

# A Review of Reasoning Variety Shows in China

Yihang Chen

School of Art, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, China

2238464252@qq.com

**Abstract.** In 2016, reasoning variety shows represented by “Who’s the Murderer” developed rapidly and received wide attention from academics. This paper combs through relevant literature and finds that research on reasoning variety shows focuses on program content construction, communication and marketing strategies, and impact and inspiration. However, the studies are mainly case studies, with limited perspectives, single case selection and insufficient depth of theoretical research.

**Keywords:** Reasoning variety show; Who’s the Murderer; literature review.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, domestic variety shows have entered a prosperous "era". According to data from the Tencent Entertainment White Paper from 2014 to 2016, China's variety show market has been blossoming since 2013. At one time, all kinds of variety shows on topics such as talent shows, marriage, parent-child and workplace have emerged continuously. In this market environment, the reasoning variety show has risen to the top with its distinctive content and unique situation, becoming a social and cultural hotspot that has won widespread popularity among viewers. The rise of reasoning variety shows in China has also brightened up traditional TV variety shows.

In terms of program content, the rise of reasoning variety shows cannot be separated from the infiltration of reasoning culture. Agatha and other writers have created a large number of high-quality works of deductive reasoning that have been well received by readers in China and have provided rich textual resources for the prosperity of deductive television shows. The accumulation of reasoning texts and the emergence of reasoning films and dramas have all created a strong cultural atmosphere for the rise of reasoning variety shows. “The development and maturation of various forms of art and entertainment based on reasoning novels and the resulting derivation of ‘reasoning’ elements as selling points over the years have provided the content and audience basis for the eventual emergence of reasoning variety shows.” [1]

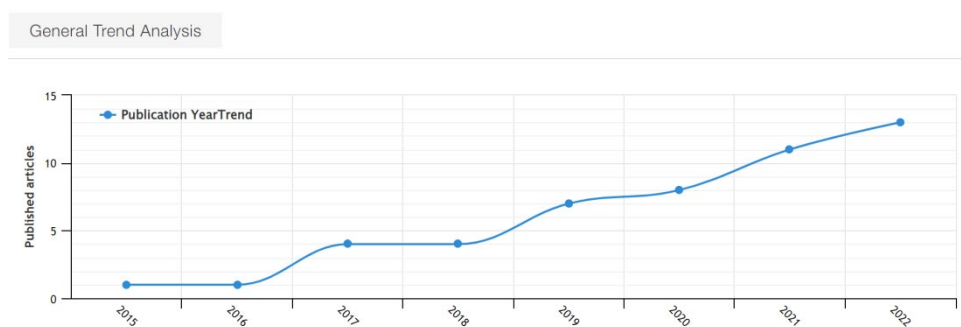
In 2013, a number of reasoning variety shows in Europe, America, Japan and Korea came out, attracting the attention of reasoning fans worldwide and setting off a reasoning boom in Asia. 2014, South Korea’s JTBC TV production “Crime Scene” aired, with two consecutive seasons of excellent reputation. In 2016, Mango TV launched a large-scale reasoning variety show “Who’s the Murderer” (later referred to as WTM). After the program was online for two hours, it received over 10 million views and its topic was read over 130 million times. As a masterpiece of domestic reasoning variety show, WTM quickly achieved a harvest of both views and reputation after the broadcast, breaking the high-start and low-end situation of domestic “variety N generation”. The continuous good reputation of WTM has set off a national reasoning craze, and new reasoning variety shows have emerged in spurts, with major video platforms launching their own reasoning variety shows one after another. Youku has launched “One of Us”, iQiYi has introduced “Cute Detective Solve Cases”, and Tencent has created “Let’s Start Reasoning”. The reasoning variety show is showing an unprecedented hot trend.

In academia, however, case studies of programs such as WTM and “Great Escape” (later referred to as GE) are abundant, but fewer papers have explored the overall field of reasoning variety shows, and research on vertical subcategories such as detective cases and secret rooms is even rarer. Numerous scholars have studied from the shallow to the deep, analyzing from the core of the program to the overall value in progressive depth. Therefore, the author will sort out the current research status of reasoning variety shows from three aspects: program content construction, communication and

marketing strategies, and impact and inspiration, to summarize the shortcomings of current research and lay the foundation for subsequent research. This paper also provides a reference for the future development of reasoning variety shows, helps media practitioners to create more reasoning variety shows of high quality and promotes the development of the reasoning culture industry.

## 2. Methodology

Domestic variety shows on reasoning emerged relatively late. It was not until the popular broadcast of WTM in 2016 that variety shows with the theme of “reasoning” gained widespread attention in China. It was also in 2016 that research on reasoning variety shows began to increase in China’s academia, basically showing a rising trend year by year.



**Figure 1.** Annual Trends in the Publication of Reasoning Variety Literature (analysis of literature search results on CNKI)

A search on CNKI, the Knowledge Service Platform of Wanfang Data, and the official website of Veep Journals using the theme term "reasoning variety show" yielded 42 relevant papers, 19 of which focused on WTM.

Since there are few studies on reasoning variety shows, the author searches for similar categories and subcategories, and find a total of 10 relevant papers with the subject terms such as suspenseful reasoning variety shows, drama variety shows, and detective variety shows. It can be seen that the literature on the overall field of “reasoning variety shows” in China is relatively small, the research perspective is fragmented, and the coverage is not comprehensive, resulting in a large gap in the research on the subcategories.

Therefore, in order to conduct a comprehensive and rich study, the author also searches for case studies of reasoning variety shows. Using WTM as the theme word, 155 papers have been obtained from the three platforms, which is a large number of papers with extensive contents. For other variety shows of the same genre, the author searches for “Great Escape”, “Cute Detective Solve Cases”, “72 Floors of Wonder”, “Panda Kill” and so on, which yield a total of 17 articles. It can be seen that the current research on reasoning variety shows mainly focus on WTM, lacking research on other programs, which leads to much room for research.

## 3. Definition and Classification of “Reasoning Variety Shows”

At present, there is no unified definition of “reasoning variety shows” in academia. Liu Jianping defines “reasoning variety shows” as “reality shows with detectives as the main characters, reasoning and solving cases, or entertainment shows with reasoning as the main element, inferring or guessing people or things through known clues.” [2] According to Wu Mingrui, reasoning variety shows are those based on sound and picture technology, with case solving as the core, or other variety shows that are dominated by reasoning elements. [3] Ma Sunan believes that reasoning shows are those that take reasoning elements as the core and present the theme under the shell of the cases. [4] The above scholars have different definitions of the reasoning genre, but there are also commonalities. All of

them emphasize “reasoning as the core”, and most of them mention “reasoning about cases”. It can be seen that “reasoning based on cases and the absolute dominance of reasoning” is the core element in the definition of reasoning variety shows.

However, the definitions by different scholars can sometimes be controversial. Regarding the division of specific genres, Liu Jianping believes that entertainment programs that focus on reasoning and quiz through clues also belong to reasoning variety shows. However, the attribution of quiz shows has not been widely recognized by other scholars. Tang Yi points out that the setting of reasoning and guessing is not uncommon in variety shows, and there is no shortage of reasoning and guessing links set in many competitive and game-like reality shows.[5] It is evident that many variety shows set up quiz sessions. But guessing and reasoning are different. Treating quizzes as reasoning is suspected of confusing definitions. Classifying quiz shows as reasoning variety shows leads to the problem of blurring and extending the scope. Taking into account the views of scholars, the author believes that reasoning variety shows are those that focus on “reasoning and strategy”, searching for clues according to the rules and integrating multiple factors to conduct a reasoning competition in order to win and seek the truth.

With the continued development of reasoning variety shows in recent years, academic attention to this type of program has gradually increased. The vertical subdivision of reasoning variety shows will be the trend of subsequent academic research. For the division of specific types, Sun Xuliu divides reasoning variety shows into board game reasoning and story performance reasoning from the perspective of program presentation. The article “Reasoning Variety Show, Still Halfway Up the Mountain” by The Paper takes the main mode of program content as the basis for division, and believes that “at this stage, reasoning variety shows are mainly divided into three categories: case investigation reasoning, secret room reasoning and board game reasoning.”[6] From a comprehensive point of view, the more widely used classification is the “case investigation reasoning, secret room reasoning and board game reasoning.” In view of the fact that academics and the industry are currently paying less attention to board game variety shows, mainly focusing on the detective and secret room categories, the author will focus on these two categories in the next part, analyzing the development of China's reasoning variety shows from three aspects: program content construction, communication and marketing strategies, and impact and inspiration.

## **4. Program Content Construction of Reasoning Variety Shows**

### **4.1 Narrative Perspective**

Regarding the research on the narrative perspective of reasoning variety shows, scholars in China mainly analyze from two major theories: Genette's narrative focus theory and Todorov's perspective trichotomy.

Genette's narrative focus theory has proposed three types of narrative perspectives: “zero focus, internal focus, and external focus”. Zero focus means that the narrator is an omniscient spectator; Internal focus means that the narrator narrates from the perspective of the characters in the text with a restricted perspective; External focus means that the narrator has less information than the characters in the text.[7] Todorov has also divided narrative perspectives into three forms: omniscient perspective (narrator > character), internal perspective (narrator = character), and external perspective (narrator < character).[8] It corresponds precisely to Genette's focus theory.

Linking the theory to the program for a case study, Zhang Yinjiao chooses “Cute Detective Solve Cases” for narrative study, arguing that the program involves omniscient perspective, internal perspective and external perspective, strictly grasps the narrative rhythm, presents the storyline in full, and makes the story more vivid and concrete. [9] Li Dan analyzes WTM with Genette's focus theory and reaches the conclusion that external focus is mainly used, mixed with internal focus and zero focus. With a rich narrative perspective, the climactic content of the show is presented to the audience in a three-dimensional way.[10] Regarding the zero-focus narrative perspective, Wang Yue believes

that GE is a typical case. The camera in the program carries God's perspective, and the program team records the entire behavior of the guests exploring the truth of the case with an omniscient view.[11]

#### 4.2 Narrative Structure

With regard to the narrative structure of reasoning variety shows, many scholars have pointed out the remarkable point of "suspenseful narrative", citing WTM as an example. According to William Archer, suspense is "the foreshadowing of a very fascinating state of affairs, but not its pre-narration." Liu Jianping points out, "In WTM, where the case is the key to reasoning, the whole process of the program is full of interlocking suspense." [12]

In addition, some scholars also pay attention to the "looped layered structure" and "cause-and-effect linear structure" of WTM. According to Wu Mingrui, from the presentation of structural features, WTM demonstrates the "looped layered structure" to the fullest extent. The program gives full play to the features of this structure, such as polyphonic narrative, to better develop the suspense and enhance the overall sense of suspense in the reasoning narrative.<sup>3</sup> Li Xianjie explains that the looped set structure refers to the narrative dynamics of multi-layered narrative threads and the dominant structural pattern of temporal back-and-forth.[13]

According to Li Dan, there is also a narrative structure of "cause-and-effect linear structure" in WTM, which means that the narrative is guided by cause-and-effect relationships and plays out in a linear time.[14] This is similar to Liu Ruixing's view, who further specifies this linear structure as a compound thread structure. "The compound thread structure connects character activities, plot extensions, and relevant details to form an organic narrative whole, consisting of relatively independent storylines." The story of WTM draws out different clues through the activities of characters and details of objects in the story, using the compound narrative to drive the plot forward.[15]

#### 4.3 Narrative Content Production

Analyzing the narrative content creation from the perspective of audiovisual language, scholars such as Liu Ruixing and Shen Sijia study the aspect of immersion creation and argue that China's reasoning variety shows habitually use the means of temporal and spatial reshaping to create a unique program format.[16] Yang Yuchen and Xue Yuan pointed out that "the immersive detective variety show should be reasonably set up from the beginning to improve the audience's sense of participation." [17] Our reasoning variety show creates an immersive viewing experience for the audience in a comprehensive and meticulous manner in both time and space dimensions, from the perspective of agenda setting, plot design, character building, as well as scene construction and prop placement.

