

The Concept of ‘Local’ in Local Chinese Television

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This paper is part of my ongoing doctoral research into Chinese local media. The aims of my research are to examine how the concepts of “local”, “national” and “international” are understood by the personnel of a local Chinese television station, how these concepts relate to each other, and finally how research into the Chinese local media can contribute to the general understanding of the notion of cultural globalization. I have chosen Chongqing television in Southwest as the subject of my in-depth case study, for reasons to be discussed later on. My methods include semi-structured interviewing and documentary research. I interviewed twenty-eight members of staff at Chongqing TV, working at a range of different levels, such as the channel controller, the producers and production consultant, the company researchers as well as journalists in junior positions.

Television broadcasting was first introduced to China in 1958, although the continuous political unrest throughout the 1960s and 70s slowed down the development of television considerably. In the early 80s the Chinese government started to encourage the development of the television industry as part of its programme of economic reforms. After two decades of development and reforms, the scale of the Chinese media is vast and China has been described as having ‘the largest television market in the world’ (Gordon 2000: 14 cit. in de Burgh 2001: 131). In terms of household penetration and the number of TV sets counted per capita, television in China is well ahead of all other developing countries and high above the average level for the world and Asia. (Prisma 2001 cit. in de Burgh 2001: 142).

Research on Chinese television started in the late 1970s alongside the development of television broadcasting. Until the events surrounding the Tian'anmen pro-democratic movement in 1989, research on Chinese television was mainly descriptive, recording the development and the educational function of the medium¹.

From the early 1990s to the beginning of the new century, the focus of studies on Chinese television shifted towards more exploratory studies. The main focus of studies in this period has been the changes to the ideology of TV in times of economic reform and in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen movement. The first important change has been the shift from communism to patriotism as the official ideology. (Zhao, B. 1998)

Secondly, the market economy has taken over almost every aspect of Chinese life. These changes have led to developments in the mass media, as Zhao (1998) has argued.

In media practice, one big step for the development of Chinese television was the emergence in the 1990s of investigative journalism, which was introduced by the CCTV programme *Focus (jiaodian fangtan)*. This kind of programme soon became popular with both broadcasters and audiences. Investigative journalism, and in particular critical reports about public issues and corruptions have helped to develop what an official source described as a sense of "public opinion supervision" (Li 1991, Li 2002). In addition, as Chan argues these programmes serves as a way to alleviate public anxieties. (Chan 2002: 47). Another development has been a boom in

¹ For example, Chu (1978) has written introduction of Chinese broadcasting industry and Guo(1991) has written the first book under the title of "Chinese television history". Lull & Sun (1988) as well as McCormick (1980) argues that the television has been used by Chinese as tools to educations.

entertainment programmes and TV dramas, as commercialization has given the Chinese media a chance to explore different ways of making profits. (Keane 2002)

In recent years, work in Chinese television studies has been stimulated by the implications of China's entry into the World Trade Organization. Researchers are more and more interested in the interaction between the Chinese television media, and the rest of the world. (Sparks 2003, Chin 2003, Weber 2003) How does globalisation influence China's media practices and furthermore, Chinese culture? Another major development in Chinese television that has attracted scholarly interest has been its so-called government led "industrialization". (Lu 2002, Guo 2004) Under state regulations, many smaller television stations have merged into multi-channel networks, and they also seek to expand into commercial areas beyond the business of television broadcasting.

Based on this recent interest in issues concerning globalisation, I would like to study the influence of globalisation on the Chinese media and in particular on Chinese television at a local level. Most studies of the Chinese media to-date have tended to look at the Chinese media as a whole, but very few have explored the great diversity and complexity of Chinese society and broadcasting structures. They have also mostly focused on the elite central media (Li 1991&2002, Keane 2001, Chan 2002, Zhao 1999, and Ma 2000), or the more developed parts of Eastern and Central China (Ballew 2002 and Weber 2002)². Television stations serving the many inland provinces of China are less well represented in the academic research to date.

² also Hunan (Keane 2002), Zhejiang (de Burgh 2000), and Tianjin (Wu 1999).

The question therefore arises whether the elite media really are typical of the overall situation of the Chinese media, and what similarities the media in less developed regions share with those of the more advanced provinces. A detailed study of the media of inland provinces promises to contribute to a fuller understanding of the Chinese media as a whole, and I have therefore based my study on an inland television station.

