

From Emotional Exposure to Interpretive Authority: Mediating Marital Crisis as Public Knowledge in See You Again Season 4

Xinyu Shao, Xinran Liu *

Zhujiang College, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510900, China

**Corresponding author: Xinran Liu, xinran0904@gmail.com*

Copyright: 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, and explicitly prohibiting its use for commercial purposes.

Abstract: Chinese relationship-observation reality television does more than expose intimate conflict: it mediates marital crisis as public knowledge by organising unequal claims to explain what a relationship means. This article examines Season 4 of Mango TV's divorce-themed programme *See You Again*, which follows three couples during an eighteen-day journey and intercuts their interactions with studio commentary. Bringing feminist gaze theory into dialogue with reality-television surveillance, epistemic authority, therapeutic culture, and Chinese platform studies, the article develops interpretive authority as a mid-range concept: the institutionally supported capacity to select conduct as relationship evidence, attach an authorised explanation to it, ratify that explanation multimodally, and circulate it across programme layers. The study applies critical textual and paratextual analysis to six focal sequences, including the marital-health test, disputes over livestreaming and the “ideal partner,” studio interpretation of motive, a participant's description of herself as a “single mother,” and the final decision ritual. The analysis identifies four mechanisms. Evidentiary selection converts ordinary gestures and statements into diagnostic material. Authorised naming enables participants, hosts, experts, celebrity panellists, and editorial voices to translate ambiguity into portable categories such as control, emotional labour, responsibility, and fear. Multimodal ratification uses editing, reaction shots, captions, and sound to support or complicate those categories. Textual circulation repeats them through episode titles, previews, recaps, callbacks, and ritual closure. These operations can make gendered inequalities publicly intelligible, but they can also individualise structural conflict and make emotionally expressive women disproportionately available for diagnosis. “Public knowledge” here refers to viewer-facing, institutionally organised claims that are made credible and repeatable within the published text, not to demonstrated audience acceptance. The article concludes that observation television is best understood not through a binary of authenticity and fabrication but through struggles over who is licensed to convert emotional exposure into socially credible knowledge.

Keywords: Chinese Reality Television; Interpretive Authority; Mediation; Marital Crisis; Public Knowledge; Gender; Therapeutic Culture; *See You Again*

Published: Sep 22, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v3i3.1585>

1. Introduction

Relationship-observation programmes have become a recognisable component of Chinese platform television. Their distinctive feature is not simply a doubled scene of viewing but a layered scene of mediation. Intimate interactions unfold

in a primary location; a studio panel watches edited footage and explains what it sees; and episode titles, previews, recaps, and short promotional extracts condense the conflict into repeatable propositions. Viewers therefore encounter marital crisis only after lived time has been selected, sequenced, interpreted, and paratextually named. The format does not merely expose intimacy. It organises the terms through which intimacy becomes publicly knowable.

Season 4 of Mango TV's *See You Again* offers a particularly revealing case. The programme records three couples facing marital difficulty during an eighteen-day recreational-vehicle journey and combines observational footage with commentary by celebrity and expert panellists. Its official description presents the studio as a space for identifying the "crux" of marital problems and guiding rational reflection on marriage, family harmony, and social harmony. Interpretation is therefore not an accidental supplement to the programme; it is part of the format's declared social function and a principal means by which marital crisis is mediated as public knowledge.

The programme's promise is that sustained observation can disclose truths that ordinary accounts conceal. A low score in a marital-health test may stand for estrangement; a refusal to comfort may signify a relational pattern; a repeated phrase may be interpreted as control; and a final decision to remain in or leave a vehicle may retrospectively organise an entire season. Yet the techniques that make intimacy legible also organise it. Camera selection, juxtaposition, subtitles, music, studio commentary, and episode naming shape both what counts as evidence and which actors can convert that evidence into a credible account.

Scholarship on Chinese dating and family reality television has shown that these formats are important sites for negotiating gender, marriage, and normative citizenship. Dating shows may create limited spaces for women's self-articulation while reproducing market and familial pressures^[1]. Parent-centred dating formats rearticulate Confucian family discourse as contemporary subject formation^[2], while motherhood reality television can celebrate women's labour and simultaneously re-domesticate them through ideals of sacrifice^[3]. Studies of Chinese video platforms further caution against treating platformisation as a universal process detached from regulation, market structure, and local interface cultures^[4]. Research on relationship-oriented reality television has examined how programme content relates to viewers' dating attitudes^[5], while Zhong (2026) conceptualises Chinese divorce reality television as affective governance that teaches marital intimacy^[6]. Together, these studies suggest that the programme does not simply display conflict; it places intimacy within a pedagogical and normative frame. What remains less precisely specified is the mediating chain through which a gesture becomes evidence, an explanation gains authority, and that explanation is made durable enough to function as public knowledge.

This article addresses that gap through interpretive authority, defined as the institutionally supported capacity to select conduct as relationship evidence, attach an authorised explanation to it, ratify that explanation multimodally, and circulate it across programme layers. The concept redirects gaze analysis from "Who looks?" to four related questions: Who selects what becomes visible as evidence? Who is licensed to name its meaning? How is that name ratified through audiovisual form? How is it repeated or contested across official paratexts and ritual moments? In this article, public knowledge does not mean empirically shared audience belief; it means viewer-facing claims that the published programme makes credible, portable, and available for public interpretation.