More scholars study the audiovisual language of reasoning variety shows by focusing on the level of post-production and analyzing the segmentation in relation to specific shows. In the case of WTM, for example, Wang Huijing argues that the program's post-production is based on logic and reconstructs the plot through audiovisual means.[18] Min Zhou and Zixuan Chang explain in detail the artwork and subtitling in the program.[19] Hu Man and Wan Jiaqi analyzed the details of the show's emojis, animation design, artistic characters, and bullet screen.[20] Lv Lijun is concerned about the editing ideas, scenery selection, and sound rendering of the show.[21] Lu Chunyu, on the other hand, specializes in sound production, analyzing the use of vocals, music, and other sounds in the program.[22]

The above studies on the content construction of reasoning variety shows in China have focused on three levels of narrative perspective, narrative structure, and narrative content production. Some of them link to the classical theories in the field of narratology to summarize the narrative perspectives and narrative structures of China's reasoning variety shows. Some focus on the content level of specific programs and integrate the post-production aspects of audiovisual language with case studies. The overall research trend is "from macro to concrete, combining theory with case studies".

## 5. Research on the Communication and Marketing Strategy of Reasoning Variety Shows

### 5.1 Communication Strategy

#### 5.1.1 Communication Path

Reasoning variety shows represented by WTM have been widely disseminated in recent years, and their dissemination paths and channels have also gained the attention of scholars' research. Research on the dissemination path of reasoning variety shows can be roughly divided into the following two categories.

The first is to analyze the dissemination path of the program from the program itself, focusing on the push settings of the broadcast platform and the level of audience interaction and participation. Zhang Nana believes that WTM has established diversified information touch points on the broadcast platform, and the layout in Mango TV has increased the broadcast rate of the program proper and the discussion of related topics.[23] Fang Ting and Lu Zhe point out that WTM has achieved vertical communication and deep user involvement. The team has collected material from netizens on the fan community communication platform and has incorporated it into the subsequent recording of the show.[24] Dong Xianshang has also pointed out that before the formal broadcast of WTM, audiences can participate in a prize competition initiated by the program team to complete story deduction based on clues to obtain rewards.[25] Li Zonglun analyze that the fourth season of WTM adopts a new mode to interact with the audience, through short videos of innovative micro-dramas, using cinematic images and a new approach to lay out the complex character relationships and suspenseful storylines.[26]

Second, in view of the overall situation of the program, the dissemination path of the reasoning variety show is analyzed from the perspective of converging media and multiple media communication to build an information dissemination matrix. Liu Jianping focuses on the overall communication channels and audience psychology of reasoning variety shows, and summarizes the full-media three-dimensional communication approach. Zhong Taoyang is concerned about the use of new media technology in the communication process, pointing out that WTM makes full use of the advantages of technology to create a region-wide interactive model of the online and offline joint investigation.[27] Zhang Nana analyzes the audience information dissemination matrix built outside the broadcast platform of WTM. The program team has opened the official microblog and WeChat official account, and has established relevant topics on Zhihu and Douban to stimulate in-depth discussions among users.

#### 5.1.2 Communication Theory

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of scholars using academic theories to analyze inferential variety arts, and the relevant theories involve many fields such as subculture, theatrical creation, aesthetics, sociology, cultural psychology, and communication. With wide coverage and fragmented research perspectives, the overall research is not deep enough, and there is still much room for development in theoretical research. There is relatively more literature analyzing inference-based variety shows from communication theories, including 5W communication model, use and satisfaction theory, carnival theory, spiral of silence theory, agenda setting theory, symbolic interaction theory and other communication theories.

Scholars in China study the communication strategies of reasoning variety shows, mostly placing the programs under the theoretical framework of Laswell's 5W communication model. Cao Qiumin[28] and Niu Yue[29] take WTM as an example, and analyze the program in a multidimensional and comprehensive way around five elements: communication subject, communication content, communication medium, communication object and communication effect. Some scholars have also expanded on this basis. Wang Yuran and Liu Yingjie have expanded the two communication processes of communication feedback and communication environment, transforming the linear communication model into a circular communication model, forming the "7W

communication model”.[30] Wu Qian combines the 5W model and summarizes the “new four elements” of social communication: communication content, communication form, communication scene construction, and communication interaction, and analyzes the communication strategy of WTM.[31]

Regarding the research on the communication effects of reasoning variety shows, Wang Ruiqi uses the use and satisfaction theory to analyze the satisfaction of audience needs through programs such as WTM, GE and “One of Us”.[32] Luo Chengjie [33] and Zhang Guyue [34] also analyze the adaptation and satisfaction of WTM to audience psychology from the perspective of use and satisfaction. Qin Yang discusses how online variety shows have both entertainment and cultural attributes, starting from Bachkin's carnivalization theory and combining the character settings and plot settings of WTM. [35] Zhai Zhan combines the binge theory with the successful broadcast and good brand effect of WTM as an example to analyze its novel characters, unique thematic content and communication strategy. [36]

## 5.2 Marketing Strategy

At present, domestic scholars' research on the marketing strategy of reasoning variety shows mainly focuses on case analysis of the programs, and the research angles are relatively scattered, involving specific marketing models, integrated marketing, brand marketing and other aspects. Regarding the research on marketing and communication strategies, Ma Sunan summarizes that the marketing model of case reasoning shows includes multi-angle “big V” marketing and all-round “advertising” effects.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the study of integrated marketing, Zhang Nana analyzes the five aspects of WTM: localized innovation, using celebrity effect, enhancing audience participation, based on social hotspots, and scenario-based marketing.<sup>23</sup> Zhong Guoli, on the other hand, combines integrated marketing theory with the principles of interaction and individuality to conclude that WTM has the characteristics of co-marketing between producers and consumers as well as segmentation and clear positioning. [37] For the brand marketing of the program, Yang Xinyi and Lu Xiaoyan summarize the marketing strategy of WTM to dig deep into the IP value and launch IP linkage. [38] Yang Fan focuses on analyzing the brand image building and brand product extension of WTM. [39] On the whole, scholars have studied the marketing strategies of reasoning variety shows from a wide range of perspectives, but have mainly focused on advertising and marketing of segmentation, with more research on implanted advertising for WTM.

Implanted advertising, the most notable marketing feature of reasoning variety shows, has received the attention of many scholars. Taking WTM as an example, some scholars have studied the characteristics of its implanted advertising in detail. Su Xiaocheng believes that advertising implantation is highly relevant to the program, deeply bound to the persona, closely tied to the brand, and derivative of the common conversation with IP. [40] Bao Jifan and Tang Xi point out that WTM makes advertisements become program props, guests become brand promoters, and program episodes become a means of implanting advertisements.[41] Qiao Xitong believes that the implanted advertisements of WTM are characterized by various forms, rich creativity and perfect integration of props and plot.[42] Other scholars are concerned about the specific way of advertising implantation. Lupin believes that WTM adopts a diversified strategy to integrate native advertising into the program's plot and format, subconsciously realizing marketing needs.[43] Zhang Shanrui points out that WTM is flexibly implanted through innovative advertising slogans, clever voice implantation and relevant props.[44]

Regarding the analysis of communication and marketing strategies of reasoning variety shows, most scholars in China start with communication strategies and marketing strategies. Some start with the program itself, while others summarize the communication path for the program as a whole. Some scholars have also linked communication theories to explore the communication strategies of reasoning variety shows, transitioning from superficial phenomenon analysis to deep theoretical research. The research on marketing strategy focuses on the analysis of implantation advertising in

advertising and marketing, and explores the implantation methods and presentation characteristics of WTM.

