral entitlement is a strategy to persuade the masses to follow the one-party rule. However, if the hegemon asks the people to conform to the rules and regulations in favour of the hegemonic class, it is a must for the hegemon to establish the legitimacy of structure. This leads to the second step of using agents as a testimony for structure.

*Agents asking for the constraint of the structure*

A mini drama in the 2006 SFG details the process of agents asking for the constraints of structure, thus legitimising the hegemonic constitution. The first justification is that structure is effective. In this short sketch, a new rule is introduced in the form of headphones. This enables the host to test whether Black Soil and White Cloud are telling the truth. The set of headphones can be regarded as a symbolic representation of structure, because the headphones dictate who has the right to speak in the conversation. The person who is required to wear this electronic device is automatically excluded from the conversation. In that way, the autonomy of agents is disabled. This setting is effective in testing who speaks the truth, offering the justification of a constraining structure. In the 2006 short sketch, the host has asked Black Soil and White Cloud the same questions and they give different answers as depicted in the following table.

**Table 1** Compared response from White Cloud and Black Soil

Q 1: How did you come to Beijing from your village? (Host)	
White Cloud: <b>We took the special transportation</b> [referring to private jet] <b>to travel here.</b>	Black Soil: [ <b>We took</b> ] <b>the special transportation</b> [referring to tractor carrying brick and people].
Q 2: How much is the fur jacket (Host)	
White Cloud: [it is made of] <b>mink velvet. Not expensive at all, only</b> [costing me] <b>RMB 40,000.</b>	Black Soil: <b>Pretty expensive! Forty per day for rent.</b>
Q 3: Is the book of White Cloud popular? Does it sell well? (Host)	
White Cloud: <b>The event of book signing is PRETTY PRETTY huge. It was like, loud music and firecrackers welcome the book. Red flags flew in the wind. There were mountains and seas of people. I was pushed under the table. A whole file of books fell down.</b>	Black Soil: <b>There was no book signing event. They</b> [the books] <b>were all for free. ...They</b> [people in the village] <b>heard that the books are for free, and the whole village went to collect the books. They used the book to paste the wall in the toilets.</b>

This table with juxtaposed answers has demonstrated the effectiveness of the device of the headphones which constrains the discursive power of individuals. White Cloud and Black Soil have described two different perceptions of reality. The perception of White Cloud deviates from audiences' expectations. A farmers' life is not associated with a "private jet", a luxurious jacket made of "mink velvet" and the fame of "book writing". The narration of reality by Black Soil shows proximity to the objective reality. This is reflected on the discursive dimension and endorsed by the social dimension. Black Soil's answer is intentionally positioned after White Cloud speaks. This special arrangement lets Black Soil's answer function as a refutation to the previous answer. The way White Cloud describes the book signing event is regarded as imaginative because White Cloud uses the same depiction<sup>11</sup> twice when the host asks her different questions. Black Soil's narration is preferred, because it fits the position of farmers in the social hierarchy and the social situation in China. According to the government official statistics (Zhang, 2006), the average annual net income of farmers in 2005 is RMB 3255 (GBP 330) and less than RMB 9 for the daily expenses of farmers. Based on this statistics, "RMB 40 per day" on renting clothes alone is indeed a luxury for farmers, quite the opposite of White Cloud's claim that it is "not expensive at

<sup>11</sup> The referred passage is "It was like, loud music and firecrackers welcome the book. Red flags flew in the wind. There were mountains and seas of people. I was pushed under the table. A whole file of books fell down".

**all**". The discovery that White Cloud is lying and that Black Soil is honest justifies the constraint of the headphones as a symbolic structure.

The second justification is the testimonial of agents. There are occasions for agents to ask for, or even request restraints from the structure. For example, when Black Soil learns that using headphones can restrict the discursive power of White Cloud, he praises the host through the use of gestures. When Black Soil cannot bear White Cloud's boasts, he begs the host by saying "**I beg you. Please let me put on that thing** [the headphones]". The usage of this imperative sentence creates a sense of urgency and it is also conveyed by the word "**beg**". The use of a pronoun "**that thing**" elevates the headphones from an electronic device to a "**thing**" that can be applied to a situation of restraint. On the discursive level, White Cloud also asks for the restraint of the structure. When Black Soil has revealed some facts which are not in favour of White Cloud, White Cloud responds with "**Little Cui** [addressing the host], **may I beg CCTV to force me out. No filming anymore!**" The word of "**beg**" on the textual level implies that it is in White Cloud's interest to be restrained by the institution. The direct reference to CCTV in the sentence conveys the message that CCTV is the power holder. CCTV represents the CCP considering the fact that CCTV is the mouthpiece of the hegemon. "**Force out**" is a censorship strategy for filtering disobedient celebrities. Relating the word "**force out**" to the social dimension, the legal reference is Article thirty-two in the "Regulations on Broadcasting and Television Administration". This regulation has been enforced since 1997. The reason to remind the audiences of the old regulations is the hegemon's drive to repress dissent and limit public political discussion. As analysed by Saich (2006), the Chinese President in 2005, Hu Jintao, aimed to repress the rising social tensions by suppressing diverse appeals. Therefore, the appearance of "**force out**" is intended to consolidate the restraining nature of the structure and functions as a warning to agents.

### *Reflection on Theme III*

Referring back to Giddens' structuration theory, the argument that agent and structure interact and constitute each other is valid and supported by the empirical evidence in this research. However, it is worthwhile to further the thinking regarding the comparative weight of the restraining power of the structure, and the empowerment of agents. As discovered in the findings, the dominant class highlights the necessity of the structure in favour of hegemonic interest. Thus it backgrounds the significance of agents. By using agents to justify the pressing demand of the structure, the hegemon can maintain its intellectual leadership without causing any harm to its moral credibility. The boundary of structure is defended and the powerlessness of agents is exposed. This does however not indicate a mechanical

separation between structure and agency. The agents for the hegemon work in different hegemonic apparatuses, such as schools, the media and other institutions (Mouffe, 1979: 186). In other words, every individual agent is absorbed into the hegemonic apparatuses and function to serve the hegemon. Assimilating individual agents into the mechanical structure, therefore, is the strategy for the hegemonic dominant class to justify the structure which is in favour of its interests and creates the illusion that the structure serves the ruled classes.

## CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation analyses how humour is mediated in the SFG to serve or resist the hegemonic rule of the CCP. The findings clearly demonstrate that the examined humour favours the hegemon, and neutralise resistance into obedience. In concrete terms the application of the CDA effectively operationalises three main themes which derive from the conceptual framework, hence answering the research questions proposed in the conceptual framework.

1. The **construction of symbol** is reflected by the manufacture of humour. The humour is used to devalue the intellectual capability of the dominated class, and thus foregrounds the intellectual supremacy of the ruling party. The mechanism of humour is used to discourage the masses from overestimating themselves, hence serves the hegemon.
2. In the theme of **remembering and forgetting**, it is ascertained that the ruling party intentionally manipulates the memory of dominated class. The selective memory renders the hegemon immune from being questioned. Furthermore individuals are associated with guilt. This strategy intends to establish the moral high ground of the hegemon. Possibilities of humour to resist the hegemon are filtered out by belittling the credibility of the alternative discourse.
3. The theme of **the tension between structure and agency** corresponds to Giddens' conception of structuration. While the dual nature of structure is indeed detected, the enabling nature of structure proves to be harmful because it makes people forget where they are located in the social hierarchy. Therefore, the constraining side of structure is given more prominence. At the same time, the empowerment of agents is either laughed at as an absurdity or criticised. Yet, interestingly humour is mediated in a way that the agents seek for the limitation of the structure, justifying and defending a repressive and hegemonic structure.

However what is absent from the findings of these three themes is a clear dominant figure of the hegemon. It is discovered that the roles representing the hegemon are constantly

changing among the actors. This camouflage-like tactic of the hegemon aims at confusing the audience. The result is that in the mini-dramas no clear dominant figure emerges. This avoids possible negative feelings towards an omniscient or omnipotent figure, while allowing the audience to perceive the performers as one of them. As a specific advantage to this methodology, the CDA detects these nuanced power relations within the text, which could not be detected or counted through quantitative methods.

Hence going further beyond the research questions, additional theoretical and methodological reflections are discussed. Theoretically, even though the concept of mediation and hegemony are compatible with each other, they are wide concepts and there are many elements within them that require further study. The overlapping area of mediation, hegemony, and humour is not limited to the three themes highlighted in this research alone, as they were chosen on the basis of both theoretical and empirical consideration. In terms of methodology, the issue of self-reflexivity has to be raised. Referring to Fairclough (1989 and 2001) and his three dimension analytics of CDA, each dimension (textual, discursive, and social) does not correspond to only one role (respectively description, interpretation and explanation). As illustrated in the findings of the first theme, it is discovered that in terms of humour, the discursive dimension can function as an explanation, apart from interpretation. Therefore it is worthwhile to take a more flexible and open attitude towards the function of each dimension in future application of the CDA on humour.

Overall, this dissertation has applied a Western understanding of mediation and the concept of hegemony to the case of China, opening the door for a number of follow-up studies. This is the first systematic study on the controlled humour in China and one of the rare examples of applying the CDA in the Chinese context. This study greatly contributes to the understanding of hegemonic discourse in China and its hidden power-relations. It hence offers a contribution to the fields of communication studies as well as Chinese studies and is of significant value for both the domestic Chinese audience and the general outside world.

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