The Tabloidisation of
Chinese Television
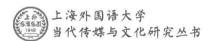
中国电视市井化研究

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INTRODUCTION

The Rock and the Hard Place

Broadcasting in China is caught up in two major currents of change. The first one involves the expansion of market dynamics and the requirement that the media in China strives for success in a highly competitive market. The second one entails the move from a strongly centralised system to one ceding more autonomy to regional operators. These currents of change are a response to the reform and opening-up in 1978. The situation faced by contemporary Chinese media involves more than simply operating within these two currents of change simultaneously. This would be difficult enough, with the struggle for market share and an adequate profit margin at the very least meaning that some media outfits and organisations would sink beneath the waters. In actual fact, the situation is far more difficult than this, despite broadcasting media being allowed greater independence to operate in the market than they have been since the founding of the People's Republic of China(PRC) in October 1949.

The situation is much more difficult because Chinese broadcast media have not only to operate in the open market; they also have to operate in such a way that they will be seen to contribute to the construction of a 'socialist spiritual civilisation'. This places them between a rock and a hard place. The two sets of demands placed upon them so that they maximise their profitability in the marketplace and remain sensitive to the interests of the Party-State—pull them in two contrary directions at once. It may seem that these contrary pulls are almost impossible at times, but Chinese broadcasting has turned to a particular resolution of the problem of living with contradictory demands.

This has involved the turn to tabloidisation. This may not seem to be a satisfactory resolution at all. How can the tabloidisation of programming formats and content be seen in any way to be compatible with maintaining and further developing a 'socialist spiritual civilisation'? After all, tabloid content is hardly considered to involve the culturally edifying material or spiritually uplifting content that would be considered desirable for socialist culture. Civilisation is one of the noblest words in the lexicon—it sits very unhappily with the prurient interests pandered to by sensationalist crime stories or game shows. What is required of a media organisation by the State and what an organisation needs to do to survive in the market are largely incommensurate demands. They are rock and the hard place of contemporary Chinese broadcasting.

There is nothing special about tabloidisation. It is a tendency that has developed alongside the commercialisation of the media in many countries, east and west. There are various general features that accompany and identify it, but it doesn't develop in exactly the same way in every country. This

is especially true of China. The current direction of the country is summarised by the Party's chief propaganda slogan, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. The 'Chinese characteristics' part of the slogan is shorthand for the development of a market economy and the expectation that both media and non-media organisations operate according to the pressures and forces of the open market. For many in the West this turns socialism into capitalism, or rather fatally undermines the further consolidation and development of socialism so that it becomes, to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from capitalism. At the least it eases the transition from communism to capitalism, since the pre-1978 period is thereby not entirely repudiated or forgotten. Socialism is still officially the central political creed. It remains to be seen whether it can actually continue to be in any way realised when market forces and pressures hold sway, but for this thesis the key question is whether tabloidisation is compatible with the requirements of the Party-State of its 'free' media.

Tabloidisation is the result of media responding to market dynamics and needing to struggle for maximum financial gain, and ask for absolute loyalty from media institutions, part of which involves serving the cultural rights of ordinary citizens, such as informing, educating, representing the public and encouraging their participation in civic life. Again, tabloidisation cannot be argued as being in the best interests of the public when such rights are brought to the forefront of discussion. Tabloid contents nevertheless go down very well with the public, and hence also with sponsors. Tabloidisation in journalism and other areas of programming emphasises crime, celebrity, and human interest stories. In China this seems part and parcel of the rise of the Internet as an interactive media source pushing broadcasters towards developing new, and more dynamic relations with their audience, and grounding programmes in popular experience rather than using a top-down model of communication.

Why, then, has the Party-State encouraged marketisation of the media and therefore the tabloidisation that has resulted from this? If, as it would seem, tabloidisation is anathema to everything a socialist state is about, surely it would be folly to give this any form of official sanction. The peculiar feature then arises: Why has the Chinese state not openly condemned the newly emerged tabloid tendencies that have become so openly manifest in Chinese broadcast media? This takes us to the hub of the thesis, which is an investigation of tabloidisation with Chinese characteristics. This involves the recognition of tabloid content and style that is both culturally specific to China while in certain ways sharing general features of tabloidisation anywhere. It is what is most specific to China that provides the answer to this key question.

