Casting an ‘Outsider’ in the ritual centre: Two decades of performances of ‘Rural Migrants’ in CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala

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Abstract
Recent years have seen the rise of the ‘processual approach’ in media ritual studies, which focuses on the making of media rituals through various ‘ritualised actions’ rather than assuming them as isolated events distinctive to ordinary broadcasting. This article advances this line of argument by shedding light on a previously less-discussed form of ritualised action: the ritualised casting. It examines how the character of ‘rural migrant’ has been staged in the 28-year history of China Central Television’s Spring Festival Gala and how the casting of this ‘social outsider’ served as a dynamical strategy in the process of ritualisation of the Gala. The case study demonstrates a persistently central position of the image of ‘rural migrants’ in the Gala in the past 21 years, yet the scripting of this ritual subject varied as the agendas and crises of ritualisation shifted. This ritualised casting not only delivered a self-replicating effect that made the success of the Gala as natural and desired, but also, it exhibited a power to converge the media’s categories with other social categories, which further legitimised the ritual authority of the Gala as a mediated centre in the festival space of the Chinese New Year.

Keywords
China Central Television, media ritual, ritualisation, rural migrants, social outsider

On Chinese New Year’s Eve in 1990, two drifters from the countryside – acted by comedians – took the stage on China Central Television’s (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala. Filthy and furtive, they sneaked into the city to hide their ‘extra’ babies from local officials in their hometowns.1 Twenty-one years later, two different rural fellows – real this time – turned up in the same programme. Tall

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and sturdy, they entertained the city with their unpolished rock singing. The past two decades have seen one social identity constantly placed in the spotlight of China’s biggest annual TV ceremony with ever-shifting faces, from guerrilla intruders to grassroots stars. They were ‘rural outsiders’ who migrated to the city without officially approved urban residency. What gave these ‘outsiders’ such a central position in an official media ceremony? What can we learn from their enduring yet changeful ritual engagements about the formation of ritual power in the media world?

Intrigued by these questions, this article sets out to examine all performances (25 in total) that involved the character of ‘rural migrants’ in 30 years (1983–2012) of broadcasting history of the Gala. These performances appeared in almost every year’s Gala for 21 years (1990–2011). Such a long duration offers a rare chance to track the ritual dynamic of the Gala in a ‘processual approach’ (Coman, 2005). Instead of being premised by the assumption that the Gala IS a ritual, this approach questions how it BECAME a ritual or what made it look like a ritual. From this point of view, the representation of Chinese rural migrants in the Gala was not merely considered the product of its ritual power, but also part of the actions that served to form and sustain its ritual power. My main aim is to spell out how the casting of a particular subject – the social outsider – can constitute a dynamical pivot in the process of ritualisation of some media practices.

**From ritual to ritualisation: re-positioning the social outsider in media rituals**

Victor Turner (1969) said, ‘Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art’ (p. 128). Yet, in contrast to the remarkable attention paid to social outsiders or the socially inferior (demons, fools, witches, foreigners, beggars, children, etc.) in the accounts of traditional rituals, this topic hasn’t got much attention in studies of media rituals. Such neglect was not surprising in the early works in the field (Cardiff & Scannell, 1987; Chaney, 1983, 1986; Dayan & Datz, 1992; Shils & Young, 1956). The dominance of the functionalist paradigm in those works has led to an over-emphasis on the media’s role in solidarity and togetherness, leaving little space for the issue of inequality and tension between different ritual subjects. Recently, the rise of the anti-functionalist approach has challenged the presumption that there is a natural need for a society to be hold together. Instead, it explores why and how the togetherness is constructed, which inevitably reveals the uneven power relationships in the process. For example, Philip Elliott (1998) describes the ritual performances of the media as ‘political rites carried out on behalf of the powerful, in which the powerless are invited to take part’ (p. 173), and it is hard for them to refuse. David Morley (2000, pp. 110-111) also warns about the risk in putting power and politics aside in the definition of sociability. He remarks that what is usually neglected in the idea of sociability or togetherness is ‘which forms of sociability feel foreign to whom’, since any particular collective production of ‘the sociable’ will have its ‘constitutive outside’ (Morley, 2000, p. 112). Given their critical strength, all these efforts, however, still position the outsider as a bystander, far from the ritual centre, and are therefore not able to fully capture the significance of ‘the social outsider’ in media rituals.

Does the social outsider have a place inside media rituals? To answer this seemingly self-contradictory question, we need to understand exactly what constitutes a media ritual itself. In other words, ‘What make some TV programmes so special that we end up call them rituals?’ A similar question puzzled anthropologist Catherine Bell (1992) when she tried to delve into the universal qualities intrinsic to rituals of all forms. Feeling not satisfied by any existing definitions, she started
to doubt the point of the question itself and proposed a shift from ‘ritual’ to ‘ritualisation’. By this she means, instead of thinking about ritual as an existing entity of some sort, we should pay attention to the way in which certain social actions become rituals by strategically distinguishing themselves as ‘sacred’ and ‘privileged’ in comparison to other actions which are perceived as ‘profane’ and ‘quotidian’ (p. 79). This process is underpinned by three strategies, which all warrant a place of the social outsider in ritual performances.