## 6. Impact and Inspiration of Reasoning Variety Shows

### 6.1 Social Value Impact

Scholars generally agree that high-quality variety shows such as WTM and GE focus on current hot cases, construct social issues and promote mainstream values in their content design. Fang Ting and Lu Zhe point out that WTM infuses value orientation and positive energy into the plot, attracting viewers to empathize with hot social events.<sup>[24]</sup> Wu Yudi believes that GE presents flat social topics in three dimensions, and delivers the right value guidance to the audience while playing games. [45] Regarding the study of the program's agenda setting, Shen Fei analyzes that each episode has guests expressing their views on the involved social topics, conveying a healthy lifestyle and an optimistic attitude.[46] Liu Qian points out that the fourth season of WTM sets up detective energy stations, adding experts in various fields of scientific knowledge and expressing reflections on social events.[47]

In addition, there are scholars who believe that reasoning variety shows have legal and educational significance. Zhang Hanwei points out that WTM promotes the spirit of law while entertaining, with the importance of law highlighted at the end of each story.[48] Ling Shaosong also points out the importance of WTM based on legal cases, which spreads the idea of law and order and popularizes legal knowledge and law-based society to the public.[49] Liang Xinyi, on the other hand, believes that WTM has achieved a blend of entertaining deconstruction and education.[50] Taking GE as an example, Zhang Jing uses quantitative research to analyze user experience data and concludes that the program has a relatively good entertainment-education persuasion effect.[51]

Chinese scholars have discussed more about the value impact of reasoning variety shows, mainly taking WTM and GE as examples, and believe that the shows combine social hotspots, which exert the social impact of transmitting mainstream values, popularizing legal knowledge, and exerting educational significance.

### 6.2 Future Development Inspiration

Throughout the multifaceted research on China's reasoning variety shows, scholars have summarized the future development of this type of variety show in three main directions. First, program creation should be audience-centered, with clear audience groups and accurate user portraits. A variety of ways should be used to understand the psychology of the audience, combine user preferences and feedback for content creation, and meet the needs of the audience market. Secondly, reasoning variety shows should deepen their content creation and strengthen their innovative power. At a time when the reasoning variety show circuit is getting crowded, the only way to be invincible in the genre-rich competitive market environment is to keep innovating and creating based on the rule of "content as king". Finally, reasoning variety shows should play a positive role in value orientation and spread positive energy. While taking into account the program's entertainment needs, producers should also deliver the right values, reasonably control the balance between fun and seriousness, create positive thematic content, and place the program at a higher level of value intention.

## 7. Summary and Reflections

In summary, there are certain shortcomings in the research on reasoning variety shows in China. Since research in this field only began to emerge from the hit broadcast of WTM in 2016, the overall development time is relatively short and academic research lags behind, so academic results on reasoning variety shows are not rich and comprehensive enough.

First, there are relatively few studies on the overall genre of reasoning variety shows, and most of them are case studies of typical programs. The research objects are relatively limited, lacking

macroscopic awareness. The research horizon is relatively narrow, often stuck to the content of one program, lacking comparative analysis among programs, and failing to look at the whole beyond the framework of programs.

Second, the selection of cases is relatively single, with most scholars' studies focusing on WTM, and a few scholars also mentioning GE and "Cute Detective Solve Cases". However, the subcategories of tabletop reasoning variety shows such as "Lying Man" and "Panda Kill" have not been studied at all. There are also other categories of relatively less well-known shows that lack attention.

Third, the depth of research is not strong enough, and the research method is relatively superficial. Most of the research is confined to superficial examples and arguments, and there lacks deeper investigation using academic theories. The literature combining data research and quantitative research is rare. Most of the analysis is only inferred from the content of the program.

China's reasoning variety shows have sprung up in recent years and are favored by the general public and commercial capital. In a genre-rich market environment, newborn variety shows, as well as veteran variety N-generation shows, are expected to assume the social responsibility of their producers, exert positive value orientation and deliver positive energy. In terms of academic research on reasoning variety shows, scholars should expand their horizons to the macro level of the overall genre, not limiting themselves to content analysis of typical cases. The selection of cases can also refer to more diverse programs. Theoretical research should also dig deeper and use interdisciplinary professional research methods to explore deeper academic fields.

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