The Party-State in China has tacitly supported and endorsed the tabloidisation of broadcast content precisely because, contrary to the assumptions and claims of many Western critics of the deleterious effects of market forces on cultural life, it sees such content as acting largely in harmony with its own interests. It does so because it can be exploited to show that the Party-State acts in cooperation with television, as for instance when it is investigating official malpractice in local government and so, in the interests of the people, being opposed to graft and corruption wherever these are manifested. Tabloidisation is also seen as acceptable just as consumerism is, for within accepted limits these lead to a certain degree of public satisfaction and contentedness which can be easily extended to current arrangements and established interests within the political system as a

whole. This is perhaps a feature of tabloidisation that could apply also in western democracies, but what the thesis argues is that it acquires Chinese characteristics in working just as much in the other direction where the illusion of popular participation is being fostered by tabloid tendencies. Such tendencies create the sense that the media are acting on behalf of the public and giving the public a voice, as for example with the increasing trend towards a focus on ordinary social life in broadcast news programming in China.

This is the central argument about tabloidisation in the thesis. Its Chinese characteristic is that it is just as much a result of political forces as of media marketisation. This is where its fostering of the illusion of popular participation works directly in the interests of the Party-State. If tabloid content and programming provide a suitable social lubricant and so ensure the smooth maintenance of public acceptance of the social and political status quo, then obviously the Party-State is more than happy to support and endorse this singular result of marketisation and of the media responding to market forces. But this is a more indirect result of marketisation and doesn't have as strong an appeal to established political interests.

The problem is where tabloidisation is actually not compatible with perceived socialist principles. The thesis develops three case studies in contemporary Chinese broadcasting to illustrate these contrary positions which the Party-State has taken on tabloidisation. The Chinese characteristics of tabloidisation are most starkly revealed when central control is exerted over what become regarded as its excesses. Tabloidisation creates the experience of greater freedom of action and involvement, but this can only be extended within very definite limits. When those limits are seen to have been reached, the experience is revealed as based on shifting sand, rather than solid rock. What can move beneath the feet of the media are not only the vagaries of market forces but also the shifts in party directives and manifest party control. By any reckoning, this is a muddled situation. The thesis is an attempt to grapple with the consequences of this situation for Chinese broadcasting today.

Dynamic City, Tabloid TV

There is a growing literature on the general parameters and impact of media marketisation in China (e.g. To, 1998; Zhao, 1998), but to date there has been a conspicuous lack of case study materials detailing how particular broadcasting organisations are responding to change, and more importantly, the consequences of their commercial choices for the range, diversity, and presentation of programming. My research addresses this gap through its detailed case studies of programmes associated with Shanghai Media Group (SMG), which operates thirteen television channels in the country's second city and dominates the media market there. The particular programmes—*Tonight Show*, *Depth 105*, and *Game Players*—are all disseminated through a particular channel, Dragon TV, the city's only satellite, and the youngest non-digital, television service. The analysis in the case studies focuses on the impact of institutional innovations and shifts in programming in order to investigate and assess broadcasters' specific responses to the changing media environment.

As China's financial centre and one of its most dynamic and cosmopolitan metropolitan regions,

Shanghai has a long history of being in the forefront of innovations in media and culture. It was the first to adapt to shifting opportunities and to pursue emerging trends from the 1920s onwards. In his seminal work *Shanghai Modern*, for example, Lee Ou-Fan (1999) presents the city as the epicentre of China's encounters with cultural modernity in the inter-war period. Its semi-colonial history before the founding of the People's Republic of China reshaped the city and its residents. It was affected in this way by modern technologies, arts and letters, and relations with outsiders. These resulted in various unique social and cultural characteristics for Shanghai, including its cosmopolitanism, its fashion-consciousness, and multicultural styles. National economic development after the 1978 reform and shifts in the national media sphere also influenced Shanghai and its television system. Since the 1980s, Shanghai has been opened to international capital and rapid development. Alongside the city's reconstruction and the emergence of development zones with multi-functions in the 1990s, a strategic blueprint that aimed at making Shanghai one of the international centres of economy, finance and business was also set up and gradually realised. More importantly, all these developments have been fully supported by not only the municipal government, but also the Central Government which puts Shanghai in an unbeatable political position in contemporary China. In short, the city has everything it needs and is now playing a cutting-edge role in relation to contemporary cultural shifts.