The first strategy is *hierarchical opposition*. The very idea that some actions are ‘sacred’ while others are ‘profane’ is only imaginable in a particular order of the world: a world where ‘any distinction is hierarchical because of the different values that are given to the respective poles in the very operation of distinguishing’ (Parkin, 2009, p. 44) (also see: Dumont, 1970; Durkheim, 1915). As a fundamental strategy of ritualisation, this principle is charted by Bell (1992) as unfolding in three dimensions: the vertical opposition of superior and inferior, the horizontal opposition of us and them, and the opposition of central and marginal (p. 125). To act out such an oppositional and hierarchical order, it is actually the nature of ritual to highlight (selectively and performatively though) the existence of outsiders, rather than totally exclude them, because they stand for a reference point by which the sense of ‘us’ and ‘public’ is imagined (Baumann, 1992). The second strategy is *embodiment*: using the presence and movements of bodies to act out the principle of hierarchical opposition (Schieffelin, 1998), so that it can be experienced as something natural and internal, almost ‘beyond the grasp of consciousness’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 94). This of course involves the staging of the insider and the superior, as well as the outsider and the inferior. In the third strategy *movement*, the subject of the social outsider is used as a border-crosser, whose bodily movements across the boundaries of social hierarchies form an important mechanism whereby these boundaries are maintained and negotiated. Victor Turner (1969) has famously remarked on ritual’s ability to create a subjunctive mode, in which the social order and hierarchy of ordinary life are overturned, people with lower status are made temporarily higher, sometimes even rising above their superiors. According to Maurice Bloch (1989), this is the very means in which ritual gains its cognitive power to construct authority and ideology. Because the chaos caused by these changes is exaggerated strongly enough to destroy everyday cognition, the new order reaffirmed in the end can therefore be expressed in an alogical manner. This manner does not recognise the world as it is in everyday life but makes a purified and more ordered representation of it, as if ‘everybody is in his place and where those in power are in authority’ (Bloch, 1989, p. 128). In sum, once the attention is focused on the ‘becoming’ of ritual and the strategies in the making of ritual, the essential position of the social outsider in ritual automatically comes to light. As a ritual subject, its symbolic presence and movements are the very condition on which all ritual strategies can be manoeuvred.

Bell’s concept of ritualisation has already had an impact on media studies. Most influentially, Nick Couldry (2003) uses this concept to oppose the old notion of media rituals as isolated media events distinctive to ordinary broadcasting. He redefines media rituals as ‘ritualised actions’, ‘where latent media-related categories are put to work in ways that are formalised enough for us to call them media rituals’ (p. 51). At the heart of all ritualised actions, he argues, is ‘the myth of the mediated centre’ – an ideology that the media have the privilege to stand for the centre of our society (p. 45). Apart from Nick Couldry’s work, many other researches have also presented a picture of how manifold ‘ritualised actions’ can be. They can be ‘ritualised images’ (Coman, 2005), ‘ritualised formats’ (Rothenbuhler, 2010), or ritualised themes, such as ‘denigration’ (Carey, 1998), ‘disaster marathons’ (Liebes, 1998), and ‘mourning’ (Panntti & Sumiala, 2009). In this multi-layered picture, the issue of casting, namely selecting actors to play different ritual roles, has only
been briefly mentioned (Berkowitz, 2005, p. 212; Dayan, 2005, p. 173), and no attention has been focused on how casting the role of the social outsider works in the process of ritualisation. This is exactly the gap my case study of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala aims to address.

**Study: CCTV Spring Festival Gala and the subject of rural migrants in contemporary China**

Spring Festival is the biggest calendrical festival in China, celebrating the beginning of the lunar year. Most importantly, New Year’s Eve, called *Chuxi*, is the time when family members gather together, big banquets are held to worship ancestors, celebrate family reunions, and pray for good fortune in the year to come. From 1983, this sacred moment has been bonded with a newly invented tradition: watching CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. Every year’s *Chuxi* night, from 8 pm to 1 am, a special 5-hour programme of singing, dancing, and comic performances was broadcast from the biggest studio of CCTV. To reach the nationwide audience, they were not only broadcast live on three CCTV channels (CCTV-1, 4, and 9) and its website, but also relayed by most of the country’s provincial channels. This sweeping scale of broadcasting was unsurprisingly the cause of an almost ‘compulsory’ mode of viewing. In its heyday in the 1990s, more than half of China’s households with TV sets watched the show. Even today, despite the availability of new and alternative festival activities, many people would still feel their *Chuxi* night had been incomplete if they missed the Gala.3

Thirty years of broadcasting history of the Gala has not only transformed the way people celebrate Spring Festival, but also changed the meaning of this ceremonial moment. When hundreds and millions of people across the country congregate around this single programme as if attending a grand feast of entertainment offered by CCTV without leaving their homes, the festivity had gone far beyond the reunion of kinship families and become the embodiment of the imagined unity of the national family (Pan, 2007; Zhao, 1998). As the sole agent of such tremendous collective attention, the Gala indisputably positioned itself at the centre of this unity, entrenching the political and economical dominance CCTV has long processed as the country’s only central TV station (Lü, 2003, 2006).