Background to the Chinese Broadcasting System

Before 1983 the Chinese television is a two level system: Central and provincial. (Lu 2002). During the 11th Chinese national radio and television broadcasting conference in 1983 the government delivered a set of important policies and principles for the development of Chinese television (including institutional reforms) (Li 1991, Chen 1995, Guo 1991). The most prominent amongst them was the policy of “si ji ban dianshi//Running Television at Four Levels”, In order to speed up the expansion of TV coverage throughout the country, this policy gave permission to the different levels of government to establish their own TV and Radio broadcasting stations catering for local public requirements, (Chen 1995: 216).

The first of these levels is the central national (or state) television station CCTV, the second level consists of the provincial broadcasters, which include the TV stations of the provinces, the municipalities and the ethnic autonomous regions. The third level is made up of the cities, and the fourth is the counties (towns) and regions whose political administrative rank is lower than that of the cities. These four levels of broadcasting institutions are all answerable to the corresponding levels' administrations. However, the non-central stations are not dependent branches of the central stations and do not

need to consult them on technical, management or financial matters. Their points of reference are local. Policy control is exercised through the party propaganda departments at the different administrative levels. (de Burgh 2001: 148)

With a population of 30.9 million³ (according to China Census 2001[www]), Chongqing is the most populated province-level municipality in China. The population formation of Chongqing is similar to the overall situation in China: the majority of the population live in rural areas, while only 33% of the population inhabit the urban areas. Chongqing lies in the Southwest of China and its administrative area covers the Yangtze Three Gorges reservoir. From the value of GDP per capita shown on the OHP transparency, Chongqing is at the level of 5000 to 6000 RMB (Renminbi Yuan) (£350-£400). This is a typical figure for China.

When Chongqing was upgraded from a city to a province-level municipality in 1997, the Chongqing TV Station also benefited. It expanded from a city-level into a municipal (provincial) television station and started broadcasting on its terrestrial channel in October 1998 through the “Apstar 1A satellite”. Following the regulation concerning the restructuring of the local broadcasting network by the central government in early 2002, the Chongqing TV Station merged with the local cable TV network and became a new multi-channel network. It also launched several internal reforms of its infrastructure, programme style, production and the overall image of its channels. In 2001, it signed a contract to have its analogue cable system upgraded to digital. The number of cable subscribers in this area alone is expected to grow from 3.5 million to 6 million in the next five years (Fredrickson, Khan, Lee, Turner 2003: 42).

³ The fifth National Census of China, conducted on 1st Nov 2000. National Bureau of Statistics of China 2001 [www] <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/rkpcgb/>, access 20-1-2004

The company also recently started to broadcast on a digital platform. The developments of Chongqing TV reflect a formula of change found throughout China. (Sun 2002: 89-90)

Some preliminary findings: the concept of 'Local'

From preliminary analysis of the data collected, six different understanding of the concept of the 'local' can be differentiated: Firstly, the 'local' as counterpart of the 'central'. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television uses two categories to describe the different television broadcasting institutions of China: 'National stations' (guo jia tai) and 'local' stations (di fang tai). Under the category of 'national' there is only China Central Television (CCTV), whereas all other stations are in the 'local' category. This understanding seems to be adopted by most personnel at Chongqing TV. In its documents the station frequently addresses itself as the local station. In general they also agree that all the stations other than CCTV are 'local' stations. However, although for some people 'central' is completely conflated with national, others criticize the close relationship of the central station with the party propaganda department. They argue that a 'national' station should represent the interest of the people rather than the party.

Secondly, 'local' can stand for the local dialect and the values of local life. The programmes using the local dialect were the first and most likely to be identified as 'local' programmes. As many have pointed out, the criterion of dialect use in a programme is not quite enough to categorize it as a 'local' programme. Truly 'local' programmes should be dealing with the life and issues of local people, in a manner which not only includes the language they speak but also the value system they hold.

Some also argue that, although broadcast throughout China, programmes made in Chongqing will always remain 'local' because the production team is mainly local and shares local values and ways of understanding.