The article asks:

How does the nested architecture of *See You Again* distribute the authority to select, name, ratify, and circulate interpretations of marital crisis?

How do field footage, observation-studio commentary, and official paratexts mediate ambiguous interactions into morally and emotionally legible forms of public knowledge?

Under what textual conditions does this mediation render gendered inequality visible, and under what conditions does it individualise relational conflict or close down alternative readings?

The central argument is that *See You Again* creates a layered economy in which emotional exposure is converted into claims to interpretive authority. Participants supply visible and narratable conduct; producers select and sequence it as evidence; participants, panellists, and editorial voices name its significance; audiovisual form ratifies or complicates those names; and official titles, recaps, callbacks, and rituals circulate them across the season. This chain can make unequal emotional labour

and marital control publicly discussable. It can also privilege diagnostic closure over uncertainty and place the heaviest interpretive burden on participants whose emotions are most narratively visible.

2. From Layered Gazes to Interpretive Authority

2.1 Layered Gazes and Authenticity under Surveillance

Mulvey's (1975) account of visual pleasure remains foundational because it connects cinematic form to unequal looking relations^[7]. It cannot be transferred unchanged to contemporary reality television: women are not only objects of an exclusively male look, men do not always occupy secure positions of mastery, and participants address cameras, panellists, and imagined publics. Nevertheless, Mulvey's central insight—that looking is organised rather than innocent—helps explain why visibility cannot be equated with voice. Reality television complicates cinematic gaze theory by naturalising surveillance as a route to truth. Andrejevic (2004) describes the labour of being watched: participants submit everyday conduct to observation in exchange for visibility, recognition, or transformation^[8]. Couldry (2008) calls the genre's central promise “authenticity-under-surveillance”^[9]. The apparent paradox—that the overt presence of cameras can heighten rather than destroy the sense of authentic revelation—is productive rather than fatal. Reality television does not require production to disappear; it requires production procedures to appear capable of testing authenticity.

In observation formats, surveillance becomes layered and multi-stage. Cameras watch couples; the studio watches the camera's account; audiences watch the studio watching; and participants can later respond to public interpretations. Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary visibility is useful^[10], but this structure is not a simple panopticon. Participants are also invited to confess, clarify, contest, and narrate their own transformation. The format combines surveillance with organised self-interpretation. Yet the multiplication of gazes does not create equal interpretive standing: the camera, studio, participant, and imagined audience occupy different positions in the institutional chain that converts visibility into knowledge.

2.2 Mediation, Emotional Labour, and Therapeutic Culture

Many conflicts in *See You Again* concern work that is difficult to measure: anticipating needs, remembering obligations, sustaining an atmosphere, absorbing frustration, or translating a partner's feelings into words. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour was developed for paid service work, and its use in domestic settings requires care. Here it functions not as a ledger of who feels more, but as a way of asking whose relationship-maintenance work becomes visible, expected, or dismissed^[11]. Giddens (1992) argues that late-modern intimacy increasingly depends on communication, mutual disclosure, and an ongoing justification of the relationship^[12]. Illouz (2007) shows how therapeutic vocabularies have become central to modern accounts of emotional competence and selfhood^[13]. Reality television intensifies this development by turning communication into a public test. Participants are expected to name their needs, acknowledge responsibility, and narrate growth. Those who speak in a therapeutically recognisable form may gain credibility; those who resist, contradict themselves, or communicate through anger may be rendered deficient.

The studio is crucial to this mediation. Psychological, sociological, and popular therapeutic vocabularies can help identify coercion, emotional neglect, or unequal care. They can also detach conduct from history and material context, turning a sequence selected for dramatic relevance into evidence of a stable personality. Zhong's (2026) account of affective governance is especially important here: the programme teaches viewers how marital intimacy ought to be understood and managed. This article narrows its analytical focus to the textual micro-process through which such pedagogy acquires authority and becomes repeatable as public knowledge.

2.3 Interpretive Authority as a Mechanism of Mediation

Interpretive authority overlaps with but is not identical to framing, preferred reading, symbolic power, or epistemic authority. Framing selects and makes salient particular aspects of reality. Interpretive authority includes selection but asks an additional institutional question: which actor is licensed to convert selected material into a general account of the relationship? A reaction shot may frame an utterance negatively; an expert's subsequent explanation claims authority to say what the reaction reveals. Mediation describes the transformation of an event into a public account; interpretive authority identifies the unequal capacity to direct that transformation.

Aşık and Yılmaz Öcal (2025) revisit how media texts organise meaning and how audiences may accept, negotiate, or

oppose preferred readings^[14]. Interpretive authority is located one step earlier and one step later within the text: it concerns how the programme constructs some speakers as authorised knowers and how their explanations are reinforced across field footage, studio talk, and official paratexts. It does not presume that audiences accept the preferred reading.