Given its influence, the Gala has long been a subject of academic research, especially among Chinese scholars (Lü, 2003, 2006, Pan, 2007, Zhao, 1998, etc.). And not surprisingly, most of the existing research delved the social meanings of this case under the framework of ‘media ritual’. But the ritual interpretation of this TV programme tends to be poised as a premise on which various criticisms were developed. Rarely has this premise itself been put under academic scrutiny. There’s nothing wrong to call the Gala a ‘media ritual’, as long it can stimulate deeper understandings. But after all, it’s only one of many ‘successful’ programmes of the CCTV and not all ‘successful’ programmes were called ‘ritual’. Why this one? Is it simply because of the coincidence between its broadcasting time and the turning of year? Or the phenomenal reception rates it once created? If these shallow answers wouldn’t satisfy us, then it seems necessary to rethink about the seemingly natural linkage between the Gala and ritual, and ask: what made the Gala differ from other programmes and look like a ritual? Or, were there any mechanisms manoeuvred to make it into a ritual and consequently grant it with all the power of ritual? It is the adoption of this framework of ‘ritualisation’, instead of ‘ritual’, that distinguishes the present research from the existing.

One of the essential tasks in this ritual construction was to cast a whole constellation of ritual actors, presenting them to the audience as the ‘dramatis personae’ (Dayan, 2005, p. 173) of the ‘national family’, both the high and the low, the central and the marginal. This was bound to be an
ever-shifting picture, wherein different actors had their entrances and exits. But against the sporadic appearances of other actors, the character of the rural migrant stood out because they appeared in almost every year’s Gala from 1990 till 2011.4 Given the social tension related to the subject of rural migrants in the transformation of Chinese society in the reform age, this shouldn’t come as a surprise. Although it has been a commonplace to see waves of rural people migrating into cities in certain stage of development in a society, few experiences in other societies can compare with the rural-urban migration China has undergone since 1979. Not only has the migration set 120 million peasants on the move, the biggest population flow in human history. More importantly, this huge group of city dwellers are still socially defined as the ‘outside population’ by the country’s household registration or hukou system,5 which deprives them of access to various welfare and social opportunities that only favour the urban hukou holders. Under such a discriminating system, rural migrants became the biggest ‘outsider’ group inside Chinese society, demographically large but socially inferior and marginal (Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001). This background did give the Gala Show’s directors a strong reason to address the character of rural migrants and the related social tension, but it couldn’t explain why this social identity had such a central and enduring position in this official media ritual. To find out the answer, we have to spell out how the performances of this character in the past 21 years worked in the ritualisation process of the Gala.

A new subject of collective anxiety

In anthropological accounts, most seasonal rites are rooted in the cultural anxiety associated with harmonising the activities and attitudes of human being with the seasonal rhythm of the environment and the larger cosmos (Bell, 1992, p. 120). Spring Festival in China is not an exception. Ancient Chinese people commonly believed that the turn of the year indicated a potentially catastrophic moment when demonic powers came down to the world and could bring disaster and plague to people and their communities (Feuchtwang, 1992; Stafford, 2000, p. 31). Many ritual activities before and on Chuxi, such as house and body cleansing, exorcism dancing, setting off firecrackers, and vigil (shousui), were essentially the reflection of this anxiety and people’s tactics to survive the catastrophe. At the heart of this mythical construction was the imagining of various forms of demonic forces as the carrier and embodiment of the crisis.6 They not only existed in folk legends, but also came to life in exorcism dancing and parades. As one way to achieve dramatic and chaotic effects, those performances often employed a gang of beggars in monstrous masks. Being empowered by the character they played, the beggars had a momentary power over almshgivers, which meant begging could sometimes become a form of compelling (Xiao, 2007).

