Win in China!

James Fallows

Points of Access—Pre-Reading

1. When you hear the phrase "reality TV" what do you think of? Does it have a positive or negative connotation? Explain.
2. Given the chance, would you want to be a participant in a reality TV show? Why or why not?
3. What is an entrepreneur? What do you think about the idea of entrepreneurs as "heros" or "role models"? Do you think this is mostly an American idea? Why or why not?
4. How "real" is reality TV? Does it reflect reality? Distort reality? Have no connection to reality? Look up the word "oxymoron." Is "reality TV" an oxymoron? Why or why not?

You think TV is bad in America, and then you watch it someplace else. For all of its defects, American TV generally has high production values—attractive people to look at, sets and staging that don't seem homemade—and it is often the place where new ideas get their start, just before they become worldwide clichés.

Right now the curse of Chinese TV, apart from its being state-controlled and de facto censored, is the proliferation of stupid low-budget "reality" shows. The oddest reality show I've come across while channel surfing was a "World's Strongest Man-type contest between teams of midgets. The cruelest, put on by the state-owned China Central Television (CCTV), pitted young families against each other in elimination events. Each family team had three members—father, mother, elementary-school-aged child—and did coordinated stunts. Three families survived each show to appear in future rounds, and three were sent home, the children inconsolable and the husbands and wives looking daggers at each other.

Fortunately there is also a best Chinese reality show, or at least one that my wife and I followed avidly through its increasingly suspenseful Tuesday-night episodes last year. We first heard of *Ying Zai Zhongguo*, or *Win in China*, from a Chinese-American friend, Baifang Schell, who was involved in the production. We became so interested that in

December we traveled to Beijing to be in the audience at CCTV's cavernous main studio for the live, final episode, in which one grand champion was chosen from five remaining contestants. Like many other Chinese reality shows, this one featured a segment known by the English letters "PK." This means nothing to most English speakers (penalty kick?), but it is widely recognized in China as meaning "Player Kill" in online games.

The PK stage of *Win* served the function of the Tribal Council in *Survivor* or the Boardroom in *The Apprentice:* After a contest or judges' assessment each week, two of that episode's competitors ended up pitted against each other in a three-minute lightning elimination. This is PK, in which one opponent issues a question, challenge, or taunt, and the other tries to answer, outwit, and provoke the first. Once done speaking, a competitor slams a hand down on a big button, stopping his or her own clock (as with a chess-match timer) and starting the opponent's. Faster and faster, each contestant tries to manage the time so as to get the very last word. The audience gasps, cheers, and roars with laughter at the gibes—and at the end, one contestant is "killed," as determined by audience vote or a panel of judges. Even if you can barely follow the language, it's exciting.

But something else distinguishes *Win in China*—not just from the slew of other reality shows but also from its American model, *The Apprentice*, with Donald Trump. "The purpose of *The Apprentice* was very functional," Wang Lifen, the producer and on-camera host of the show, told me (in English) shortly after the final episode. "There's some job that already exists, and Donald Trump is just looking for somebody to fill it, while providing entertainment." Wang said that she had higher ambitions for her show: "We want to teach values. Our dream for the show is to enlighten Chinese people and help them realize their own dreams." Having seen the program and talked with contestants and compared it with some superficially similar Chinese reality shows, I don't scoff at what she said.

The didactic and uplifting ambitions of the show could be considered classically Chinese, the latest expression of a value-imprinting impulse that stretches from the Analects of Confucius to the sayings of Chairman Mao. Or they could be considered, like the Horatio Alger novels of young, muscular America, signs of an economy at an expansive moment when many people want to understand how to seize new opportunities. Either way, the particular message delivered by the show seems appropriate to China at this stage of its growth. Reduced to a moral, *Win in China* instructs Chinese people that they have chances never open to their compatriots before—but also that, as one contestant told me at the end of the show, "The only one I can rely on is myself."

Wang Lifen moved from Beijing to Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2004, for a one-year fellowship at the Brookings Institution. She was then in her late 30s and was an influential

figure in CCTV's news division, where she had created and produced documentaries and talk shows. By the time she returned to CCTV, a year later, she was ready to act on a question she'd asked while watching American TV: What would an improved, Sinified version of *The Apprentice* look like?

