



Television reform in the era of globalization: New trends and patterns in post-WTO China

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ABSTRACT

Taking China's accession into WTO as a key point, this article attempts to investigate the manner in which two important market-oriented television policies have been made in China, namely 'Separation of TV program Production and Broadcasting (STVPB)' and 'Broadcasting Consolidation and Reorganization (BCR)'. In addition, it also tries to examine how these market-oriented policies have been implemented with Chinese characteristics and how they have influenced the operation of Chinese broadcasting market. In this article, it argues that television reform with Chinese characteristics is very likely to provide favorable conditions for the co-existence or co-operation of politics and market. In particular, it suggests that the effectiveness of Chinese state's control power has not been weakened but strengthened with its adoption of market-oriented reform in post-WTO period. Under such circumstances, the future of Chinese television is less likely to evolve into a free competition mechanism, but more likely into a pattern in which the state-owned media capitals achieve rapid growth and dominance through the process of market-oriented reform, and private and foreign ones have to choose for collaboration or even dependence upon the former.

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1. Introduction

The advancement of globalization has given the rise of economic liberalization and deregulation in many spheres. In the media industry, the privatization or commercialization of media enterprises have also been brought about in many countries. In Asia, the traditional monopolistic broadcasting system has been affected most drastically. Adopting liberalized policy has become the commonplace for many Asian countries since the 1980s (Chan and Ma, 1996; Zhao, 1998; Hong and Hsu, 1999; Yan, 2000). Private ownership and more competition from foreign broadcasters in television industry have been granted permission. Asian broadcasters have been increasingly relying on commercial revenue sources other than government subsidies or license fees. Tremendous financial change has consequently driven and reinforced the alienation of television operators from the governments, especially when the latter's political interference prevented the former from high market returns. As many communication scholars have observed, media commercialization has resulted in "the distancing of television organizations from the state, the increase of autonomy in media operation, and the undercutting of ideological uses of television" (Nanjundaiah, 1995; Voraseth, 1995; McDaniel, 1994; cited in Chan, 1996, p. 49).

In China, the television sector has also experienced these changes attributed to its rapid commercial development. After the government adopted the economic reforms that introduced the market logic into the party-controlled media system, Chinese television plunged into "the deep ocean of commercialism" (Lee et al., 2008, p. 598). There was a growing body

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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) (Thomas, 2005; Zhao, 2008; Sen, 2008). These commercial changes have invoked much attention and are believed by some scholars to constitute a powerful force in providing more autonomy to Chinese television workers and encouraging the growing distance of Chinese television from the state's control (Zhang, 2006; Zeng, 2005; Meng, 2001).

There has been an emphasis on the “de-monopolization” of Chinese television in a post-WTO period. The China's accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been widely treated as a crisis for the once stable and heavily monopolized broadcasting system in China (Keane, 2007), signifying intensified commercialism as well as the possible intrusion of foreign competitors. There have been increased worries that Chinese openness to Western corporations would cause an overwhelming number of Western media content shown on domestic screen with fewer restrictions and China would begin entering a very dangerous period full of cultural threats coming from Western capitalist values and ideologies. As Zhang (2006) points out, In order to be in line with WTO principles, 127 pieces of policy were abolished by the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT). More than 30 transnational television channels are permitted to broadcast in higher than 3-star hotels (2006, p. 66). The growing challenge of direct foreign competition can be expected in a very near future.

In general, it has always been assumed that commerce goes against the established power. “Politics” and the “market” are the two opposing forces that always operate as ‘push-and-pull’ factors in such circumstances (He, 1998). Commercial reforms have thus been considered as catalysts for breaking up government communication monopolies. Although the inherent antagonism between these two forces is significant in understanding the state-market context, the dynamics between these two forces are sometimes too complicated to be able to make such an argument that Chinese television regulation will ultimately become liberalized because of the “liberalizing” force of the market. Some studies have observed that, in a post-WTO era, Chinese media actually attempts to enhance market appeal by softening explicit propaganda messages (Zhao, 2008; Lee et al., 2008; Fung, 2008). For example, Lee et al. (2008) argue that Chinese press has been conglomerated into ‘Publicity Inc.’ 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 policy in which power marries money in a tacit manner” (2008, p. 3).

Having similar point of views with those of the above-mentioned studies, this essay attempts to rich these arguments by investigating some interesting phenomenon taken place in the sector of Chinese television. This article examines the intricacies of Chinese television's commercialization process in a post-WTO era. It examines the manner in which two important market-oriented television reform policies have been adopted, namely “Separation of TV program Production and Broadcasting (STVPB)” and “Broadcasting Consolidation and Reorganization (BCR)”. It also examines how these market-oriented policies have been implemented with specific Chinese characteristics and how they have influenced the operation of Chinese broadcasting market. With the empirical findings obtained from the fieldwork conducted in the Chinese television organizations, this article argues that the market-oriented television reforms in the post-WTO period are very likely to provide the conditions for the co-existence or co-operation of politics and the market. In particular, it is suggested that an increase in the marketable operations of television workers does not necessarily imply that the state's control power is sacrificed. The effectiveness of state regulation has not been weakened, but been strengthened through the adoption of market-oriented reform policies. Under such circumstances, the future of Chinese television is less likely to evolve into a free competition mechanism, but more likely into a pattern in which state-owned media have quickly gained monopoly over the country's market while private media have been led to a cooperative, albeit less ideologically and culturally antagonistic, relationship with the former.

2. Research methodology

The fieldwork employed three types of research methods to learn the television organizations in Beijing.¹ The first method was in-depth interview. A wide range of staffs have been interviewed, including the managers, producers and directors at state-owned TV stations (i.e. CCTV Central China TV and BTV Beijing TV) and private TV production organizations (i.e. *Guangxian*, *Yinhan* and *Guanhua*).² Through the assistance of personal connections, such as previous colleagues, the author was given permission to hold a “multiple re-entry pass” to enter the buildings in which some TV stations are located and to gain valuable opportunities to regularly interview the staff who worked inside. The second research method “participant observation” was employed to learn the work of television operators, for example, by sitting to one side and observing the details of the whole process of content creation, from the topic selection, discussion, 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 when the informant first gets to

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).

² *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.

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