This background suggests that for the Gala to establish its ritual authority in today’s Spring Festival, its foremost task was to find something that had the same effects as the demons and plague in ancient times, a new issue to express the collective anxiety. It also needed to cast a role to act out this issue and make the public’s anxiety visible, as beggars had done in the exorcism parades. One solution arose in 1990, when the image of ‘rural outsiders’ first appeared on the stage. In a comic sketch called ‘The Fellow Sufferers’, two rural drifters sneak into the city to escape being fined for having too many children. When they both seek shelter in a cement drainage pipe, they realise that rather than being competitors they are in fact fellow sufferers. They confide in each other how miserable their lives have been, constantly running and hiding from the authorities, and they boast of the tactics they have used to escape – all in order to have the chance to have a baby boy. In the end, hearing an inspective team approaching, they hastily set out again.
It is worth noting that the first appearance of ‘rural outsiders’ in the Gala did not coincide with the initial influx of rural migrants into Chinese cities. The initial wave of rural migrants actually arrived in the early 1980s as the result of the establishment of the first group of special economic zones in some coastal cities (Mu, 1990; Xie & Cheng, 1990). But as they were still largely invisible for most mainstream urbanites, the image of ‘rural outsiders’ had been absent in the first 7 years of the Gala. Their first appearance in the 1990 Gala was closely linked to two very turbulent Spring Festivals which the country’s railway networks experienced in 1988 and 1989. Totally unprepared for the number of peasant workers wanting to travel between home villages and cities before and after the holiday, the railway system fell into unprecedented chaos. This consequently brought the problem of ‘mingong chao’ (tide of peasant workers) or ‘mangliu’ (blind drifters) into the centre of public resentment. They were blamed as an undisciplined flood that not only put extra pressure on public services but also threatened the security of the urban society (Jacka, 2006; Zhang, 2001). What ‘The Fellow Sufferers’ captured in such a timely fashion was exactly this public sentiment. But given its importance, after all the problem of ‘floating populations’ was by no means the only or the biggest issue to make the public anxious. If there was a sense of public anxiety at that time, it was rooted in a whole range of social conflicts triggered by economic reform. While other contemporaneous social events, such as the nationwide shopping riots in 1988 caused by price inflation and the 1989 Tiananmen Square event, were too sensitive or even dangerous for public discussion, the problem of ‘floating populations’ turned out to be a perfect outlet of expression. It came with an identifiable and vulnerable object of blame and therefore had the power to channel public anxiety at a crisis moment into public resentment against the weak and the stranger.

In this vein, it was not surprising to see a rather demonising representation of rural migrants in the sketch. They were portrayed as spatial transgressors (people who intruded in a place they did not belong), law violators (against the family planning policy), as well as culturally untouchable (squating in cement pipes, homeless and filthy). Much of the sense of crisis was derived from a kind of ‘guerrilla’ scenario, which imagined the ‘rural outsider’ as a public enemy, dangerous, scheming, and hidden. The threats of this enemy urged ‘us’ to come together under a shared commission. In fact, using the metaphor of guerrilla to portray the ‘rural outsiders’ was not a coincidence. One month earlier, a comic sketch about ‘rural outsiders’ in CCTV’s New Year Gala7 was literally titled ‘The Excessive Childbirth Guerrillas’. Just two years later, the same sketch was rearranged into a circus act in the 1992 Spring Festival Gala, under the same title.

In so doing, the Gala had grasped a perfect subject that was both able to hold the collective anxiety and easy to target. But how much ritual power could be drawn from it would depend on what kind of salvation it could provide, namely, how effectively the collective anxiety could be eased through the strategic scripting of the subject.

From reversal to elevation: scripting ritual catharsis

In his book on ritual process, Turner (1969) delineates two types of scripting in structuring ritual subjects: *rituals of status reversal* and *rituals of status elevation*. In the first scripting, the ‘persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors’, normally involving ‘inferiors revile and even physically maltreat superiors’. In the second, ‘the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalised system of such positions’ (p. 167). Each scripting delivers different formulas of ritual catharsis. While the first creates a sense of relief when the upside-down status it stirs up in the early stage is restored in the end, the
second releases the tension by elevating some qualified individuals into the higher position. Turner featured these two types as attached to different kinds of rites – normally, the first is associated with calendrical rites, while the second is associated with life crisis rites, such as birth, puberty, marriage and installation. But what we see in the Gala was a strategic deployment of both types of scripting in the performances of the ‘rural outsider’, which provided the anxious public with different therapies of ritual catharsis.

From 1991 to 2003, the scripting was structured by ‘the rite of status reversal’, wherein the ‘rural outsiders’ were bestowed with a momentarily superior position over the registered urbanites, without having their social status perpetually changed. The effects of reversal were created in two ways. In some comic sketches, ‘rural outsiders’ performed together with ‘urban insiders’, and their hierarchy was put upside-down as the former were allowed to use robust verbal or non-verbal behaviours to humble the latter. In the comic sketch ‘The Stranger’ (1991), for example, an urbanite man encounters a rural girl lost in the city late at night and tries to help. In order to rid her of her fear and distrust, the man lets the girl tie his hands to convince her he won’t run away or harm her. The stage effect is that the man is made to look like an animal or criminal taken for a walk on a leash by the girl. The same kind of twisted inverted relationship was also seen in the comic sketch ‘Shoe Polishing’ (1993), which presents an urban shoe-factory technician as a ‘maid’ serving a street shoe polisher who has newly come to the city from the countryside. Other comic sketches from this period used mimicry to deliver the effect of status reversal. In this case, the ‘urban elites’ were absent and the plot was about how the ‘rural outsiders’ made themselves look foolish by imitating the behaviour of urban elites. A good example of this was the comic sketch ‘Searching for the Focus’ (1995). A peasant couple eagerly wants to try out their mini video camera and take a video of their first trip to the city. They pay every effort to mimic professional journalists and make their filming look like an authentic news report. In another sketch, ‘Returning Home’ (1998), a rural migrant man buys a second-hand mobile phone behind his wife’s back. He spends one year’s income from his job washing cars in order to buy this fashionable gadget just to pretend he is a wealthy urbanite.