Symbolic power names the capacity to impose legitimate classifications^[15]. Interpretive authority specifies a middle-range audiovisual mechanism through which that broader power operates in observation television. It is observable in who supplies evidence, who names it, and which name is repeated. Epistemic authority concerns the socially recognised capacity to produce or communicate credible knowledge. Television studies show that programmes perform authority through format, expertise, witnessing, and production practices^[16]. Interpretive authority is narrower: it concerns authority over the meaning of mediated conduct, including situations where a speaker lacks formal expertise but gains authority through hosting position, lived experience, editorial placement, or multimodal confirmation. Formal expertise in marriage is therefore one possible resource within interpretive authority, not the concept's defining object.

The concept comprises four analytically separable but sequentially related operations:

Evidentiary selection: conduct is selected, sequenced, and positioned as evidence of a relationship.

Authorised naming: a participant, host, expert, celebrity panellist, or editorial voice attaches a category or causal explanation to that evidence.

Multimodal ratification: editing, reaction shots, captions, music, and studio agreement support, qualify, or complicate the proposed explanation within a sequence.

Textual circulation: the interpretation is repeated or reformulated in official episode titles, previews, recaps, callbacks, and decision rituals across the season.

Textual circulation is deliberately distinguished from reception. The present study does not measure whether a frame became dominant among viewers or was amplified by an algorithm; it examines the programme's unequal invitations to interpret. Authority is strongest when all four operations converge and weakest when participants contest a name, panellists disagree, or official paratexts preserve competing explanations. Consider the livestreaming-for-her-benefit sequence (Episode 5, Part 1). An affective-governance reading (Zhong, 2026) identifies celebrity marital conduct being transformed into a public lesson about communication and spousal consideration. The interpretive-authority framework specifies how that lesson acquires force: Yang Zi's claim to act for Huang Shengyi's benefit is (a) selected as the episode's central narrative question, (b) named by the host as a matter requiring evaluation, (c) ratified through reaction close-ups and musical cues that frame his rationale as needing verification, and (d) circulated through recaps and previews that repeat the question across the season. Affective governance explains the general pedagogical project; interpretive authority explains why some accounts of relationship reality become textually more credible, portable, and difficult to contest than others. The concepts are complementary: interpretive authority identifies the fine-grained chain that converts a normative frame into asymmetrical claims to public knowledge.

3. Case, Corpus, and Method

3.1 Case Selection and Chinese Platform Context

Season 4 is treated as a theoretically strategic case rather than a representative sample of Chinese television. It preserves the series' established "marriage + journey + observation studio" structure while placing three publicly recognisable couples within a platform-first production. Official programme materials explicitly combine documentary rhetoric with a pedagogical aim of promoting rational reflection and family harmony. This dual mandate—commercially valuable conflict and constructive interpretation—makes the programme a strategic site for examining how marital crisis is mediated as public knowledge and how interpretive authority is distributed.

Mango TV, launched in 2014 as the digital platform of state-owned Hunan Broadcasting System, is not simply a television channel transferred online. Its content strategy combines commercial youth-oriented entertainment with an explicit commitment to "positive energy" (zheng nengliang) programming, making it a structurally distinctive site for the negotiation between market appeal and regulatory expectations. Mango TV's observation formats, including *See You Again*, sit at this intersection: they seek audience engagement through celebrity conflict while packaging that conflict within studios that model "rational" and "harmonious" interpretation. More broadly, Chinese video services operate through locally specific

combinations of regulation, market structure, interface design, and cross-platform circulation. Scholarship on Chinese celebrity governance likewise shows that entertainment platforms navigate both commercial imperatives and moral-political demands^[17]. The observation studio can consequently be understood as both an entertainment device and a visible mechanism for converting conflict into publicly intelligible lessons. Whether Mango TV's distinct position—as a state-affiliated platform competing in a commercial market—generates interpretive patterns that differ systematically from those on fully commercial platforms such as iQiyi or Tencent Video remains an open empirical question; the present analysis treats the platform context as interpretive background rather than a causal mechanism.

3.2 Corpus and Source Hierarchy

The primary object is the published programme, not the participants' unmediated relationships. The bounded corpus consists of the thirteen numbered main instalments of Season 4 released by Mango TV between 17 October 2024 and 9 January 2025. Because the programme exists in split episodes and platform-specific versions, the analysis uses stable episode/part identifiers rather than claiming universal timestamps.

Six focal sequences were selected using a maximum-variation strategy across three dimensions: couple (Huang–Yang, Mai–Li, Liu–Ge), season phase (opening, middle, closing), and dominant interpretive operation (evidentiary scoring, competing naming, emotional visibility with alternative readings, expert-to-paratext ratification, participant-initiated testimony, and ritual circulation or closure). The full season's thirteen instalments were first screened for scenes in which the observation studio supplied an explicit interpretation of partner conduct or in which partners explicitly contested each other's framing of their relationship; twenty-one candidate sequences were identified. From these, six were selected to maximise coverage of the three variation dimensions, ensuring each couple and each season phase was represented by at least one sequence. Selection stopped when additional sequences reproduced interpretive patterns already represented in the focal set, indicating analytical saturation. Excluded sequences included two involving minor disputes that generated no studio commentary and one involving a non-core participant whose marital status was not central to the season's narrative. The selected sequences are:

Episode 1, Part 1 (17 October 2024): the marital-health test and the introduction of comparative scores^[18].

Episode 5, Part 1 (14 November 2024): the dispute in which Yang Zi frames livestreaming as being for Huang Shengyi's benefit^[19].

Episode 5, Part 2 (15 November 2024): Li Hangliang's description of an "ideal partner," Mai Lin's distress, and his refusal to comfort her^[20].

Episode 8, Part 2 (6 December 2024): Hu Yanbin's studio interpretation that Yang Zi fears Huang Shengyi's departure^[21].

Episode 12, Part 1 (2 January 2025): Li Songwei's "say the opposite" intervention and Huang Shengyi's description of herself as resembling a "single mother"^[22].

Episode 13 (9 January 2025): the vehicle-based final decision ritual^[23].

Primary-text facts were checked against official Mango TV pages and the official Mango TV Lifestyle YouTube uploads. Broadcast dates and focal-event descriptions were cross-checked against episode listings. Published journalism was used only where it supplied a traceable quotation or production context; commentary and user-generated clips were not treated as factual substitutes for the programme.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The study uses critical textual and paratextual analysis. Each focal sequence was examined across three connected textual layers and coded for the four operations of interpretive authority:

Field layer: what interaction, statement, silence, or decision is selected and positioned as evidence?

Studio layer: who names its meaning, with what source of authority, and with what degree of certainty, agreement, or contestation?

Paratextual layer: how do official episode titles, previews, recaps, and callbacks ratify or circulate the scene as a repeatable question or category?

For each sequence, analytic notes distinguished description from inference. Claims about production intention were avoided unless supported by official statements. Claims about audience response were excluded. The analysis proceeded abductively:

gaze, emotional labour, and therapeutic culture supplied sensitising concepts, while the recurring movement from evidence to naming, ratification, and circulation refined interpretive authority.

Negative-case analysis was also used. The final decision ritual and moments of studio disagreement were examined for situations in which interpretation remained unresolved or participants retained control over meaning. These cases reduce the risk of the concept becoming unfalsifiable. Evidence against strong interpretive authority includes unresolved panel disagreement, participant refusal of a diagnostic label, paratexts that pose questions rather than announce conclusions, and decisions that contradict the season's most repeated readings.

3.4 Scope, Reflexivity, and Ethics

The study analyses public media representation and does not diagnose participants. It cannot establish what participants privately intended, what footage was excluded, how producers made particular decisions, or what viewers ultimately believed. It therefore uses calibrated verbs such as “positions,” “invites,” and “renders available,” rather than assuming direct effects. The researchers' theoretical interest in gendered power creates a risk of selecting scenes that confirm female disadvantage. To reduce this risk, the focal set includes all three couples, two male-centred interpretive sequences, a female participant's contested emotional visibility, and the final decisions of all six participants. Gender is treated as one structuring relation among celebrity status, occupational authority, speech style, financial position, and narrative salience.

Although the material is public, marital distress remains ethically sensitive. The analysis uses only statements already central to the programme or reliable reporting, avoids remote psychological diagnosis, and does not reproduce abusive audience labels. Public availability is treated as a condition of access, not as unlimited ethical permission.

4. Evidentiary Selection: Turning Marital Conduct into Public Evidence

4.1 The Marital-Health Test as an Evidentiary Machine

The opening marital-health test establishes the season's epistemic grammar. In Episode 1, the couples answer questions about each other and receive comparative scores. The official title foregrounds whether Huang Shengyi and Yang Zi have “failed” the test, while the synopsis emphasises that the lowest score is surprising. Before viewers encounter the full histories of the couples, the format offers a numerical device that converts familiarity into apparently comparable evidence. The test does not merely reveal knowledge gaps. It establishes a rule: intimacy can be externally prompted, scored, and interpreted. A low score becomes a narrative warrant for later scenes of distance. The authority of the number is partly theatrical—its meaning depends on question selection and performance—but it creates a baseline that subsequent editing can confirm or complicate. In this sense, the test functions as an evidentiary machine that converts private familiarity into a publicly comparable claim.

This sequence demonstrates the difference between framing and interpretive authority. The test frames estrangement quantitatively; the programme then authorises the score as an evidentiary reference point. Participants may dispute what a question measures, but they must respond within an evaluative structure designed by the programme. Evidentiary selection precedes expert commentary.

The sequence also contains a limit. Because all three couples undertake the same ritual, comparison may expose differences without assigning a single moral diagnosis. Interpretive authority remains relatively dispersed: the score invites explanation but does not by itself establish cause. This is a weaker form of authority than later sequences in which studio discourse supplies an explicit relational account.

4.2 Livestreaming “for Her Own Good”: from Justification to Control

Episode 5, Part 1 offers a stronger chain. The official synopsis describes Huang Shengyi proposing an idea and Yang Zi sharply criticising her as “not clear-headed”; the official video title foregrounds his claim that livestreaming is for her benefit. The sequence turns a practical disagreement about labour, exposure, and career direction into a question about who may define another person's interests.