It would be Chinese in being huge. There would be thousands of initial candidates, with entry open to any adult "of Chinese origin" anywhere in the world. More than 100 (versus *The Apprentice*'s 18) would have a serious chance to compete on-camera for the prize. The nature of that prize indicated why *Win in China* could seem more American than its American model. Instead of a job and a paycheck within a Trump-style empire, Wang offered seed money for new entrepreneurial ventures—and for more than just one contestant. By Chinese standards, the sums were enormous. The ultimate victor would receive 10 million yuan, or nearly $1.3 million. The runner-up would get 7 million yuan, and the three other finalists would get 5 million yuan apiece. With other prizes and incentives, the money the show was offering came to nearly $4 million.

This would be large even for a U.S. show, but the source of the prizes was even more unusual. Wang raised the money not from sponsors or the network but from individual investors in China—for instance, Andrew Yan, of Softbank Asia Infrastructure Fund, who had recently been named "Venture Capitalist of the Year" by the Chinese Venture Capital Association. Yan and a few other investors, including Kathy Xu, of Capital Today, and Hugo Shong, of the U.S.-based company IDG, put up the pool of prize money—in return for a 50 percent share in the real-world businesses the winning contestants would use it to create or expand. Twenty percent would belong to the contestants, and 15 percent to the show's production company. The remaining 15 percent would go by "lucky draw" to viewers who had voted for candidates, via mobile-phone text messages, during the show's run. In effect, the many weeks of the program (33 episodes were shown in all, some live) amounted to a drawn-out, public version of a pitch to venture capitalists (the investors) from entrepreneurs seeking their backing (the contestants). Every week, contestants would be put through some kind of quiz or business-oriented team challenge that would whittle their numbers down. Wang had an additional hope for this process: that it would give viewers practical tips on starting businesses of their own.

Within a few months of her return, Wang had rounded up the financial backing, gotten the show on CCTV's schedule, and begun the hunt for candidates. (China is a timeless civilization and so on, but today's business deals can happen very fast.) Her team posted Web notices and placed ads in 20 newspapers around the country, asking potential entrepreneurs to send in résumés and business plans. In March 2006, the top 3,000 (!) files were sent to screening teams, which reduced the pool to about 500.

Interviews of at least 15 minutes apiece then produced 108 semifinalists—an auspicious number, because of the "108 heroes" (also known variously as the "108 bandits" and "108 generals") of a famed uprising in the Shandong mountains a thousand years ago.

All of the 108 came to Beijing at their own expense and made a mass climb of the Great Wall, along with the investors, producers, and judges, to build team spirit for the challenges ahead. Then, in one televised debut episode, the 108 were divided into two big teams and winnowed down to a field of 36, based on their performance in a computerized simulation of business decisions. Meanwhile, all 108 were given off-camera seminars on finance, personnel management, and other skills each would need as an entrepreneur.

Through the next stage, the 36 survivors appeared in groups of four before panels of judges that included prominent Chinese business and academic figures. The best known was Jack Ma, co-founder and CEO of China's dominant e-commerce site, Alibaba. Each contestant had two minutes to present his or her business plan (three women were among the 36), after which the judges would begin the interrogation. What about holes in the plan? What was Plan B, if the sales projections didn't pan out? Why was this plan better than other candidates'? Often the questions came from investors whose own money was at stake.

On September 5, the producers held a reception at CCTV's Beijing headquarters for 6,000 guests: contestants, friends and family, press, and business dignitaries. The 12 finalists were announced—and then taken away to the Huang Yuan hotel in Beijing, where they would spend the next four weeks being filmed competing.

The seven further weeks of the show, which took the 12 contestants down to the five who would compete in the finale we went to, drew an audience that grew to 5 million (considered large for this "serious" a show), were discussed avidly in numerous blogs, and had a structure more or less familiar from American reality shows. The competitive pattern was essentially like that of *The Apprentice:* The 12 contestants were divided into two teams, which then competed against each other in some real-world business task—selling life insurance, raising money for charity, improvising a solution to some other business problem. Members of the winning team got to come back for the next episode. Members of the losing team went through various other assessments that included a final PK. Based on how the pair sounded when debating, a panel of judges would send one or the other home.

All the contestants were interesting, but we found ourselves rooting for four. Zhou Jin, one of two women among the final 12, was general manager of an advertising agency, and her project was to develop new labor-training services. She had been seven months pregnant when the competition began, and was granted permission for a brief

absence from the competition, but then fought her way back into consideration with strong performances. Ms. Zhou had a sassy air and, as best I could judge from others' reactions, a sharp tongue. She had a lot of backing in blogs because of the way she handled her pregnancy.

We came to think of Song Wenming as the social-conscience candidate. He was a mild-looking, baby-faced man in his early 30s from Anhui province, an impoverished area many of whose people end up as illegal migrant workers in the big coastal cities. Song himself had earned an M.B.A. and held a job with a big international accounting firm. He resigned and, with two friends, started an employment firm to match Anhui people with jobs. His business plan was to expand these operations with new capital.

Zhou Yu was jokingly called by his competitors "Wolf' or "Wild Wolf," but we thought of him as Country Boy. He was a tall, rangy 35-year-old with a buzz cut who had worked for years in the clothing business, and his business plan was to expand factories for lingerie and other ladies' apparel. In manner, he was much earthier than most of the other contestants—barking out remarks, grimacing, predictably losing his temper at some point in each show. Among the final 12, he was the only one not to have gone past high school, and during PKs he talked about the limits of book learning and the value of the school of hard knocks. He was a favorite in mobile-phone voting.

Then there was Zhao Yao, who struck us as the smoothest of the candidates. He grew up in Beijing but now lives in Los Angeles, having been based in America since 1995. He'd left China to get an M.B.A. at the University of Wyoming, and then tried to set up what he later described to me as his "Wyoming-based selfservice tour-planning company." After work-permit problems, he'd moved to California, where he was a computer programmer, an accountant, and a business consultant. He dreamed of bringing the "direct-response marketing" business to China. Direct-response marketing is the polite name for the infomercial business, and Zhao planned to set up the infrastructure—call centers, payment systems, customer service—that would allow the George Foreman Grill, for example, to be sold on TV in China (except here it would be the Jackie Chan Grill).

Week by week, our candidates survived, until the last episode before the live finale. Zhou Jin, the woman, and Zhao Yao, the Californian, were both on the team that lost that week's competition, and they were pitted against each other in the final PK. One or the other would go down! Their debate was relatively high-road, each pointing out his or her own strengths rather than the other's weaknesses. Ms. Zhou looked shocked when the judges' result was announced: She would go on to the finals, and Zhao was out. This seemed shocking because Zhao had seemed, probably even to her, such a golden-boy candidate. When the series was over, I asked him, in English, how he interpreted

his elimination. "If I had just spoken my mind, here is what I would have said before the verdict," he told me. "I would have told the judges, 'I don't think I've given you any reason to eliminate me. But the lady hasn't given you any reason to eliminate her. Under the circumstances—her being pregnant, the struggles of a young mom, the public support—you should just take me out.'" As they did.

Everything about the live final show was meant to be spectacular. Most episodes had three judges; this time there were 11. In addition to famous investors, like Jack Ma and Hugo Shong, there were other prominent business figures, like Niu Gensheng, head of one of China's leading dairy companies. Introduced separately, and given the right to make the final selection, were the heads of the two most respected firms in all of China:

Lenovo, the leading computer company, and Haier, which has a high reputation for quality and which absolutely dominates the domestic "white goods" market for refrigerators, washing machines, and so on. *Win* publicists said this was the first time the two CEOs, Yang Yuanqing of Lenovo and Zhang Ruimin of Haier, had made a joint appearance.

The two finalists who were not among our candidates were the first two eliminated in PKs. Then things got serious. Ms. Zhou, Song "Social Conscience" Wenming, and Zhou "Wild Wolf" Yu answered questions from the judges—and mobile-phone votes showed that Song had done best of the three. Thus the two Zhous had to face off in a PK, whose drama was apparent even if you didn't understand what they were saying. In an earlier round of questions, all five candidates had had to explain their greatest weakness. Mr. Zhou said that he had a bad temper—but that passion was a good thing in a leader! And so, he helpfully pointed out, was the kind of education you couldn't get from books. For her part, Ms. Zhou said that her attention was always flitting from subject to subject; on the other hand, that kind of alert eye could help in running a business.

During the PK, it was as if Ms. Zhou was trying to make Mr. Zhou explode. "You are avoiding my questions, maybe you don't have enough learning to answer." "They call you the Wolf, it would be better for the Wolf to stay in the wilderness." After Mr. Zhou (unwisely) mentioned that he was thinking of going back to school, she dug in: "Even if you get the diploma, it won't mean real skills." After inserting each of her barbs, Ms. Zhou would slap her PK button with a smile at the audience and a little rise of her eyebrows. Wild Wolf would splutter and yell, slamming his fist onto his button, and finally getting a near-ovation from the crowd when he said, "You question my skills, but I am standing here tonight! That should be proof enough for anyone!" He also had the last words, which were: "I'll talk to you later!"

As it turned out, in trying to provoke the Wolf, Ms. Zhou ended up mortally wounding them both. The judges declared him the victor over her in this PK—one said later that he was "like China itself, from a poor background, still crude, but proud of its rise"—and so she had to sit down. But in the anticlimactic final choice between Mr. Zhou and Song Wenming, the M.B.A., Zhou's fiery and uncontrolled outbursts during his PK with Ms. Zhou proved his undoing. All 11 judges spoke, many saying that passion was great, but you needed a steady hand to build an enterprise. Song Wenming was nothing if not steady. The Haier and Lenovo CEOs glanced at each other and gave the winner's name: Song Wenming.

What had it all meant? I got in touch with our four contestants later on, Zhao Yao in person when he visited Shanghai and the others by e-mail through a translator. Each made veiled and provocative comments about the contest itself. When I asked Ms. Zhou about differences between the contest as she experienced it and what viewers saw on TV, she said she could not give any details, "because of traditional Chinese values" of discretion. "All I can say is that the exposure of the most repulsive side of human nature by us—if there was any, because of the award—did not, fortunately, appear in front of the audience." (She added that some altruistic moments had also escaped capture.) She said that she had often felt "condescension and suspicion" toward her talents from others on the show because of her gender, but hoped that her success would be encouraging for Chinese women in general. ("And after all, the United States only now has its first woman speaker of the House.")

When I asked Zhao Yao whether his life was different now, he began in stentorian tones—"The impact of my involvement in the show has been profound"—and then started laughing and said, "I am taking the tone promoted by the show, enthusiastic and assertive!" He said that becoming famous enough to be recognized on the street had been of great practical benefit, since a real venture capitalist had now offered him funding. "I do wonder if the actors in U.S. reality shows would be expected to iron our own shirts and wash our own socks while encamped in a hotel room for a month," he added. "Maybe they do— I only know that's what we did."

Zhou Yu, the Wolf, said he was glad to have been the people's champion. He had also learned that his wife was now referred to as "Wolf's Wife." Song Wenming, the winner, said that he had grown exasperated at times but had been confident he'd do well as long as he could just be himself before the judges. In indirect or open ways, all of them made clear that what was shown onscreen had been trimmed, rearranged, and highlighted to seem more dramatic. "Maybe this is the 'reality' that reality TV is introducing us to!" Zhao Yao said.

About one point all of them sounded utterly sincere: their hope that the program would encourage more people in China to start their own businesses. Song Wenming put it in historic terms: Its age-old ethic of stability was part of the reason China had fallen so far behind Western countries, and even now, "Chinese culture does not facilitate creativity very much." He hoped the show would introduce the "positive power" of entrepreneurship. Ms. Zhou said she hoped potential entrepreneurs would learn the importance of both perseverance and passion.

There was much more in the same vein.

"I have a close friend on the staff of a state-owned company," Wang Lifen, the show's producer, told me. "After the final episode, she called and said: 'I have to quit my work unit and my company! I have to be an entrepreneur, because I want a new life.'" Women must retire from state-owned companies in China by 55; men, by 60. "No one can provide for the next stage of life but me," Wang's friend told her. According to Wang, a "minister-level" official in the Chinese government called the head of CCTV when the series was over and asked, "How can we make everyone watch this show?" (In China, this might not be a purely rhetorical question.) As a start, CCTV has renewed the show for two more seasons.

"There is no religion in China, so it is very important to promote the right kind of values," Wang said. "Today for our society, the entrepreneur can be our hero."

"Hero" might be going too far, but the participants on *Win* seem to have been received in the press and blogs as modern Chinese role models. Having listened to their dreams and followed their onscreen contests, I cannot help wishing all of them well. Even more, I hope China's development is such that their show is eventually looked back on the way Horatio Alger's *Luck and Pluck* is: as an unsubtle and perhaps over-sincere effort to teach people the rules of peaceful prosperity. I hope it doesn't eventually become another bit of evidence about the Chinese bubble: the way people behaved when they thought the good times would always go on.

Points of Engagement—Reading Comprehension

1. On page 102, Wang Lifen, the producer of *Win in China* describes the purpose of the show. Find the passage. Do you think a TV show can achieve these goals? Why or why not?
2. Fallows explains the concept of "PK" on page 102. If the intent of *Win in China* is to instill values and enlighten people, what values does "PK" impart?

3. In the final paragraph, Fallows hopes that *Win in China* will be viewed the way Horatio Alger's *Luck and Pluck* is, in the United States. Do an Internet search on Horatio Alger and his book/s. What similarities do you see? Can you spot any differences?
4. Consider the following claim: "*Win in China* could seem more American than its American model" (103). Look at the context. What, specifically, does this mean?

Points of Departure—Assignment Questions

1. In "Win in China!" James Fallows describes a TV show that the Chinese government hopes will encourage its citizens to dream of a better future. In "Small Change: Why The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," Malcolm Gladwell writes about Facebook and Twitter, stating that these social media tools make it "easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concerns:" (134). Yet, Gladwell also realizes the limitations of these tools. How do traditional media, such as TV, differ from social media as an influence on values, behaviors, and social change? Your project is to engage with the views in both texts and come up with an answer of your own, in light of these views. You could also pair this question with Ian Bremmer's essay, "Democracy in Cyberspace."
2. In their essays, Naomi Klein and Kristof and WuDunn write about many of the serious problems associated with globalism. James Fallows gives us a much more positive view of America's influence abroad. Which "America" do you think is more powerful in the world? The America that other nations imitate? Or the America that they fear as a threat? Why?
3. Is there such a thing as "American values"? "Chinese values"? Are values something personal, individual, or can a nation have a set of "values"? If so, where do they come from? Who decides what they are? Write a paper in which you explore these questions, and provide answers using essays by James Fallows and one or two of the following authors: Ian Bremmer, Amy Chua, Diana Eck, Janet Flammang, or Arlie Russell Hochschild. Keep in mind that you are addressing two *specific* nations in all of these essays: China and the U.S.
4. How can money bring people together? How can it drive them apart? Do communities always benefit from increased wealth? What is the price that they pay, if they pay one at all? In James Fallows' essay, the winner of the competition, Song Wemming, hopes the TV show will introduce the "positive power of entrepreneurship" to fellow Chinese. Back in America, Arlie Russell Hochschild and Janet Flammang observe the negative effects of capitalism and the pursuit of wealth on American family life

and civil society. As China moves from a state-controlled Communistic economy to a capitalistic entrepreneurial economy like we have in the US, what effect might we anticipate on the way people relate to one another in China? In other words, what influences—positive or negative—does an economic system like capitalism, which values money so highly, have on civil society?

5. #winning. In his essay, James Fallows documents the human desire to WIN, but there has recently been more research on the counterbalancing desires to cooperate and collaborate. These two inclination—to win and to work together—may exist within individuals or within cultures in extremes or in various combinations on a continuum. Look for specific examples of the competitive and cooperative spirits in the contestants on *Win in China* and in essays by Amy Chua, Arlie Russell Hochschild, Gregory Orr, or Naomi Klein. Then ask yourself these questions: Why do we care so much winning? What does the drive to win do for us and to us? What are we willing to do in order to win? When and why do we cooperate? If someone wins, does it always mean that someone else loses? Are there some struggles or competitions that simply *cannot* be won? What happens then? Use the experiences described by these authors to help you formulate your own position about what makes individuals more competitive, more cooperative, or a mix of the two.