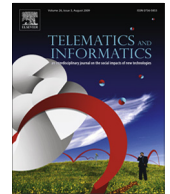




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Commercial reform and the political function of Chinese television [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the changing dynamics of the relationship between the market reform and party control of Chinese media. Based on the party-state's decision on further economic liberalization in the new era, a commercial structure is becoming more common in the field of communication. The diffusion of economic reforms into media domain had been regarded as a force which would lead to the erosion of the Chinese Party's control over ideology. This article interrogates the way in which the sphere of production of Chinese television has been privatized in a post-WTO period. It argues that while the new media market initiates a redistribution of power and interests, the Chinese party-state is still able to effectively control the production and consumption of media messages within its nation, and an increase of commercialized operation of the television system does not necessarily lead to the weakening of the political function of Chinese television.

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1. Introduction

A lot has been written in the last decade about the media commercialization and its inherent drive to either democracy or liberalization in Asia (Zhao, 2008; Thomas, 2005; Sen, 2008). Chinese television sector has also experienced these tendencies attributed to its rapid commercial development. Since the government adopted the economic reforms that introduced the market logic into the Party-controlled media system, television has no longer been treated as a pure political apparatus heavily manipulated by the party-state to reinforce its intensive propaganda work, but plunged into “the deep ocean of commercialism” (Lee et al., 2006:598). There was a growing body of literature that documented the symptoms of Chinese television's commercialization, ranging from the changes of institutional structure (i.e. the introduction of commercial advertisement), professional practice (i.e. being more dependent on market responses), to program formats and content (i.e. a rapid increase in the number of entertainment formats and a decrease in explicitly propaganda issues). These commercial changes have invoked much attention and are believed to constitute a powerful force in providing more autonomy to television workers, weakening the state's control power and ultimately leading to the undercutting of ideological uses of television (Voraseth, 1995; Nanjundaiah, 1995; McDaniel, 1994).

Lee (1990) has comprehensively captured the “de-emphasis of ideology” on Chinese television during the 1990s' commercial reform. First, as he documented, the state's political influence has become less and less intrusive. Second, the relative de-emphasis on ideology has made it possible for various cultural genres, such as entertainment shows and other less political material, to flourish. Third, television has been manipulated to promote economic modernization instead of class struggle, leaving China to be “far less totalistic in the ideological arena”. After China's accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO), there has been renewed emphasis on the symptoms of the “de-politicalization” of Chinese television. The concern is

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that political usage of Chinese television would be challenged as new policies have been made to turn media institutions into enterprises that are scheduled to become more responsive to the market. Joint-ventures with regional and western capital have been found common and the party-state's monopoly over media production is gradually giving way to competition. The ideological control began to relax and a rampant growth of television commercialization would drive audiences away from the party-state serious propagandist work (Meng, 2001; Zeng, 2005; Zhang, 2006).

The period of the 1990s has witnessed a fast-changing nature of Chinese television. Commercialization in this period has depoliticized the media and given an increased operational autonomy to media workers in China. However, some recent studies have observed that commercial reform by no means necessarily undermines the Party-state political manipulation over its media system and the ideological tone conveyed by media messages (Zhao, 2000; Ma, 2000; Lu, 2003; Fung, 2008; Lee et al., 2008). Lee et al. (2008) argue that in a post-WTO era Chinese press has been conglomerated into 'Publicity Inc's' to possess a two-tier operation system to remain its propaganda work, which means that the 'parent papers' are oriented toward the wishes of the party bosses while the 'offspring papers' cater to the wants of the masses. Within such an innovative operation, Chinese newspaper has been able to serve the party while please the market at the same time. "This institutional 'innovation' can be viewed as part of the state corporatist policy in which power marries money in a tacit manner" (2008:13).

The assumption that commerce has always gone against established power becomes contestable, at least in the context of Chinese media. Having similar point of views with those of the above-mentioned studies which collected their findings mainly from the field of China's press, this article first attempts to rich these arguments by investigating some new scenarios taken place in the sector of Chinese television. Through investigating the intricacies of Chinese television's commercialization process in a post-WTO era, this article tries to fill a major gap in the current literature. Second, with the empirical findings obtained from the fieldwork conducted in television organizations in Beijing, this article observes that Chinese television producers have developed an innovative strategy, which I tend to conceptualize it as "Transformative Mediation" narrative measure, to please the party-state and the market at the same time through promoting party's ideology by means of injecting more commercial components into television contents. Finally, this article argues that the privatization of television production area does not necessarily lead to a weakening of the state's political control over the operations of television. Instead, the party-state is still able to effectively control the production and consumption of television contents due to a wide adoption of "Transformative Mediation" among Chinese media professionals. As such, the political function of Chinese television has not been undermined with the ongoing commercial reform. Chinese television actually becomes capable of enhancing propagandist effectiveness by softening explicit propaganda messages and the producers have been led to a cooperative, albeit less ideologically antagonistic, relationship with the party-state.

2. Research methods

This article employed four types of research methods to study the television organizations in Beijing.¹ In-depth interview was the first method. A wide range of staff has been interviewed, including the managers, producers and directors at state-owned TV stations (i.e. Central China TV and Beijing TV) and private production houses (i.e. *Guangxian*, *Yinhan* and *Guanhua*). The interviewees were carefully chosen as they played an important role during the process of program production.² The second research method "participant observation" was employed to learn television routine work. Such a participant-observation approach enables the investigator to gather specific data at the institutional and individual levels, and, especially, to scrutinize the content production process from inside. For example, by sitting to one side and observing the details of the whole process of content creation, from the topic selection, content discussion, studio shooting and editing to the final step of censorship. However, doing formal interviews and taking participant observation are insufficient to know well about how media works. Some inside stories, especially when it comes to sensitive issues about censorship, usually cannot be told. Therefore the author spent four months in these television organizations, regularly attending their meetings and building a good relationship with the staff. "Informal discussions" was consequently employed as the third method to get sensitive stories. In general, the results of the interviews that have been reported in this article are representative views and reflect a common knowledge shared by television workers. But most of interviewees refused to expose their identity, though they were notified of the nature of research and knew that their views would be reported in research publications. It is mainly due to a common sense that the party-state exerts a tremendous influence on media system. Politics in China, in its broadest sense, is pervasive. Media workers always speak of different words publicly and privately. They realize that "official" response to the interviewer appear to be meaningless. They actually are willing to say something "unofficial" to the investigator to let outsiders know how the media system works inside. Therefore, they agree to reflect what they thought as long as the investigator keeps their identity unpublished. Finally, "documentary research" was employed as the fourth research method. Some archives and internal reports in these television organizations had been documented while the author was staying in Beijing.

¹ Beijing was selected as a research site because some important TV organizations are located over there. For example, CCTV, the most important Party's mouthpiece, is set at the center of Beijing. Besides, most of the private television production houses are centered in Beijing due to the outstanding conditions offered by this city, such as talents, experts and financial resources (Fu, 2007). *Guangxian* and *Yinhan* are two top-ranking private production companies in China. *Guanhua* is another production company founded by Wang Jianping, one of the ex-founders of *Yinhan*. The founders of these three companies are representatives of Chinese private producer.

² The investigator has already paid attention to avoid confirmation bias, which is understood as the tendency to seek out data that supports the researcher's own ideas. The investigator did not impose any personal understanding before the research started. What have been argued in this article are the representative opinions shared by most of the informants.

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