The phrase “for her good” is interpretively dense. On one reading, it presents managerial labour as care. On another, it displaces Huang's account of her own interests and authorises Yang to speak for her. Earlier in the season, Huang states that this is the third year she has wanted a divorce and describes Yang as regarding himself as highly authoritative and expecting her to follow his instructions, a dynamic consistent with the gendered discourses identified in Chinese reality dating

television^[24]. When the later livestreaming dispute is placed beside that statement, a recurring relation becomes textually available: one partner claims both practical expertise and interpretive priority over what benefits the other. The programme's paratext does not neutrally identify "a disagreement about livestreaming." It foregrounds the justificatory formula and the possibility of online backlash. The anticipated public judgement becomes part of the title's drama. Yet the question mark in related promotional phrasing also preserves ambiguity: the paratext invites scrutiny without formally resolving whether care or control is the better explanation.

This scene illustrates interpretive authority operating between participants before it is redistributed across the programme's other layers. Yang claims authority through business experience and spousal knowledge; Huang contests it through first-person experience. Studio commentary and paratextual framing then mediate the dispute as a public question about care, control, and the right to define another person's interests. The core issue is not simply a male gaze but an asymmetry between being spoken about and being recognised as an authoritative knower of one's own interests.

4.3 The "Ideal Partner" Sequence: Hypervisibility as Evidence

Episode 5, Part 2 shifts attention to Mai Lin and Li Hangliang. The official listing condenses the sequence into a striking chain: Li discloses his "ideal partner" template; Mai becomes distressed; and Li refuses to comfort her. The title transforms a complex interaction into three legible units—preference, emotional reaction, and withholding of care.

This condensation is analytically revealing. Mai's visible distress is narratively abundant: it can be shown, replayed, discussed, and named. Li's non-action is quieter but becomes visible through juxtaposition. The sequence therefore has the potential to expose unequal emotional labour rather than simply pathologise the person who cries. At the same time, an emotionally expressive participant is more readily made into the location of "the problem." Her affect supplies more material for reaction editing and studio diagnosis. Interpretive authority is contested here because the same sequence supports rival accounts. One account centres Mai's emotional demand and reads it as excessive pressure. Another centres Li's disclosure and refusal of comfort as a withdrawal of relational maintenance. A third treats the conflict as an incompatibility between reassurance needs and communicative capacity. None can be established by tears alone.

The official paratext helps preserve this ambivalence by asking what choice made Mai leave rather than supplying a psychological label. This is a negative case against the strongest version of interpretive closure. The programme heightens visibility, but its official title does not completely fix causation. The analytical lesson is that hypervisibility increases vulnerability to diagnosis without guaranteeing a single preferred reading.

5. Authorised Naming: Layered Claims to Know the Marriage

5.1 Professional, Celebrity, and Experiential Authority

The observation studio combines several authority resources: professional credentials, celebrity recognition, rhetorical fluency, hosting position, and personal marital experience. These are not equivalent forms of expertise, but the format can place them within the same interpretive hierarchy and enable some speakers to move from "what I saw" to "what this relationship means." The studio's explanatory repertoire draws on what Hochschild (1983) theorised as "feeling rules"—socially organised norms about what emotions are appropriate, how strongly they should be felt, and how they should be expressed. When panellists name Yang Zi's conduct as "control" or Huang Shengyi's accommodation as "unequal emotional labour," they apply feeling rules that make some forms of relational work visible as work while rendering others invisible as natural. Formal expertise matters, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for television authority. Kantor (2021) shows that television programmes perform epistemic authority through institutional practices as well as individual expertise. In *See You Again*, an expert's category acquires force because it follows selected footage, appears within a dedicated interpretive space, and may be confirmed by other panellists or official recaps. A celebrity panellist can likewise gain authority through affective identification or rhetorical clarity. The analytically relevant distinction is among differently sourced claims that the programme positions and ratifies with unequal force.

The studio's most consequential practice is naming. It can translate diffuse discomfort into emotional neglect, control, fear of abandonment, unequal responsibility, or a mismatch of needs. Naming can validate experiences that participants themselves struggle to articulate. It can also give edited evidence more certainty than it can bear.

5.2 “He Is Afraid She Will Leave”: Inference Becomes a Public Proposition

Episode 8, Part 2 provides a clear example. The official title foregrounds Hu Yanbin’s analysis that Yang Zi is afraid Huang Shengyi will leave. A studio inference about motive is elevated into the episode’s public proposition. The title does not merely report that Hu commented; it circulates his interpretation as a salient explanation of Yang’s conduct.

This is interpretive authority in a strong textual form. The field layer supplies conduct; the studio layer attributes fear; the paratextual layer repeats the attribution. Hu’s celebrity and observation position support the move, even though the claim concerns another person’s interior state. The sequence demonstrates why interpretive authority is not identical to expertise. The authority arises from a conjunction of speaker status, editorial selection, and textual repetition. The explanation can humanise Yang by translating controlling or contradictory conduct into vulnerability. It may also redistribute sympathy in ways that obscure Huang’s first-person account of being managed. This does not make the interpretation false. It shows that authorised naming has moral consequences within the text: a causal story about fear can soften one participant’s conduct while shifting attention away from its effects on another.

The sequence also invites a rival explanation. Yang’s conduct may reflect commercial habit, gendered entitlement, concern about public image, fear of loss, or several of these at once. A reflexive analysis therefore distinguishes the studio’s plausible interpretation from verified motive. Interpretive authority is observable precisely because the text makes one hypothesis more portable than its alternatives.

5.3 “Single Mother”: Participant Testimony under Expert Mediation

Episode 12, Part 1 introduces psychologist Li Songwei and a “say the opposite” exercise. The official title foregrounds Huang Shengyi’s statement that she feels like a “single mother”. Here the participant, rather than the studio, supplies the central name. The phrase condenses a material and emotional claim: marital status coexists with perceived solo responsibility. It therefore carries testimonial authority grounded in lived experience. Fricker’s (2007) work on epistemic injustice is relevant because speakers do not enter interpretive situations with equal credibility^[25]. Huang’s celebrity visibility may amplify her speech, while her long incorporation into a spousal business narrative may simultaneously weaken her recognition as an independent knower.

The intervention changes the conditions of speech by asking participants to state the inverse of familiar positions. Such a device can loosen rehearsed narratives, but it also structures what can count as revelation. The expert authorises a procedure; the participant supplies testimony; the episode title ratifies the phrase as the sequence’s interpretive centre.

This case complicates any model in which the studio simply imposes meaning. Interpretive authority can move. A participant can use the programme’s ritual to name her own condition, and the institution can amplify rather than overwrite that claim. The key normative issue is whether subsequent commentary treats the statement as situated testimony, a metaphor to explore, or a complete diagnosis of the marriage.

6. Multimodal Ratification and Textual Circulation: Gendered Visibility and Incomplete Closure

6.1 Cross-Layer Ratification across the Three Couples

Across the focal sequences, interpretations gain force not simply because they are spoken, but because visual, studio, and paratextual layers support and repeat them. This cross-layer ratification is not reducible to gender, but it is gendered in patterned ways. Yang’s business experience supports claims to know what benefits Huang; studio interpretation can recode his conduct through fear or vulnerability; Huang’s authority is strongest when her first-person testimony is directly foregrounded. In the Mai–Li sequence, Mai’s visible distress supplies abundant diagnostic material, while Li’s quieter withdrawal requires editorial juxtaposition to become legible. The Liu–Ge couple is represented primarily through the cross-couple opening test and the final decision ritual rather than a dedicated mid-season sequence. It therefore serves as a limited comparative case: its inclusion tests whether the patterns identified in the Huang–Yang and Mai–Li sequences recur across the full cast, but it does not support an equally fine-grained account of how studio commentary mediates this couple’s conflict. This asymmetry is treated as a corpus limitation rather than evidence of lesser interpretive significance.

These differences show why a simple count of who speaks is insufficient. Visibility, evidentiary selection, multimodal

ratification, and interpretive authority can diverge. A participant may be highly visible but lack control over what that visibility signifies. Another may speak less yet benefit from an authorised explanation that translates conduct into fear, pressure, or incapacity and is then carried across programme layers.

Gender is therefore treated as a relational tendency rather than an all-purpose cause. Celebrity status, profession, rhetorical skill, emotional expressiveness, and prior public reputation also shape who is believed and how conduct is edited. The concept is most useful when it identifies the mechanism through which these resources become consequential, rather than assuming in advance that every scene reproduces the same hierarchy.

6.2 Diagnostic Circulation and the “Problem Woman”

The Mai–Li storyline demonstrates diagnostic surplus: once a participant’s emotion becomes a recurring narrative resource, later scenes, reaction shots, and paratextual callbacks can be assimilated into an established character explanation. Anger, withdrawal, crying, and demands for reassurance may all be read through the same label. This is especially risky for women, who are culturally expected to manage relationships while being discredited for emotional excess.

An oppositional reading, adapted cautiously from hooks (1992), does not require declaring the visible woman blameless^[26]. It asks why her affect becomes the principal site at which the relationship is explained. It also asks whether quieter forms of power—financial opacity, strategic passivity, refusal of care, or the authority to define what is reasonable—receive equivalent interpretive attention.

The official episode descriptions nevertheless provide partial counter-evidence to a completely closed “problem woman” frame. By identifying Li’s refusal to comfort, Yang’s dismissal of Huang’s proposal, and Liu’s failure to recognise Ge’s value, they circulate quieter forms of male non-action as interpretively relevant. The programme is therefore not reducible to a single misogynistic code. Its interpretive field is contradictory: it can expose male authority and simultaneously concentrate diagnostic attention on female affect.

6.3 The Final Decision Ritual and Incomplete Closure

Episode 13 asks each participant to decide whether to leave the vehicle, transforming marital uncertainty into an embodied choice. The ritual stages closure at the level of format, but the decisions do not simply confirm one studio diagnosis. Huang Shengyi and Yang Zi, and Ge Xi and Liu Shuang, choose separation, while Mai Lin and Li Hangliang choose to continue the marriage. The divergence prevents a single moral lesson from absorbing all three relationships.

The final decision is also individually staged. Partners can make different choices without immediate negotiation, which temporarily restores first-person authority. At the same time, the binary design compresses ambivalence into a televisual action. The programme authorises the vehicle as a final sign, even though participants’ later lives remain open.

This is a negative case against the claim that textual circulation always fixes meaning. The ritual produces narrative finality, but its meaning remains contested. Separation can be read as liberation, failure, recognition, or strategic self-preservation; continuation can be read as commitment, dependence, or postponement. The programme cannot fully control which account follows from the choice.

7. Discussion

7.1 From Gaze to the Mediation of Public Knowledge

The analysis extends gaze theory by distinguishing emotional exposure from control over meaning. The three-layer format does not simply multiply viewpoints; it mediates marital crisis through a sequence of evidentiary selection, authorised naming, multimodal ratification, and textual circulation. Interpretive authority names the unequal capacity to direct this sequence and to convert visibility into a credible public account.

Framing explains why certain aspects of an interaction become salient. Preferred-reading theory explains how texts organise meaning without determining reception. Epistemic authority explains why some speakers are treated as credible knowers. Interpretive authority connects these levels within a specific audiovisual sequence. It shows how a speaker’s status, a programme’s edit, and a recurring official label cooperate to make one explanation easier to carry across the text.

The concept also generates a comparative question unavailable to a gaze-only model: when does greater visibility reduce rather than increase a participant’s authority over the meaning of their experience? The Mai–Li sequence suggests that

emotional abundance can create diagnostic vulnerability. The Huang–Yang sequences show that first-person testimony can regain authority when it is institutionally foregrounded. The Hu Yanbin sequence shows that an external interpretation can become portable even without formal clinical expertise.

7.2 Mediating Marital Crisis in the Chinese Platform Context

The Chinese context matters not because the programme expresses a timeless Confucian culture, but because it operates within a platform system that joins commercial competition, celebrity production, regulation, and expectations of socially constructive entertainment. Chinese video platforms are neither neutral distributors nor simple copies of US platform models. Mango TV's official description connects emotional spectacle to family and social harmony, making constructive interpretation part of the format's legitimacy.

This dual mandate helps explain the observation studio's centrality. Conflict generates attention, while expert and celebrity commentary, reaction editing, and official paratexts convert that conflict into lessons about communication, responsibility, and self-knowledge. The programme can therefore commercialise emotional exposure while presenting its interpretations as a public resource for intimate competence. Zhong's (2026) "affective governance" describes this normative project; interpretive authority identifies the textual mechanism through which marital crisis is mediated as public knowledge.

The mechanism is not total. Participants contest each other, panellists disagree, official titles often use question marks, and final choices resist uniform explanation. Chinese platform television should therefore be analysed as a negotiated field in which commercial, pedagogical, and personal claims intersect.

7.3 Textual Mediation, Production, and Reception

The study deliberately separates three levels. At the textual level, the programme positions gestures, statements, and decisions as evidence. At the production level, the reasons for particular edits cannot be known without interviews or production documents. At the reception level, no claim can be made about dominant audience beliefs without a defined audience corpus.

This distinction requires revising common causal language. The programme does not automatically "make" viewers condemn a participant. It makes condemnation, sympathy, or therapeutic diagnosis differently available through textual organisation. Platform recirculation may alter that availability, but such an effect must be independently studied.

Future research could test the concept through reception analysis, production interviews, or comparative content analysis. A platform study could examine whether authorised studio labels recur in comments and clips. A production study could investigate how editors negotiate expert disagreement. A comparative study could ask whether the authority chain differs across Chinese, Korean, and Anglophone observation formats.

7.4 Toward Accountable Interpretation

Observation television cannot avoid guidance, because selection and sequence already guide attention. The ethical question is not whether the format should interpret but whether its interpretations remain contestable. Four criteria follow from the analysis: transparency about editorial mediation, separation of observable conduct from diagnostic inference, provision of a structured opportunity for participant reply, and evidential humility about interior motives. These are offered as an agenda for future normative development rather than a checklist that any single format can fully satisfy.

These criteria suggest specific format-design directions, though each requires empirical testing rather than presumption. First, transparency about mediation could be operationalised by including occasional brief production disclosures that flag editorial choices—for example, noting when a reaction shot is drawn from a different moment than the footage it punctuates. Second, the conduct–diagnosis distinction could be formalised by requiring panellists to separate what they observe from what they infer. Third, participant reply can be institutionalised through a dedicated response segment in which each couple can address the studio's interpretations—not as a performed rebuttal but as a structural counterweight to the diagnostic asymmetry the format currently organises. Fourth, evidential humility can be modelled by panellists themselves when they explicitly name the limits of their inference, as suggested by paratexts that pose questions rather than announce conclusions. These proposals are normative, not descriptive, and each carries risks: production disclosures could become another authenticity effect, and dedicated participant replies could be edited into further conflict material. The broader principle is that an institution converting emotional exposure into public knowledge should also build structural avenues for contesting that knowledge.

The goal is not neutral mediation. It is accountable interpretation: an institution that converts exposure into public knowledge should disclose the limits of its evidence and preserve avenues for contesting its claims.

Conclusion

See You Again Season 4 mediates marital crisis as public knowledge through a layered scene of exposure, explanation, and repetition. Its significance lies not only in who becomes visible, but in who can convert visibility into a credible account. The marital-health test selects evidence; participants and panellists compete to name its meaning; audiovisual form ratifies or complicates those names; official titles, recaps, and callbacks circulate selected explanations; and the final decision ritual stages closure without eliminating interpretive dispute.

The article has defined interpretive authority as the institutionally supported capacity to direct this chain of evidentiary selection, authorised naming, multimodal ratification, and textual circulation. The concept clarifies why emotional exposure can be both enabling and punitive. It can make unequal care and marital control publicly intelligible, but it can also individualise structural conflict and make emotionally expressive participants—especially women—disproportionately available for diagnosis.

The analysis does not establish audience effects, production intention, or participants' private motives. Its contribution is more specific: it identifies how an observation programme turns marital conduct into viewer-facing claims about what intimacy means and who may credibly explain it. A more adequate ethics of reality television must therefore move beyond the question of whether scenes are authentic or scripted. It must ask who selects the evidence, who is licensed to name it, how audiovisual and paratextual forms ratify and circulate the explanation, whose testimony receives credibility, and what remains contestable after that explanation has become public knowledge.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Reference

- [1] Luo, W., & Sun, Z. (2015). Are you the one? China's TV dating shows and the sheng nǚ's predicament. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(2), 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.913648>
- [2] Song, L. (2020). Re-inventing Confucian subjects: Politics of subject-making in Chinese Dating with the Parents. *Continuum*, 34(5), 665–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2020.1812216>
- [3] Ho, W. S. (2022). Chinese Supermom: Re-domesticating women in reality TV shows. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(7), 1801–1816. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1913433>
- [4] de Kloet, J., Poell, T., Zeng, G., & Chow, Y. F. (2019). The platformization of Chinese society: Infrastructure, governance, and practice. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), 249–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1644008>
- [5] Ferris, A. L., Smith, S. W., Greenberg, B. S., & Smith, S. L. (2007). The content of reality dating shows and viewer perceptions of dating. *Journal of Communication*, 57(3), 490–510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00354.x>
- [6] Zhong, Y. (2026). Teaching marital intimacy: Affective governance in Chinese divorce reality television. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779261443337>
- [7] Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- [8] Andrejevic, M. (2004). *Reality TV: The work of being watched*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [9] Couldry, N. (2008). Reality TV, or the secret theater of neoliberalism. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 30(1), 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714410701821255>
- [10] Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- [11] Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

- [12] Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford University Press.
- [13] Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity.
- [14] Aşık, O., & Yılmaz Öcal, S. (2025). Rethinking polysemy and negotiated reading of gender representation in television dramas. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494251360183>
- [15] Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- [16] Kantor, B. J. (2021). Performing “the authoritative account”: How the BBC’s *Horizon* produces epistemic authority. *Social Studies of Science*, 51(3), 463–483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312720947181>
- [17] Xu, J., & Yang, L. (2021). Governing entertainment celebrities in China: Practices, policies and politics (2005–2020). *Celebrity Studies*, 12(2), 202–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2021.1912109>
- [18] Mango TV. (2024a, October 17). See You Again Season 4, Episode 1, Part 1: Three couples begin the journey; Huang Shengyi and Yang Zi fail the “marital-health test”? [Video]. Mango TV Lifestyle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr2bzd3-ec>
- [19] Mango TV. (2024b, November 14). See You Again Season 4, Episode 5, Part 1: Yang Zi says livestreaming is for Huang Shengyi’s benefit [Video]. Mango TV Lifestyle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uA3p5Ptqc0M>
- [20] Mango TV. (2024c, November 15). See You Again Season 4, Episode 5, Part 2: Li Hangliang reveals his ideal-partner template [Video]. Mango TV Lifestyle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD8SDzyp4Cw>
- [21] Mango TV. (2024d, December 6). See You Again Season 4, Episode 8, Part 2: Hu Yanbin analyses Yang Zi’s fear that Huang Shengyi will leave [Video]. Mango TV Lifestyle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4bNbl--A2A>
- [22] Mango TV. (2025a, January 2). See You Again Season 4, Episode 12, Part 1: Li Songwei joins the journey; Huang Shengyi describes herself as a “single mother” [Video]. Mango TV Lifestyle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoeD9jph2H0>
- [23] Mango TV. (2025b, January 9). See You Again Season 4, Episode 13: The three couples make their final decisions [Video]. Mango TV Lifestyle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0N3-22mOVE>
- [24] Jia, X. (2026). Gendered discourses of entrepreneurialism in Chinese reality dating television. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2026.2703970>
- [25] Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- [26] Hooks, B. (1992). The oppositional gaze: Black female spectators. In *Black looks: Race and representation* (pp. 115–131). South End Press.