As the centre of public urban changes in Shanghai, television is pivotal to this process. On the one hand, the city television service is typical enough to present the country's regional broadcasters. As I will follow up in this thesis, being the country's second biggest media conglomeration ranking right behind CCTV, the city's television service demonstrates all the major institutional and programming shifts in Chinese television in general in the process of regionalisation and commercialisation, and definitely reflects Party interests and principles. On the other hand, this very television service is unique in the sense that it has developed within the special and powerful political, economic, and cultural background, with the commercialisation of this television service squarely in the cultural tradition of the city. It is also unique in the sense that the SMG has a complete monopoly over the local television market with a clear ambition towards national media power for the sake of profit, which practically posits itself as a direct rival of the CCTV. Consequently, how SMG attempts to ground this unlegitimised ambition within a commercialised yet still state controlled media system is a matter of intense cultural and political interest.

The originality of this research lies not only in its case studies but also in the data drawn directly from SMG and its television and television related institutions. The research is based on in-depth interviews with station personnel, and supplemented by the analysis of relevant documentation. This 'insider' knowledge, coupled with analytical objectivity, enables me to approach the project with a unique combination of grounded insight and conceptual depth. The research delivers a unique insight into the impact of ongoing changes on the institutional and creative life of contemporary Chinese television. It makes a substantial contribution not only to media and communications scholarship but also to work on the current transformation of Chinese culture, economy and society more generally.

Key Research Questions

Based on detailed documentary research and extensive interviews with a range of managerial personnel and programme makers working in the television industry, this research aims to show:

(1)How the relationship between SMG and Chinese Central Television (CCTV), the country's major public broadcasting organisation located in Beijing, and the relationship between the media and the Party-State, has changed over the last two decades, and the consequences of these shifts;

(2)How the SMG has responded to the challenges and opportunities presented by marketisation, institutionally (in terms of organisational policies, goals and strategies), creatively (in terms of programme making), and socially (in terms of its relationship with its audiences);

(3)How the implications of these shifts and responses may affect the future organisation and role of television in China.

Methodology

Research of this kind raises obvious questions of access. As a past programme director with the former Oriental Television Station (OTV), I have an extensive range of contacts at both executive and production levels. In fact, my research was discussed within the organisation and greeted warmly as a worthwhile initiative. Consequently, there were very few problems either in securing interviews or gaining access to internal documentation. In practice, the research employs three main methods: documentation analysis, in-depth interviews, and case studies.

First of all, I was able to gain access to various archival sources that are not open to the public. These included the Shanghai Audio-Visual Archive, the online intra-organisational SMG archive, internally circulated documents within SMG, and the Dragon video library. Such sources yielded an enormous amount of data which I have drawn on extensively throughout the thesis. My documentary analysis covers Chinese media history, media policies, regulations, goals, channels and programme performance. I have also drawn on information about new working relations produced by government, CCTV, and SMG. This includes internal documentation and data on the internal SMG website that doesn't circulate publicly as well as those available for public access. Both restricted and open forms of data are in print, digital, or video forms according to availability.

Secondly, in-depth interviews in Mandarin with executive personnel and programme makers working within SMG were conducted for the research. In total, more than 30 personnel in broadcasting and advertising have been interviewed, ranging across senior managers in the Shanghai television system and Dragon Satellite TV, independent producers and programme makers either working within SMG or for the independent production companies, senior executive personnel in the advertising industry who have rich experience in dealing with media. Interviews were conducted in person in Shanghai, or through telephone and emails when necessary. Some of the interviewees were interviewed more than once over the three year research period, not only for complementary or

supplementary information, but more importantly, in order to check or further probe the information they initially provided.

The interviews were conducted in two modes: formal and casual. Most of the interviews with senior personnel were in a formal style—set at a fixed time, and focused on nothing but the topic. The programme makers and independent producers, however, were more likely to express their real feelings and offer stories other than the official viewpoint. They often preferred a casual talk rather than a formal interview. More importantly, these 'other stories and explanations' were more likely to be told in a rather casual and friendly way. This encouraged them to be forthright in their stories, complaints, and experiences. Both kinds of interviewees were always aware that the material they provided may be used in my research. However, it is clear that even those interviews with senior personnel in a formal style were not considered 'official' as most interviewees saw an interview as a favour for the researcher who needed direct information from those inside the organisation. So even top executives didn't always confine themselves to the official line. However, given the sensitivity of some of the interview material, or when they were talking off the record, some of the interviewees remain anonymous in the research. Casual conversations with media personnel were also used in this research, often in anonymous form, but only when the information is considered useful.