Thirdly, 'local' is seen as a tradeable commodity or a 'unique selling point' in the struggle for ratings? In China, the more than twenty provincial television stations all have very similar listings and all broadcast drama series bought from the same suppliers. This uniformity easily confuses the audience about which channel they are watching. The personnel of Chongqing TV all stressed the importance of producing "brand-name programmes" in order to stand out and be able to compete in the battle over of audience figures. My interviewees admitted that 'local' culture is their most valuable resource for programme making. One of the channel directors said "we are a poor station in a poor area, "the local" is all we've got to sell."(Jing, interview)

Chongqing TV has branded its satellite channel as the 'spicy and trustworthy'. 'Spicy' here refers to the stations most popular local dialect soap and the famous spicy local cuisine, both of which stress the localness of the channel. In terms of ratings, Chongqing TV's top three programmes are all 'local' programmes broadcasting in dialect, and the station has recently dedicated a whole channel to dialect programming. These programmes also fit into the latest state requirement for good television entitled "Being close in three respects" - Close to reality, close to life, close to the masses. (Li 2003) These programmes are both profitable and popular with the propaganda departments.

Fourthly, local is sometimes equated with 'low quality'. In my interviews the personnel regularly demanded that 'local' should not to be used to define the quality of

programmes. However, they often described the ‘local’ audience as having a low-level of education and income. They also said they had a parochial taste and were interested only in meaningless entertainment programmes or in what immediately concerned their daily lives. The producer of the most popular programme in Chongqing TV “Spicy life /*shenghuo malatang*” thinks that the programmes which are meant to appeal to ‘local’ audiences do not need to be polished technically and do not even need professional actors “as long as they have a good story” close to everyday life. (Luo. interview)

Some are frustrated by this situation, but no one can deny the high profits being made by this kind of programme.

Fifthly, ‘local’ is equated with ‘location’, to which there can be said to be three scales. The first is the city of Chongqing, consisting only of the urban areas in which the main commercial activities take place. The second, is the area of greater Chongqing, consisting of all the urban and rural regions and counties. The third scale of reference is much wider, and some argue that the ‘local’ encompasses the whole Chongqing region which shares a similar historic background and dialect. Producers at Chongqing TV consider the local to also include a region encompassing the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan and a part of Shannxi and Hubei provinces, all of which share a common culture. This area has a total population of 300 million.

Redefining ‘local’ in such a wide sense opens up a much bigger target audience and potential market to sell programmes with a ‘local’ flavor.

Sixthly, ‘local’ is not seen as the counterpart of ‘international’. The personnel made no direct connection between the local and the ‘international’. Many use ‘international’ as equivalent to ‘receiving international recognition’ or ‘internationally renowned’,

implying a judgment on quality. 'International' in this sense was used to mean 'the West' or 'Anglo-America'. Some identified 'international' as 'having universal values' which could be appreciated and understood by different cultures. They also said they did not fear the pressure of 'international' competition, since they expected that the Chinese media market would be closely supervised by the party's propaganda authority in the foreseeable future. However the developments get, it is unlikely that there will be a change in the fundamental ownership of the broadcasting media, and the market will therefore not escape control. The main concerns voiced were about defending the fair share of Chongqing TV in the domestic market. CCTV, other provincial stations, the print media and new media such as the Internet were identified as the main competitors. The documents I looked at show a desire for increased interaction with broadcasters outside China, through activities such as meetings and programme exchanges. However, such plans are not very central to the day-to-day business of running the station.

In conclusion, the concept of 'local' as used by the employees of Chongqing TV can be described in very complicated but also very pragmatic terms. It affects how they define their relationship with other broadcasting organizations in China and how they draw the border of what they see as 'local'. The economic value of the concept 'local' has been recognized and is being used widely in production. As a cultural value, the 'local' is still undecided: On the one hand it is often seen to cater for the taste of the less educated, but on the other hand people are also calling for a reevaluation of how the term is used. As we have seen, direct 'international' influence is only of little concern to the practice of running this local television station. Similar studies about the media of Saudi Arabia and Malaysia found that a main concern in these countries was

that globalization would change Muslim values and the local culture. In Chongqing however, there were few similar concerns among media workers. For most of my interviewees, globalization was an issue they were neither concerned with when going about their everyday work nor at an ideological level. They tended to describe globalization as a commercial reality rather than a cultural threat. Their attempts at a definition of Chinese culture was rather abstract and few of them drew a clear boundary to differentiate it from the foreign. This may explain why there is no widespread feeling that the culture itself is under threat. It has to be said however, that this analysis is at a very early stage, and only concerned with a small sample of Chinese local television today. I would not claim that Chinese local television operates in total isolation from the rest of the world, but that their system of reference has certain limitations. These are caused by pragmatic reasons: Local television stations have to find a balance between limited resources, strict broadcasting control, the responsibilities of the profession, and the realities of market competition.

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