What was common in these two ways of performance was that they deliberately inverted the power relationship between the rural and the urban, the insider and the outsider, the superior and the inferior. The more dramatic and ridiculous this reversal, the more it could trigger the tension needed to restore the normality. In the end, the audience is not only entertained by the performances’ mockery and humour, but also greatly relieved to find that, after a moment of theatrical turbulence, the world was still as it is supposed to be.

The effectiveness of this ritual mechanism, however, couldn’t last very long. Two events in 2003 evoked a strategic shift in the Gala’s portrayal of the ‘rural outsider’. In March, a young migrant worker’s death in Guangzhou Detention Centre kindled unprecedented social uproar against the State’s Detention Law, a notorious piece of legislation that had for decades allowed the authorities to banish rural migrants and other marginal populations from the city. After just 3 months of public pressure, the legislation was officially terminated. Later in the same year, the newly inaugurated leadership of the ruling Communist Party launched a campaign to promote the idea of a ‘harmonious society’ as a remedy for social instability. This included adopting a more humane style of governance over rural migrants while maintaining the hukou system largely intact. For example, a more politically correct title, ‘peasant workers’, was used to replace the overtly discriminative titles in official discourses, such as ‘floating populations’ or ‘outsider populations’.

As an immediate response to such a discursive transformation, there was a remarkable alteration in the 2004 Gala. A peasant worker is invited to an urban household as the boyfriend of his urban boss in a comic sketch called ‘We Are All Non-natives’. This visit, which is also a form of test he has to
go through, helps him to understand that he shouldn’t feel ashamed to be a ‘non-native’, for in a sense ‘we are all non-natives’ who came to the city earlier or later. All of a sudden, a ‘rural outsider’ has apparently been elevated to an equal position with the ‘urban insider’.

Since then, the *rite of status reversal* gave way to the *rite of status elevation* and this new trend was continuously manifested in the 2005 comic sketch ‘A Decoration Worker’ and the 2006 comic sketch ‘Odd Jobbers’ Kindergarten’. As in the 2004 sketch, they both tried to convey a sympathetic and inclusive attitude towards the ‘rural outsiders’ who were ‘good’ enough to be part of ‘us’. The climax came in the 2008 Gala, when 25 minutes of prime time (Beijing time 21:40-22:05) was devoted to two programmes about rural migrants. The first was a comic sketch about an accidental encounter between a native Beijinger and a peasant construction worker on a bus, called ‘Bus Concerto’. Finding out the peasant worker was heading to a hospital to donate blood to another worker’s wife who was in danger, the Beijinger is moved and donates a month’s worth of salary to show his sympathy. Through this shared generosity, a brother-like bond is formed between two strangers. After this uplifting story, the second performance is meant to make the audience really sit up. Some 40 ‘peasant workers’, including the construction worker in the sketch, chorus ‘The Song of Peasant Workers’. To a marching rhythm, the song praises ‘peasant workers’ as hardworking and aspirant, whose devotion and enthusiasm earn them a proud place in the city. In the background, a big screen shows imposing images of urban development, overlapped by the title page of a State Council Document ‘The Practical Guidance on the Problem of the Peasant Workers’. All these efforts attempted to stage an official rite that elevated some ‘peasants’ to ‘peasant workers’. Following the same logic, 3 years later, a 1950s iconic working-class song ‘We Workers Are Powerful’ was restaged as a song and dance routine performed by a group of migrant workers, which pushed the elevation another step forward – moving some ‘peasant workers’ to genuine ‘workers’.

Unlike the temporary and reversible status change depicted in previous years, the status change in this period was scripted as permanent and irreversible. This was aimed at another formula of ritual catharsis. As Turner (1969) observes, while the *rites of status reversal* mobilise collective identities, the *rites of status elevation* only implicate selected individuals, meaning to irreversibly change some individuals’ status while keeping ‘the collective status of his subjects unchanged’ (p. 171). The key is to test individuals with physical ordeals or oral insults, teaching the novice obedience and manliness. Only the qualified pass. What is at stake here is the reinforcement rather than erosion of social hierarchy. One can clearly see the operation of this ritual scheme in the Gala by comparing the images of rural migrants since 2004 with those before. When ‘rural migrants’ were collectively featured as ‘outsiders’ in the *rite of status reversal*, their images were ambiguous and undetermined. They could be male or female, young or old, fit or weak. They shifted between various jobs to make a living in the city: a shoe polisher, a cobbler, a car washer, an hourly jobber, and a water deliverer, etc. – jobs which were all informal and unorganised. The *rite of status elevation*, however, served as a closure to this fluidity and ambiguity. It absented all the elderly, the weak, the unskilled and only left the young, the fit, preferably the male, so that the identity only connoted the qualified ‘peasant workers’. Casual and rustic clothes were changed to work uniforms, which not only fixed the ‘value’ of migrants solely as a workforce but also positioned them to some particular jobs that the city mostly wanted them to take, such as construction workers, manufacturing workers, sanitary workers, servants, and security guards. The idea to ‘elevate’ the outsider to the insider also wielded the power to judge or test the outsider with the standards of the insider, such as that migrant youth was tested by the family of his urban girlfriend (2004) and a kindergarten run by the migrants was inspected by an urban cadre (2006). Those who ‘passed’ the tests were marked by two qualities: the ability to endure hardship and the dedication to make a contribution to the city.
Using this measure, the performances of ‘rite of status elevation’ delivered another ritual catharsis: harnessing the fear towards the stranger by making the stranger somehow knowable and useful for ‘us’ (Bauman, 1990).