Thirdly, case studies of the economic, political and social contexts and pressures shaping the development of selected new popular programme forms within SMG have been conducted in the research. This has enabled me to examine the impact of contemporary changes in China and the institutional shifts in the Chinese media at a micro-level. It has involved me in the generation of more concrete primary evidence than in some of the more background chapters of the thesis. Three different programme genres were selected from Dragon Satellite TV: documentary-style investigative programming, the entertainment talk show, and the computer game show in a hybrid format. These case studies are based on the longitudinal content analysis of the three programmes over a period of several months, and on the more qualitative analysis of interviews, documentation, and random sample programmes provided by the relative production teams and by Dragon Satellite TV.

The Arrangement of the Thesis

The whole thesis focuses on the consequences of institutional changes for programming. It involves a threefold move from the more general to the particular, gradually homing in from a national to a regional and an organisational focus. Reflecting this threefold move, the thesis is divided into three sections.

The first section provides an overview of the general context of current changes together with the key conceptual arguments about tabloidisation. Chapter One presents an outline history of contemporary Chinese mass communications and its official working practices, which are governed by the Party principle. Chinese media have adopted the Party principle since Mao's era, and it therefore constitutes the national background for the whole thesis. The development of the country's television since 1978, when the national political economic reforms started to transform the old planned

economy to a socialist market economy and greatly accelerate national economic development, is presented in Chapter Two, with the focus being on the institutional shifts in governance, finances, corporate structures, technologies, and cultural horizons. This all starts with the decentralisation of the Chinese television system which ceded more autonomy to the regional authorities and broadcasters in order to stimulate and speed up the commercialisation process and free central government from financial pressure, although of course the ultimate central control remains with them. Accompanying this was the growth of the country's advertising industry on which the television service has come increasingly to depend, the development of communications technologies and their broader utilisation by broadcasters, the conglomeration of the media system at a regional level which strengthens regional media power and introduces more space for independent producers, and globalisation and programme importation, exportation, and increasing cooperation with foreign capital. Following the institutional shifts, Chapter Three indicates the changes in programming in general from instruction to audience building, with the major focus being on the arguments for and against tabloidisation. I argue that his process, the wholesale shift to what is commonly accepted as tabloid media content and a tabloid style and approach, is the principal cultural response to the demands imposed by growing commercialisation and competition. The tabloidisation process in Chinese television, although it shares similar features with the western experience, presents its own Chinese characteristics, not only through close relations between the ideological and the tabloid contents, but also through the collaboration between the Party-State and the media institution in terms of production and presentation. As previously argued, what is distinctive about Chinese tabloidisation is its political as well as its cultural manifestations.

Moving from the national landscape to the regional broadcasting system, the second section focuses on Shanghai as a cosmopolitan media centre, the growth of SMEG and the organisation of Dragon. Starting with a general picture of Municipal Shanghai, Chapter Four explains why Shanghai is special and worth investigating. This is not a historical review of Shanghai, but a review of some highlighted unique aspects of Shanghai in its semi-colonial history. These include the city being a city state with strong sense of its uniqueness and Shanghai-ness on a nationwide scale; a cultural laboratory where both international and various national cultures were tolerated and absorbed to shape its own distinctive metropolitan culture; a commercial and consumer centre where business, finance, banking, and commerce all flourished during the pre-Civil War period which commercialised the city to a great extent and has made it a financial centre of the country since then; and a media hub with innovations in media production and a reputation as the centre of the country's film and advertising industries. An annalistically historical review of Shanghai television is given in order in Chapter Five to draw a general picture of this regional television service and explain how it responds to the great social and cultural changes in China over the last two and a half decades. This provides the essential context for Chapter Six where Dragon Satellite TV, born as a result of both financial and political demands by the local authority, is first introduced in the thesis. Dragon is the first practically corporatised television channel in China, and its ambition is to become a national broadcaster that matches the city's position in the country. This pits it in direct competition with CCTV and other

successful satellite channels.

The final section focuses on the programming of Dragon and presents the three case studies. Chapter Seven focuses on Dragon's programming strategies after examining the institutional innovations of this satellite service. Institutional shifts, however, only aim at better financial results with very little change in the control structure. Tabloidisation comes in at the production and presentation levels. It is there that its ideological 'effects' are manifest. In fact, as a commercialised Chinese television service, Dragon has inevitably gone tabloid with clear evidence of this being shown in its programming. In order to generate concrete evidence to help the investigation at a micro-level and exemplify the different dimensions of tabloidisation in Chinese television, three programmes from different genres—the entertainment talk show *Tonight Show*, the investigative documentary *Depth 105*, and *Game Players*, a computer game show in hybrid form—are studied in detail in Chapter Eight, Nine, and Ten respectively. The case studies reveal that Chinese tabloidisation is not of a piece but has various different manifestations. My argument is also that it has different dimensions as well, particularly those identified as political rather than cultural. The way these have taken on Chinese characteristics is crucial to the story which the thesis seeks to tell.