**Playing the reality card**

Whether reversing or elevating status, the effects of ritual performances were all based on the creation of a liminal space on the stage, which was meant to be contrary to people’s daily experiences. For a long time, this liminality had been constructed through a fictional and often overacting form of performance, all played by professional actors/actresses and comedians. From 2007, however, a new form of performance emerged in the production of the liminality. Ordinary people with genuine migrant identities started to appear and gave the performance a veneer of reality. The trend burgeoned in the 2007 Gala. For the first time ever, 29 primary school students whose parents were rural migrants were arranged to recite a poem entitled ‘The Innermost Thoughts’. The poem attempted to stage an attitude that inspired the migrant children to strive to be strong against their disadvantages. It used the ‘real’ identity of the performers and the tone of first person to send a message that this was a genuine voice of those children and the group they stood for. This rhetoric was further refined in the 2008 Gala. In the comic sketch ‘Bus Concerto’ we talked about earlier, the role of ‘peasant construction worker’ was very tellingly cast to film actor Wang Baoqiang, who was widely known to have been a peasant construction worker before becoming famous. After the sketch, Wang Baoqiang stayed on stage and was interviewed by the presenter, allowing his ‘real’ previous identity to be further highlighted. This ‘representativeness’ was then injected into the next performance when Wang joined in the chorus ‘The Song of Peasant Workers’. Beside him, 18 singers in the chorus were also ‘real’ peasant workers from a state-owned construction group in Chongqing. Like Wang Baoqiang, they all wore work uniforms and little make-up. It was also rumoured that these workers’ appearance in the Gala was on the instruction of the Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao.9

Three years later, this factual rhetoric evolved into an archetypal TV reality show, as presented in a distinct session in the 2011 Gala. The show started as a talent competition called ‘I Want to Enter the Spring Festival Gala’, which was launched in September 2010 as a weekly programme on CCTV-3. By chance or otherwise, all winners were rural migrants: pop singer Ren Yueli and pop group ‘Xuri & Yanggang’ were subway buskers from Beijing; Wanfu Street Dancing Group brought together a group of young migrant workers from Shenzhen. Their prize was the opportunity to perform in the Gala on Chuxi night, which meant part of the Gala in 2011 was devoted to the prize giving ceremony of the talent competition. The playing of the reality card had reached its pinnacle.

To understand the ritual implications of this new trend, we have two questions to ponder. First, why did it have to be somebody ‘real’? More precisely, what performative effects could actors with real rural migrant identities deliver which professional performers couldn’t? This leads us to Nick Couldry’s (2003) theory on the media’s ritual categories. He points out that under the surface of the cult of reality and ordinariness, there is a hidden dimension of ritual categories in operation. That is the hierarchical categories defined by the relationships with the media, which demarcate things and people that are on, in or associated with the media apart from those that are not, and construct the former as superior to the latter (p. 47). As all social categories, the ritualisation of which involves movements from one state to another, the ritualisation of the media categories too requires bodily movements from the non-media world to the media world. One effective way to deliver these
movements is to invite non-media people to perform in the media. What we have seen in recent Gala performances was this important role being cast to the actors with the ‘real’ identity of rural migrants. In those performances, emphasising their ‘real’ identity was to categorise them into the non-media or ordinary world, so that their entry in the Gala connoted a movement across the boundary between the non-media and the media world. The aim of doing so, however, was by no means to withdraw but to reinforce the boundary. What those performances inculcated was how unusual it was that this crossing could happen. Every word and every action was designed to glorify the sublime sensation that ordinary people experienced when they entered the media world, a powerful way to say the two worlds were not just different, but hierarchically divided. A closer look at one moment in the 2011 Gala can help to illustrate this effect. When the migrant winners were invited on stage, the presenter stressed: ‘They are all ordinary people, for whom appearing on the stage of the Gala is like an unreachable dream come true’. Then the microphone was passed to one of the winners, Ren Yueli. Clearly thrilled, the girl said, ‘I feel this stage is so big and I am so small …’. Next Yueli’s family, who were watching the Gala on television far away in a village in northern China, appeared on a big screen. Their virtual presence worked as another reminder of the distance Yueli had travelled …

Therefore, playing the reality card reflected an urge to foreground the agency of the medium – CCTV – in the festival space. Then our second question is: why now? Or, in what kind of situation did this become an issue? Previous studies on reality TV have come to the conclusion that the worldwide proliferation of reality programming since the late 1980s has a lot to do with the overall shake-up of the media industry as ‘market-place considerations’ became increasingly important, which prioritises the media’s self-interest in TV production (Kilborn, 1994, 2003). In China, market-oriented reforms also made its media industry much more pluralised. This inevitably put the country’s biggest TV producer, CCTV, under greater pressure to maintain its near-monopolistic position, including the almost exclusive dominance of its Spring Festival Gala in the festival market. From 2007, a growing number of local TV channels were unhappy about only relaying CCTV’s programme on the Chuxi night and wanted to have a share of the festival viewing market. In 2011, for example, 37 out of 42 provincial satellite channels broadcast their own gala shows during the Spring Festival, though only a few were broadcast on the Chuxi night. A more alarming threat came from the Internet. The number of Chinese Internet users soared from 2009’s 33.3 million to 2011’s 51.3 million. While cable TV users remained more or less the same. Facing competition from abundant on-line entertainments, television had much less power than before to hold people’s attention on the Chuxi night, especially that of the younger generation. All these changes had an immediate impact on CCTV Spring Festival Gala’s audience numbers. The audience share had been fluctuating around 28% from 2007 to 2011, far below its glorious records in the past (up to 62.1% in 1998). For a programme purported to be the sole agent of the national ceremony, this not only meant a big loss in advertising revenue, but more crucially raised questions about its legitimacy. That’s why a new ritual scheme was needed to assert a more overt imperative of self-justification, in order to entrench CCTV’s central position in an increasingly decentralised market.

The performers who addressed this imperative most directly were migrant singers Xuri and Yanggang, known as Xuri Yanggang Group. Before taking part in CCTV’s talent competition, these two subway buskers had already become well-known on the Internet thanks to mobile phone footage uploaded to the web, showing their improvised performance in their dormitory. For CCTV, presenting these two online celebrities in the Gala, especially by getting them to sing the same song they sang in that mobile video, was an effective way to draw large numbers of viewers from the Internet to television. What’s more, because their entry to the Gala was presented as a higher level of rite of passage for media celebrities, as an elevation from grassroots heroes to ‘genuine’
celebrities, the effect was not only the reinforcement of the boundary between the non-media and media world, but also the consolidation of the hierarchy within the media world, which enshrined CCTV as superior to any other media outlets. In the presenter’s words, only the Gala deserved to be the ‘genuine’ stage to welcome the new year’s arrival.

**Discussion: ritualised casting**

Two decades of performances depicting ‘rural migrants’ in CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala provides a good example of the position of the social outsider in the construction of the mediated ritual centre. As the content analysis reveals, the strategic staging of the ‘rural outsider’ formed a pivotal mechanism in establishing and sustaining the ritual authority of the Gala in the festival space of the turn of the Chinese New Year. It started with demonising the ‘rural outsider’ as a subject of collective anxiety, while the Gala was imagined as the centre where this anxiety could be defined and harnessed. The next step was to provide ritual catharsis for the public’s anxiety by performatively mobilising the social status of the ‘rural outsider’ across social boundaries, either by reversing it or by elevating it. In the most recent phase, the ‘rural outsider’ was refashioned into ordinary people who entered the media world in awe and this media-related awe became a remedy to ease the Gala’s own anxiety of losing its dominance in a decentralised market.

This shifting trajectory was remarkable both in its variability – different portrayals entailed different ritual schemes to address different agendas and crises, and in its invariability – whatever scripts and themes were used, the main role was persistently cast as one social identity: the rural migrant. Having already focussed on variability, I want to conclude by reflecting more on invariability. In conventional media content analysis, this invariability tends to be conceptualised as a manifestation of ideological closure, which means ‘fixing’ the ‘multi-essentiality’ of signs and texts to certain connotations as a tool to construct the dominant interpretation in media representations (Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994, p. 43). The problem of this reading is it is too text-centred. Fixing the role of the social outsider to ‘the rural migrant’ for 21 years in the Gala was much more than a textual strategy, which influenced how both ‘the social outsider’ and ‘the rural migrant’ were perceived. From the ritual point of view, it pertained to a media-related social action, which serves to differentiate the Gala from ordinary TV programmes and established it as a ritual bonded with the sacred moment of turning of the year. This action can be termed as ‘the ritualised casting’, meaning a performative strategy that repetitively and persistently presents one type of actors in the performance until this casting is formalised as a symbol to distinguish the whole performance as a ritual. This special mode of casting works as a kind of what Rothenbuhler (2010) calls a ‘self-referencing’ or ‘self-replicating system’. This system has the capacity to organise itself through certain levels of closure, which enables it to succeed at the expense of other possibilities (p. 65). In retrospect, the initial emergence of the ‘rural outsider’ in the Gala was to a large extent the result of historical contingency. But that sense of contingency was eliminated and changed to something ‘inevitable’ and ‘natural’ by decades of endurance by the same character against many odds. Disregarding the variation of the scripts, simply by casting the same character year after year could deliver a self-replicating effect and create ‘a world in which its success is natural, expected, even desired’ (Rothenbuhler, 2010, p. 66).

The effects of the ritualised casting did not stop here. When the same actor was used to perform different ritual scripts, the audience was given a signal to converge different social categories conveyed in each script into one coherent social order. This mechanism also helped to facilitate the negotiation and conspiracy between different ritual agencies in the process of ritualisation. In particular, this case offers
a good example of how the media’s categories articulated with other social categories through the performances of ‘rural outsiders’. Another look at the historical trajectory depicted above would reveal an interesting overlap since 2007. That is, the same character – ‘rural migrants’ – simultaneously acting out two rites of passage: the passage across the insider/outsider boundary and that across the media/ordinary boundary. It is more important to notice that the two rites intersected after the first one had evolved from the rite of status reversal to the rite of status elevation. So the overlap was precisely a joint ceremony of two elevations – the elevation of the social outsiders to insiders and the elevation of the ordinary people to media celebrities. These two elevations can only happen so simultaneously and compatibly in a world ordered by a homologous and cross-referencing bond between two hierarchies: the closer to the mediated centre, the socially higher, and vice versa.

In conclusion, just as CCTV Spring Festival Gala is an invented tradition rising from a particular historical conjuncture, the persistent and distinguishing ritual position of the ‘rural outsider’ in the Gala was far from given, but deeply embedded in the dynamical process in which the Gala made itself look like a ritual. First, like all rituals, the role of the social outsider was indispensable to the process of ritualisation of the Gala in that they could play out the hierarchical categorisation that legitimised the need for a ritual centre. And in this case, such a role was historically cast to ‘rural migrants’ in the Gala. Second, once the initial contingent casting proved to be successful, the casting itself could get ritualised as well through the strategical maneuver of various scripts at the cost of other possible options. This doesn’t mean the whole process was not without any deviations. In fact, other forms of ‘social outsiders’ were also put on stage throughout the two decades, such as women, the disabled, ethnic minorities, homosexual subjects, etc. But in the end, none of them replaced the position of the ‘rural migrants’. This result doesn’t necessarily mean rural migrants are socially weaker or holds more significance in the social and cultural power struggle than other forms of social outsiders in Chinese society in the two decades. Rather, it’s better to be explained as driven by the strategical mechanism of ritualisation that was aimed to construct a televised ritual centre. No doubt, such media ritualisation is intricately interwoven with the macro social-economic power relationships in contemporary China, but these two axes of social construction shouldn’t be reduced to each other.

Given its length, the time span of this case study (1983–2011) inevitably brings limitation to the research. Especially considering, after 2013, China and Chinese media organisations entered into a new era structured by Xi Jinping’s regime at political level and the breath-taking transformation in media technologies at industrial level, it’s not surprising to witness very different performances of CCTV Spring Festival Gala in recent years. To what extent this new trend changed the position of the “rural outsider” in this long-lasting media ritual centre, or even changed the overall dynamics of its ritualisation, is an intriguing topic worth further explorations.

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**Notes**
1. Under China’s one-child policy, more than one child can result in fines and other punishments for many couples.
2. The 25 performances include 19 comic sketches, 5 singing and dancing performances, and 1 poetry reading. The only 2 years without performances related to rural migrants were 2001 and 2010.
3. According to the published official statistics, the highest audience share occurred in 1998 (62.1%). The 2004 rating was 40.8%, reaching a population of 455 million. In 2008, although the overall
reception rating dropped to 29.2%, among television viewers on Chuxi night, 3 out of every 5 watched the CCTV Gala.

4. Although it is beyond the time span of my content analysis, it is worth mentioning that the character of rural migrants was still active in the recent 2013 Gala.

5. The origin of the household registration system, also called hukou, can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty. Its modern version was launched in 1953 and is still in effect today. Under this system, every citizen is required to be registered at birth with the local authorities and their hukou card is therefore fixed to their birthplace. Depending on where their residential registration was located, the entire Chinese population is divided into two ranks: the ‘agricultural’ and ‘non-agricultural’ hukou holders, one for rural residents and the other for urban residents.

6. One well-known form of demon was called nian, literally meaning ‘year’ in Chinese.

7. CCTV’s other special programme for the solar New Year’s Eve. It is similar to the Spring Festival Gala in many ways but less influential.

8. From the name of the victim, it is known as Sun Zhigang Event.

9. See in: http://ent.cctv.com/20080129/107625_1.shtml; http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2008-01/22/content_7473203.htm

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