PART ONE   CHINESE MEDIA IN TRANSITION

CHAPTER ONE
FROM MAOISM TO MARKET

Although the media in China have a long history dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907) when newssheets, designed as a sort of court circular, first began to appear, the first modern Chinese newspaper was published in 1815 by an English missionary, Robert Morrison (1782 - 1834). In the fifty years following the Opium War in 1840, foreigners established more than three hundreds newspapers in China, most of which were published in Chinese. Obviously, the major western powers, who were competing for trade and influence, tried to use these media to advance their interests within China. (Fang & Chen, 1992) Learning from these foreign powers, many Chinese reform-minded intellectuals began to use the media to advocate their own ideas and mobilise people in support of their causes. Since China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, this effort was increasingly devoted to building opposition. Some ninety-four newspapers and periodicals appeared throughout the country from 1895 to 1898, and more than one hundred and sixty revolutionary newspapers were published in 1905, both overseas and at home. (Gong, 1997)

This legacy was build upon throughout the period of China's modern mass communication. It can be roughly divided into four periods.

The First Period

The first period can be traced back to the late 1910s, when the whole country was facing both martially imperialistic aggression from outside, and intensive internal battles among different warlords. This continued till 1949, when Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China. Over this period the media came to be integral components in the Party's management system for the purposes of communist mobilization and propaganda. (Hong, 1998: 42) They were highly effective in influencing public opinion and winning people over. (Wang, 1989: 20-22) Print media were the major channels, developing most quickly and being used most frequently to mobilize people for revolution. Even before the founding of the CCP in 1921, many future Party leaders, such as Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai, were heavily involved in publishing radical journals in which intellectuals and students voiced their attitudes and position towards imperialism

and warlords. Marxism-Leninism, for example, was vigorously propagated in China during the May Fourth Movement in 1919 by *Xin Qingnian Magazine* (*New Youth Magazine*), which was chiefly edited by Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, founders of the CCP.

Soon after the birth of the CCP, the mass media as a means to mobilize people for revolution and as instruments for communist propaganda bloomed with influential publications and key institutions under the Party's leadership. By the autumn of 1933, for instance, there were thirty-four newspapers and journals, including party organs and non-party publications in the Jiangxi Soviet, the central beachhead of the Chinese Soviet Republics. These advocated Marxism-Leninism and spoke against the Nationalist government. (Zhao, 1998: 15) Mao delineated the four tasks for the mass media, saying that they 'should propagandise the policies of the Party, educate the masses, organise the masses, and mobilise the masses' (Lu, 1979-1980: 4-5). Meanwhile, the Red China News Agency, the predecessor of today's central news institution, Xinhua News Agency, had been established. The Party's press continually grew during the anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1945-1949) both openly and underground. Indeed, even before the founding of the PRC, the Party had built a complete media system, with the key institutions already in place.

The Second Period

The second period consisted of the years after the establishment of the PRC from 1949 to 1965, just before the Cultural Revolution. By the time the CCP assumed power, it had built a foundation for the media system of the New China and expended its propaganda force very well, which in turn promoted the Party's cause and played a key role in its growth and propulsion to power in 1949. (Yan, 2000: 499-501) News media over this period were established mainly on the basis of the Party's journalism cadres and the material and technological infrastructures left over from the old regime. The journalism of the party state was established without much change either in conceptualisation or structure. (Zhao, 1998: 16) Strongly influenced by Lenin's propaganda theories, the Chinese media strictly reflected Marxism-Leninism and the Maoist conceptions of mass persuasion. Though independent commercial publications were encouraged in theory by the CCP (Zhang, 1992: 59), and special interest newspapers run by political and social organisations, as well as government departments, were allowed, they could only survive as part of the Party-dominant system with special roles. Effectively, the CCP came to hold a monopoly over China's mass media. This was a time of consolidation. The Party tightened control over the media, with the primary purpose of publicizing the Party's policies and directing people towards the socialist cause. (Hong, 1998:42)

Theoretically, the role of the mass media in the political process at that moment was based on the Party's political communication theory of 'mass line' (Zhao, 1998: 24), which defined three distinct power relations: between cadres (Party workers in the field) and the masses (the people as a whole); between Party cadres and ordinary Party members; and between the Party as the revolutionary vanguard and the masses. (Howard, 1988: 21) As Mao stated: