

The Rise of China's Media Supermarket: An Appraisal of Cultural Imperialism's Relevance to the Chinese TV Industry

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This essay examines a series of online narratives by a group of Chinese TV professionals. Through their eyes, this analysis seeks to reveal the impact of commercialization on Chinese television in terms of programming, genres, formats, and content themes. Also, I evaluate their attitudes toward commercialization as expressed in their online narratives which reveal their interpretive limits. While many of them condemn the commercial symptoms of Chinese television, they paradoxically embrace commercialization as the destined, inevitable path for the development of Chinese television. Factors that set boundaries to the professionals' interpretive agency are identified, including the global influence of the neoliberal capitalist ideology; the Chinese party-state's ideology of developmentalism; the professionals' own elite social perspective; and a propaganda-weary popular mood in post-communist China. I argue that these interpretive limits, as well as the constraining factors, are indicative of the prevalence of the neoliberal capitalist ideology in China, and therefore prove the continued pertinence of scholars' concern over corporate cultural imperialism. Finally, this essay concludes with a theoretical discussion of an implosive mode of corporate cultural homogenization, which is globally conditioned, but often foregrounds the domestic forces of a country as solely responsible for their "domestic" cultural sphere, and therefore frees global media corporations from the charges of cultural imperialism.

Asian television industries have experienced dramatic changes in the past 17 years as it responded to the globalizing forces represented primarily by U.S.-based transnational media corporations (TNMCs). The changes occurred across multiple areas, ranging from media policy, technology, institutional structure, and professional practices to program content and formats. The arrival of Rupert Murdoch's Hong Kong-based satellite broadcaster Star TV in 1991, for instance, has prompted many defensive Asian governments to adopt market-friendly media policies in an effort to commercialize their own TV systems (Chan & Ma, 1996), which spawned a range of national and transnational commercial ventures such as Zee TV in India, MEASAT Broadcast in Malaysia, SCV in Singapore, MBC in South Korea, and TVB in Hong

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Kong. As Long (1995) contends, Asia has transformed from a highly regulated, state-owned television environment to a dynamic test bed where global, transnational, and national (often government-affiliated) media interests compete for audiences.

These changes in the Asian television landscape set the tone for China's media reform. Chinese television started to strive for financial autonomy in the early 1980s as the party-state cut off media subsidies. The early 1990s marked Chinese media's "plunge into the deep ocean of commercialism" (Lee, He & Huang, 2006, p. 598). In October 2002, the 16th Party Congress, anticipating intensified international competition as a result of China's accession to the World Trade Organization, officially endorsed a market-driven "culture industry" (Zhao, 2008). Furthermore, to energize China's undercapitalized and poorly managed TV stations, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and the Department of Commerce announced in November 2004 that foreign companies could form joint ventures with Chinese stations, especially in the area of producing films and TV dramas.¹

For Chinese television, these policy changes bring both opportunities and competition as they enable Chinese media practitioners to establish transnational affiliations to broaden and reorganize the domestic market. These transnational affiliations are indicative of, in Zhao and Schiller's words (2001), the reintegration of China's political economy with transnational capitalism. Chinese intellectuals predict that, in less than eight years, foreign and private investments will comprise up to 50% of the entire Chinese TV industry (Changshun Shi, 2005). Moreover, as a result of both the state's calculated admission and transnational broadcasters' proficiency in "gray distribution"² that goes beyond approved landing cities, 31 transnational satellite channels have broken into the Chinese market and 30 million Chinese households can receive their programs (Ventani, 2005).³ These channels include CETV (AOL Time Warner), Phoenix Satellite Television (News Corp.), Star TV (News Corp.), BBC (British Broadcasting Company), CNBC (U.S. Cable Network), etc.

Excited and worried at the same time by the global integration, the Chinese government, like their Asian counterparts, considers that the best strategy is to encourage a rapid growth of commercial broadcasting while maintaining a solid control of the commercialization process. Since the 1980s, the government has redefined its broadcasting units as commercial enterprises, consolidating them into major media corporations, and selectively opened certain venues to foreign investments and domestic private

¹ Meanwhile, foreign capital is restricted from investing in and operating news media, broadcasting networks, and other core communication venues. See Zhao (2008, p. 178) for details.

² Strategies used include: 1) acquiring landing rights in some provinces, but rebroadcasting from there to restricted areas with the help of local agents; 2) becoming joint venture content producers and packaging foreign content into "time-blocks" with the help of local production partners. The time-blocks are then sold to a particular channel from where they are further syndicated across a number of affiliated channels in various TV markets; and 3) leasing airtime, through a majority-owned advertising company, on a satellite channel in a certain province from where the block is syndicated across other provinces.

³ Pietro Ventani is a Hong Kong-based consultant providing strategic solutions to transnational media investors in the Asian-Pacific region.

capital (Hu, 2003; Zhao, 2008). Taking advantage of the policy reform, the Chinese TV industry now has 18 broadcasting groups (Zhao, 2008), 302 stations at national, provincial, and municipal levels that offer 1,279 cable/satellite channels to 1.3 billion viewers.⁴ This mega-size industry produced about 2,250,000 hours of programming and broadcast nearly 12.6 million hours in 2005 alone, according to Professor Xiaopu Zhou (2006) from Renmin University of China. Moreover, a new satellite, ChinaSTAR9, was launched June 9, 2008, and brought 47 additional channels into this already fierce competition.

In particular, China Central Television (CCTV), the authoritative station created as the mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party, now has transnational and domestic advertising as its main source of funding (Zhao, 2008) and has quickly grown into a multi-channel broadcaster with 18 channels. CCTV also displays its transnational ambition as it reaches out to Chinese diasporic groups worldwide through CCTV-4 (a Chinese-language, international channel) and as it targets a more general world audience through CCTV-9 in English, CCTV-E in Spanish, and CCTV-F in French.⁵

Against the backdrop of Chinese television's structural reform and rapid growth, this essay analyzes a group of Chinese TV professionals' narratives from an Internet forum called *TV Criticism*. The analysis seeks to reveal, through their eyes, the impact of commercialization on Chinese television in terms of programming, genres, formats, and content themes. This group of TV practitioners is both excited and worried by the rapidly commercializing Chinese television. As I collect and collate their online narratives, several symptoms of current Chinese television emerge, symptoms that scholars have largely connected to commercialization. Meanwhile, I evaluate the TV practitioners' attitudes toward commercialization as expressed in their online narratives. I argue that their attitudes are quite complex and often contradictory. Although they mostly share a deep concern over the commercial *symptoms* of Chinese television, they fail to pinpoint the commercial *logic* as the root cause of these symptoms. Their overall attitude toward the commercial *model* is paradoxically positive. This, on a theoretical level, is indicative of the continued relevance of the cultural imperialism critique, which argues that a crucial incursion of cultural imperialism is the spread of the commercial model and the neoliberal ideology, both of which delimit cultural agents' imagination of alternative paths for media development (Herman & McChesney, 1997; D. Schiller, 1996; H. Schiller, 1991). Finally, following in the footsteps of previous scholars (Artz, 2003; Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008; D. Schiller, 1996; Sinclair, 1990; Zhao, 2003, 2008), I argue that the nation-centric perspective of the cultural imperialism thesis needs to be revised in light of the rapidly changing global media landscape, where the Chinese television industry and many other emerging, transnational/national media enterprises join the traditional U.S.-based TNMCs to become the driving force of a cultural imperialism whose receiving end is the global working class and cultural minorities.

⁴ There are also more than 700 county stations offering over 1,000 local channels, according to Zhou (2006).

⁵ The channel information is from CCTV's Web site: <http://www.cctv.com/default.shtml>

Cultural Imperialism Thesis Revisited

One focus of the cultural imperialism tradition has been the uneven flows of media in forms of advertising, news, films, and TV programs from Western countries to the rest of the world (Beltran, 1978; Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Guback, 1984; Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974). This focus, and by extension the whole cultural imperialism thesis with its concern over the homogenizing power of Western programming and consumer ideologies, has attracted much criticism that is based on studies of audience interpretations or regional productions by culturally peripheral countries. The critics contend that foreign content does not have unmediated impact on local audience members (Ang, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1986; Tracey, 1985); that audiences often prefer culturally proximate content over imported programs and they display diverse, complex responses and interpretations (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007); and that the existence of geolinguist regions limits the global appeal of Western cultures, but gives advantages to regional media players (Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham, 1996). In addition, the nation-centric perspective of the cultural imperialism thesis has induced revisionist works that highlight cultural diversity and fragmentation, but unsettle the assumption that cultures are geographically isolated and internally homogenous (Tomlinson, 1991).

As much debate revolves around the influence of Western (primarily U.S.) programs and the values and lifestyles coded in them, scholars who value the cultural imperialism tradition remind us that media imperialism functions on different levels, and the uneven flow of content is only one of their concerns. In addition, foreign investment, spread of the commercial media system, and cultivation of consumerism among global audiences are all indicators of media imperialism and cultural homogenization (Boyd-Barrett & Xie, 2008; Chadha & Kavoori, 2000; D. Schiller, 1996; Lee, 1980; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997). Homogenization also happens via genre dominance, for example, the dominance of soap operas, talk shows, and reality shows around the world. Straubhaar (2007) reveals that imported U.S. genres impose effective boundaries on local productions, and that their underlying consumption messages are often replicated in local programs. Meanwhile, the rising trend of licensing and ex/importing commercially successful program formats, such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, *The Apprentice*, and *American Idol*, leads scholars to warn us that the flow between countries of genres, formats, or patterns of creating programming is more troublesome than the uneven flow of content in the current global media environment (Morley, 2006; Straubhaar, 2007). The most crucial incursion of media imperialism, as cultural imperialism theorists highlight, is the increasing dominance of the commercial media system and the spread of the U.S. model as *the* evolutionary model that defines the path of media development in other countries, which ultimately brings these countries into the orbit of interest of dominant powers (Herman & McChesney, 1997; H. Schiller, 1991). Thus, the analytical center of the cultural imperialism thesis, as Dan Schiller (1996) poignantly argues, lies in the "changing forms and processes of an emergent global capitalism" that quickly absorbs the communication systems of many developing countries to nourish "the supranational domination" (p. 89) by a few transnational cultural giants.

Mindful of the different layers of the cultural imperialism thesis, this essay appraises the thesis' explanatory power, particularly in relation to the influence of the commercial media system in China. The deregulation and commercialization happening in other Asian countries' television systems, as described at

the beginning of the essay, illustrate the growing power of the U.S. model around the world. What is special with China is that the country, as a self-claimed socialist party-state, has an anti-capitalist legacy and is often seen as one of the most restrictive governments when it comes to admitting cultural products and values from the capitalist West. Therefore, studying the commercialization process of Chinese television and its consequent TV phenomena can potentially generate strong empirical evidence that shows the continuing pertinence of the cultural imperialism critique of the global trend toward media commercialization.

Many previous studies have actually focused on China, a unique nation-state whose reform processes have been challenging the traditional dichotomies of authoritarian vs. market-oriented, and socialist vs. capitalist. These dichotomies, as well as many seemingly contradictory structural policies, institutional rules, professional practices, and popular attitudes observable in China's media/communication systems, as Zhao (2003, 2008) comprehensively and effectively demonstrates, need to be interpreted from a transnational cultural imperialist perspective (or a "transcultural political economy perspective" in Zhao's words). Such a perspective interprets the intricacies of China's commercialization process against the backdrop of the country's reintegration into global capitalism, considering the ruling status of its authoritarian, bureaucratic, and capitalist power bloc and this power bloc's promotion of the neoliberal capitalist ideology, along with its suppression of leftist discourses. Against this backdrop, the friction between foreign media groups and the Chinese party-state, which is often cited as an example of the global-local antagonism, is largely inter-capitalist rivalry. As Dan Schiller (2005, 2008) summarizes, the Chinese party-state and the country's emerging urban middle class actually share an agreement with transnational capitalists — that China's national economy should be bound comprehensively to the vicissitudes of a transnational market system. Only the terms and conditions of this process of integration — not the process itself — are objects of negotiation and conflict. The neoliberal capitalist ideology, as these scholars and many others (Chin, 2003; Hu, 2003; Pan, 2005) prove, has indeed taken root in China.

To contribute to this growing body of evidence of China's negotiated submission to the transnational capitalist cultural imperialism, this essay examines Chinese TV practitioners' diagnoses of Chinese television as it goes through commercialization and their own attitudes toward commercialization. As scholars search for new theoretical approaches and models — for example, the model of asymmetrical interdependence by Straubhaar (2007); the critical cultural transnationalist approach by Kraidy (2002, 2005); and the transcultural political economy approach by Zhao (2003) and Chakravartty & Zhao (2008) — I hope this study can help tease out the critical insights of the cultural imperialism thesis that can be carried into the theorization of new models and approaches. After all, the thesis' primary concern over issues of power is something that academic inquiries should not quickly move beyond, especially when contesting arguments — for instance, those about active audience receptions, hybrid cultural experiences/identities, continued regulation by local governments, and growing local or regional exports— are not only extensively documented and acknowledged but also tactically appropriated by corporate discourses to paint transnational media capitalism as a "progressive force," as Kraidy cautions (2002, p. 328).

The Online Forum

The global trend of media deregulation and commercialization, as well as Chinese television's own structural reform, has certainly altered the mentality and practices of Chinese TV professionals. It has shaped their attitudes toward foreign content, formats, and the commercial logic at large, and ultimately influenced the programs they produce. It has also elevated elite media professionals to a vested interest group or "the cultural component of the ruling bloc" (Zhao, 2008, p. 82) that uses its political linkage to the party-state for financial gains. Yet, this overall condition does not mean that these professionals experience the structural changes and class re-formation without negotiations, or that they absolutely agree with one another regarding the commercial drive or the social function of Chinese television. Rather, they negotiate not only with the party line, but also with one another, or even with themselves. Some of them have quickly and happily jumped on the commercial bandwagon, while others hold onto their lofty socialist ideals as they start to critically evaluate the performance of Chinese television and its role in society. In July 2002, CCTV launched an online forum, *TV Criticism*,⁶ to provide an interactive platform for Chinese scholars, audience members, and TV workers to analyze the status of Chinese television, identify its developmental trends and socio-cultural impacts, and explore potential remedies for its defects. This forum showcases the very discursive negotiations described above.

Instead of analyzing each and every posting in the forum, including those by media scholars and TV viewers, I interpreted only the articles by producers, editors, journalists, anchormen/women, and some broadcasting units' executive officers and strategic planners, i.e., the narratives of the professionals. I focused on the articles revolving around the following two topics: 1) Chinese television's structural changes — the extent of government control and commercialization — and the impacts of these changes on programs and on media cultures at large; and 2) the influence of the U.S. model and its commercial strategies and professional practices. Overall, I analyzed 59 online postings by 64 TV professionals from 12 major stations in China.⁷ The earliest posting dates back to July 25, 2002, while the most recent is on August 27, 2006. The professionals under analysis all display a certain level of self-reflectivity by, for instance, participating in the forum of *TV Criticism*. However, their comments do not always exhibit a critical perspective, contrary to what is suggested by the forum's title. Actually, as many as 24 online articles indicate a welcoming stance by the authors toward media commercialization, although the rest 35 articles reveal the authors' concerns over the negative impacts of commercialization. For my analysis, the latter group of articles helps to *identify* the commercial symptoms developing in Chinese television, while the former group, especially the narratives of commercial success, helps to *illustrate* the commercial symptoms in Chinese television.⁸

⁶ The forum is accessible at <http://www.cctv.com/tvguide/tvcomment/index.shtml>

⁷ Since this forum is initiated and maintained by CCTV, the majority of its articles are by professionals from CCTV.

⁸ Although this body of data provides much insight into Chinese TV practitioners' professional agency and their attitudes toward commercialization, it does have limits. Given the prevalence of neoliberalism in China's current political economic system, and the professionals' own long-term practice of using "politically correct" talks as their discursive means to negotiate the institutional constraints (Pan & Lu,

In the first section below, I synthesize the current problems in Chinese television through the eyes of its professionals. The second section examines the solutions presented by some of them as a result of their daily negotiations with transnational influences and Chinese television's own structural changes. By analyzing their diagnoses of Chinese television, I explore their interpretive strengths and limits. I argue that they have discursively embraced the commercial model, although many of them condemn the commercial symptoms and are always searching for ways to glocalize imported materials and to "reinvigorate the Chinese culture with the best of world civilization," to use the words of Ziyang Zhang, Director of CCTV International. Finally, in the last section, I contend that Chinese television's commercialization provides empirical evidence for the continued relevance of cultural imperialism scholars' concern over the spread of commercial television and the neoliberal capitalist ideology. Meanwhile, the transformation of Chinese television, along with the development of many other "local" and culturally "peripheral" media systems, requires us to modify the nation-centric view of the cultural imperialism tradition. As China's ruling bureaucratic capitalists, who possess both political and economic power (Lee et al., 2006; D. Schiller, 2005; Zhao, 2003, 2008), join force with TNMCs to build a media industry in China that benefits them both, they lucidly illustrate that cultural imperialist forces are often consolidated in a transnational manner.

Commercial Symptoms of Chinese Television

The TV professionals' online narratives identified or illustrated several symptoms emerging in the newly commercialized Chinese television, symptoms that scholars have attributed to commercialization.

The Rise of Entertainment

Entertainment programs proliferated exponentially in Chinese television since the early 1990s. As Xie and Tang (2006) reveal in the *2006 Report of Chinese TV Entertainment*, in the early 1990s, there were only a few entertainment shows in China made and broadcast solely by CCTV such as *Zongyi Dagan* and *The Spring Festival Gala*. Yet, by 2005, Chinese television offered 254 entertainment news programs, 272 game shows, 982 reality shows, 148 talk shows, 709 variety shows, 2,767 galas, and more than 800 other entertainment programs made and broadcast by various stations. These shows are creating a huge entertainment bubble that engage Chinese viewers with star-studded guest lists and chic, urban visual styles. Many of the programs adapt foreign formats. CCTV's *Happy Game* is an adaptation of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*; its *Ultimate Challenge* is the Chinese version of *The Apprentice*; Phoenix's *Talk with LuYu* is modeled on *Oprah*; Hunan Satellite's *Super Girls* follows *American Idol*, to name a few. To put the

2003), it is questionable whether those who cheered the commercial logic online did so without any doubts, and on the other hand, whether those who did express their criticisms were being exhaustive. A different set of data, such as interviews, may generate more nuanced and contradictory discourses from the professionals. Meanwhile, I also believe that if, indeed, some of them were practicing "political correctness" online and appeared less critical of the neoliberal makeover than they wanted to be, this very practice makes evident how popular and powerful the transnational neoliberal capitalism is in China as it is legitimized and internalized by the party-state.

popularity of these shows into perspective, *Dream China 2005*, an adaptation of *American Idol* by CCTV, received 500 million votes in its seven-day live broadcast and set off a star-making cultural movement with similar programs such as Hunan Satellite's *Super Girls*. Such a phenomenon illustrates the current global predominance of talk shows, game shows, and reality shows, formats that work well with newly commercialized networks and stations around the world, as Straubhaar (2007) asserts.

Such a rapid rise of entertainment in Chinese television induces many questionable cultural phenomena.⁹ For instance, in relation to talk shows, Min Song, a producer from Beijing TV, reveals on *TV Criticism* that, among the over 100 talk shows in China, most are copycats of previously successful ones and few display memorable qualities. As these shows rely more and more on celebrities and social elites for high ratings, Song cautions that images and voices of everyday people will be marginalized or completely eliminated on these shows. Other problems associated with talk shows include their lack of sincere, meaningful conversations and their use of tacky tricks, such as teasing celebrity guests to an inappropriate extent until they cry on TV, or probing their private lives to satisfy audience voyeurism. Yongyuan Cui, a well-known host of one of the pioneering talk shows in China, *Tell It As It Is*, reveals that many shows, in order to attract viewers, plant respondents in their live audience to ensure that dramas can be produced when needed. Such an absence of honesty and spontaneity, according to Cui, debases the professional ethics of talk shows and the ethics of Chinese television at large.

While Song and Cui are particularly concerned about talk shows, a collective sense of anxiety over the general socio-cultural impact of TV entertainment emerges from as many as 19 of the online postings. The professionals contend that the chic, metropolitan style of many entertainment programs (especially TV galas), their promotion of high-end lifestyles, and their creation of a blind, crazy fan culture are nurturing materialist values, numbing viewers' social nerves, and diverting their attention from real-life issues. These criticisms resonate with the concerns of cultural imperialism theorists. As Lee Artz (2003) contends, consumerist entertainment reduces thought to pleasure and reflection to escape. Through entertainment, Chinese television has "caught up with mainstream American television, both in form and in its ideological and cultural role in society," that is, to create "a morality play of unity and stability" (Zhao, 2008 p. 86). Ziyang Zhang of CCTV International, one of the high-ranking professionals who seeks to balance the economic imperatives of Chinese television with its socialist legacy, issues a call online for limiting the making and broadcasting of such flashy galas, and for devoting more financial and human resources to programs with cultural meanings and service functions.

As noted, not all the narratives exhibit a critical view. Some stories of commercial success illustrate the very symptoms that are of concern to others.¹⁰ One of the symptoms vividly illustrated is the rise of infotainment at the expense of hard news. For example, Yongqiang Li, the producer of *Global Information Billboard* (a brand-name show of CCTV-2), proudly shares online his experience of financial success in an article titled "Style Matters: TV News Programs' Unconventional Techniques."¹¹ An advocate

⁹ Fourteen articles under analysis share this view.

¹⁰ Twenty-four online articles under analysis fall into this category.

¹¹ All the articles posted online are written in Chinese. I translated their titles and content for this essay.

for commercial television, Li doesn't regard the intrusion of soft news as problematic. He claims that "news should have an entertaining aspect." He credits the success of his show to its stylistic innovations, including: 1) presenting news in a billboard format, a format commonly used in entertainment programs; 2) softening serious news by story-lining the event and constructing characters out of the people involved; and 3) collaborating with businesses to create "news events" to be broadcast by the show, such as the Award Ceremony of the 2004 Chinese Billboard of Automobiles. Besides Li, many professionals from CCTV-2 must also welcome, or at least accommodate, entertainment. Together they contribute to an ironic fact that the most recognizable shows (*Happy Game*, *Luck 52*, and *6+1*) broadcast by this news and information channel are all entertainment programs in nature. Li further reveals in the article that the channel is planning a late-night infotainment show that resembles *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* or *Late Night with David Letterman*. As he reflects, the global trend toward entertainment has surely produced its Chinese breed. A similar tabloidization of news is observed and criticized by Thussu (2007) in reference to the Indian news culture under the influence of Murdoch's *Star News*. According to Thussu, India's contemporary news culture demonstrates an obsessive interest in glamour, celebrity cultures, and flashy presentational styles. Given what is suggested by Li's article, such a criticism appears applicable to CCTV-2, a leading news channel in China that sets the benchmark for provincial and municipal broadcasters.

Crime, Romance, Violence, and Luxury: The Selling Themes in TV Dramas

Other than news and entertainment, serial dramas constitute another major component of Chinese television. Unlike a U.S. television series that might span several years, a Chinese drama series usually has a pre-determined number of episodes (ranging from 20 to 60) and a self-contained storyline. In 2006 alone, a total number of 1,477 drama series and 184,971 episodes were made and broadcast in mainland China, according to *China TV Rating Yearbook and Directory* (Wang, 2007). As 13 of the online narratives indicate, a major problem with such a huge production is its low quality and lack of thematic diversity: crime, violence, and romance dominate the storylines of these dramas. Director Jinlin Luo sadly reflects online that it is the commercial logic that dictates the success of the above themes, as well as the failure of stories that are experimental, artistic, or avant-garde. Specifically, as Hu (2003) explains, under the commercial logic, successful content, themes, or formats created by one TV station in China often spawn a larger number of imitations by other stations, making the TV landscape increasingly homogenous.

A disturbing issue in the production of the above themes, according to five online articles, is the disrespect for history. When some dramas adapt historical events or borrow historical settings, facts are twisted for the convenience of violent, romantic, or sensational plots. Time-sensitive cultural practices and customs are represented in irresponsible manners, and historical settings are altered, sometimes to the extent that viewers could mistake the story as contemporary if the actors and actresses were not wearing costumes. There are dramas that seek to stay true to commonly accepted historical facts. Yet, without plots being sensationalized by violence or romance, for instance, they suffer low audience ratings. Meanwhile, as Haibo Lu (Dean of the Department of Television, the Chinese Central Academy of Theatre) criticizes, many fictional dramas, which only use historical settings for plot convenience, don't identify themselves as fictional, leaving it to the viewers to differentiate facts from fabrications. This, Lu argues, degrades the educational value of television, especially in relation to young viewers. Moreover, under the

dictate of audience ratings, even "red classic" dramas, which adapt stories from communist revolutionary literature, were once twisted and spiced up, resulting in a "less-than-dignified" representation of the party's revolutionary history and its heroes, which led the SARFT to tighten its censorship over "red classic" dramas, as Zhao (2008) notes.

Another disturbing issue identified in *TV Criticism* is that many TV dramas' projection of high-end urban lives and luxurious public/private settings misrepresent the material realities of many Chinese TV viewers.¹² When Producer Xiongbiao Ye talks about his successful drama series, *The Promise of Destiny*, which revolves around the lives of several high school students going through China's nationwide college entrance exam, he admits that, although this drama distances itself from the thematic clichés of crime, violence, and romance, it suffers from one weakness: its inattention to China's large number of high school students in underdeveloped rural areas. This series is questioned for showing main characters living in big, lavishly decorated houses, which achieves visual pleasure at the expense of realism in the eye of common viewers. As Xu (2007) criticizes, TV shows that attract audience through a display of luxury embody and reinforce the increasingly visible class division in Chinese society as they reaffirm the privilege of the urban elite and entice the desire of aspiring groups. Similar shows are also identified by Oliveira (1993) with reference to Brazilian television, where TV Globo is catering only to the upper 20% of the population. Oliveira argues that glamorous programs, although produced by local media professionals, play a role similar to that of U.S. imports. They serve as political pacifiers. The fictional, classless, and luxurious world created by many Chinese TV dramas is evidently capable of fulfilling this political function. Indeed, under the dominant framework of neoliberalism, the party-state has translated its media's motto of "serving the masses" into identifying target audiences and serving their needs, while effectively marginalizing the anti-capitalist voice of the new left and the urban/rural poor (Pan, 2005; Zhao, 2008).

Overall, such a massive production and distribution of drama series in Chinese television that only centers on a limited number of themes is, indeed, troublesome. Homogenized TV representations cultivate homogenized values, which in contemporary China seem to breed a collective desire for consumption, disrespect for history, and an unconsciousness of social disparity. It is not surprising that many concerned TV professionals share the view that the TV culture in contemporary China is engineered by two devils: commercials and dramas, as Peng Xiao, a journalist of Shenzhen TV, notes online.

Serious Programs Under Threat

As the commercial logic determines the rise of entertainment, it simultaneously dictates the diminishment of educational and informational programs, including long-form documentaries, one-episode dramas, and programs that appreciate non-commercial, folk and high cultures (Straubhaar, 2007). Such a commercial symptom and its Chinese manifestation can find a vivid illustration in the online narrative by Baiming Zhang, a strategic planner from CCTV and also an advocate for commercial reform.¹³ Zhang proudly describes online how CCTV-1 (a general channel that enjoys an authoritative position in Chinese television) reversed its downward momentum in audience rating by sidelining educational programs.

¹² Ten articles under analysis share this concern.

¹³ Similar examples can be found in 14 other online articles analyzed here.

As Zhang describes, CCTV-1 started facing serious competition in 2002 from provincial and municipal channels, especially during the second half of its daily primetime. Its rating from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m., a designated slot for drama series, was a solid 14.59%. Yet, once the channel switched to non-entertainment shows after 9:00 p.m., the rating dropped to less than 8%. In reaction, CCTV-1 radically changed its primetime schedule in 2004 by expanding the drama slot to two hours, and then following it with other popular — primarily entertainment — shows borrowed from other CCTV channels. The new schedule also consolidated five suffering documentary programs into one and assigned it a late-night slot of 11:26 p.m.¹⁴ This rescheduling in 2004 increased the channel's profit by 700 million RMB (about US\$94 million), as Zhang claims.

Scheduling is only one source of challenge. Programs dedicated to documentaries also face serious issues at the level of production. Many of these programs, due to financial constraints, largely depend on private production teams/companies for supplying content and for access to international imports, as revealed by Ding Tian, the producer of CCTV-12's documentary — *Heaven, Earth, Human*. Unfortunately, according to Guang Chen, a journalist of CCTV's news center, some private producers prioritize visual impacts over aesthetic values, and entertaining materials over thought-provoking themes. Guang Chen's online narrative documents an interesting interaction between Zhen Chen, the producer of CCTV-1's brand-name documentary *The Everyday Lives of Everyday People*, and his contracted documentary maker. When asked by the producer why his episodes lacked a common theme and an in-depth exploration of the issues under discussion, the contractor replied: "Today's viewers don't care about meanings, themes, or any heavy-handed materials. All they want is entertainment." This leads the producer to conclude that a major threat to quality documentary-making in China comes from its unprofessional private production teams who lack a humanistic and scientific mindset to make documentaries that can hold their own against the onslaught of entertainment.

Besides documentaries, other programs under threat in contemporary Chinese television are those about newly released books, folk arts, ancient literary forms such as prose and poems, etc., as the professionals reflect in 12 online postings. CCTV-10's *Off the Shelves*, a TV book club, only has unpopular weekly slots: 1:00 a.m. and 10:50 a.m. on Tuesdays and 10:00 p.m. on Mondays. However, when these marginalized shows are evaluated for their performance by decision makers, their audience ratings are compared with those of entertainment programs. As a result, they often end up further marginalized or even taken off the air. Sometimes an entire channel gets marginalized (CCTV's rural channel) or even abandoned (CCTV's western channel dedicated to the less-developed western region), as Zhao (2008) observes.

In short, since the late 1990s, Chinese TV professionals have been witnessing and/or been actively involved in making major changes to Chinese television that include: a quick proliferation of various entertainment shows across channels and stations; a rise of infotainment and celebrity cultures; a mass production of TV dramas dominated by a few themes; and a marginalization of educational

¹⁴ The show is called *Witness*. As of March 20, 2008, the show is scheduled at 1:21 a.m., proving that it is further marginalized since the 2004 rescheduling.

programs, such as documentaries and TV book clubs. These issues deeply upset some self-reflective TV professionals. The next section focuses on their critical comments, revealing their interpretive strengths and limits.

TV Professionals' Interpretative Limits

As mentioned, the professionals who posted online comprise an internally heterogeneous community. Some embrace the U.S.-inspired commercial changes without a critical pause; some are more self-reflective as they observe many undesirable changes that violate their socialist vision for television; and, finally, a third group of professionals are still developing their stance on this issue and are constantly negotiating the tension between the commercial pressure and their own professional ideals. This section focuses on the last two groups and their 35 online postings as their questions and negotiations not only illustrate their critical agency, but, more importantly, point to the structural constraints that have largely erased their critical edge. Meanwhile, I choose not to analyze the first group of professionals in this section, because their pro-market discourse online¹⁵ — suspected of being unauthentic under the pressure to toe the neoliberal party line — figures as straightforward evidence of the power and influence of the transnational neoliberal capitalism on both the structural and the professional levels in China.

In response to the aforementioned commercial symptoms, the latter two groups of professionals start probing why proliferated channels fail to bring about high-quality programming and diversity in genres, formats, content, and viewpoints. They attempt to identify causes and offer solutions. Yet, despite their disapproval of the commercial symptoms, most of their online articles treat commercialization as an inevitable path, which I argue proves the prevalence of the neoliberal ideology in China. This dominant ideology, inscribed as the party line, may have limited how critical these professionals were willing to be of the commercial logic in an open forum such as *TV Criticism*. More importantly, it constrains their imagination of and exploration for alternative developmental models for Chinese television. As they constantly compare their own programs and professional practices to those of their U.S. counterparts, the benchmark status of U.S. television is consolidated in their minds. Before discussing their interpretive limits, let's first look at the causes and solutions identified by them, which, I contend, stay mostly on professional and institutional levels, but avoid unsettling the party line of commercialization.

Causes and Solutions

A main reason identified by the professionals for homogenous programming across channels and stations is the explosion of channel capacity in recent years, which increased the demand for content at such a fast pace that TV producers are often too busy filling their air time to think of building unique identities.¹⁶ Under this condition, adapting existing formats and copycatting successful genres become convenient and inexpensive strategies that lead to the dominance of entertainment genres, such as game shows, talk shows, and reality shows. Qiangjun Wang, a CCTV producer, criticizes online that Chinese thematic channels — despite their claimed focus on economics, news, entertainment, or sports — heavily

¹⁵ See footnote 10 for the number of articles displaying such a discourse.

¹⁶ Twenty-one online postings share this view.

overlap with one another. As a result, channel capacity, as well as financial and human resources, gets wasted, and diversity becomes a myth.

Meanwhile, stations need to buy programs from or subcontract production tasks to private companies, especially in the case of TV dramas and documentaries, since their own financial and human resources can no longer sustain the in-house production for so many channels. Unfortunately, the private production teams often do not possess professional skills and are guided primarily by commercial values, as demonstrated previously by the exchange between a CCTV documentary producer and his contractor. According to Hong Yin and Ruxue Ran (2002), journalism professors at Tsinghua University, the mode of production of Chinese television is still preindustrial. In many cases, subcontracted producers are given a limited amount of money or forced to raise funds themselves, which compels them to hire cheap labor instead of professional talents at the expense of quality.

Even in the areas of news and inexpensive entertainment shows, where in-house production still dominates, many stations, due to personnel shortages, have to hire outside talent, who, sometimes, turn out to be without much talent.¹⁷ For instance, Yading Zou, a senior editor of CCTV, comments online that many of these outside hires have little knowledge/experience needed to harness the visual language of television. Their work often conveys ambiguous messages. Meanwhile, many professional producers, themselves, have yet to catch up with the fast pace of channel expansion; their news or entertainment shows are little more than lousy patchworks of materials borrowed from elsewhere. Overall, ambiguous channel positioning, production outsourcing, and in-house personnel's own ineffective response to technological advancement are the main causes cited by the professionals in *TV Criticism* for the quality and diversity issues in Chinese television.

Along with this diagnosis, the professionals propose, or are already implementing, several solutions. The first involves launching new thematic channels, consolidating the individual identities of existing ones, and focusing on niche broadcasting.¹⁸ CCTV is the pioneering station to implement this solution. It launched several thematic channels in the past five to six years, including CCTV-8 for dramas, CCTV-9 for 24-hour news, CCTV-10 for science and education, CCTV-15 for children's programs, CCTV-2008 for the Olympics, etc.

The underlying logic of this solution is that once entertainment, news, drama series, and educational programs secure their independent domains with autonomous financial and human resources, separate productions, and different target audiences, they will thrive individually and coalesce into a mosaic of genres, formats and viewpoints. Following this design, programs with cultural, educational values and service functions will be able to preserve a space for themselves. Meanwhile, entertainment shows and drama series can continue their quest for commercial success with clearer channel identities

¹⁷ A total number of 17 articles show the professionals' dissatisfaction with both private and in-house production teams.

¹⁸ As many as 23 online articles present this as a solution.

and dedicated airtime. Yunhong He, a producer of CCTV-10 Science and Education,¹⁹ reflects online that the viability of this channel depends on its clear positioning and continuous focus on an audience group that shares similar educational backgrounds, aesthetic values, and worldviews. Such a positioning also shapes the channel's production and broadcasting behaviors. Channels without identities, the producer warns, will be colonized.

CCTV's Associate Editor-in-Chief, Yusheng Sun, even expects thematic channels to address the issue of social representation in Chinese television. Sun criticizes online that China has a rural population of 900 million and the world's largest population of senior citizens. Both groups are increasingly marginalized in a TV culture that caters to young viewers and develops an urban bias. He asserts that thematic channels designed primarily for these two groups can solve the problem. Yet, he also predicts that these channels won't come into being until China's commercializing television satisfies its craving for growth and profit through programs with high audience ratings. I contend that Sun's confidence in thematic channels and niche broadcasting, shared by others in the TV industry, points to their interpretive limits when it comes to the implications of the commercial logic for TV cultures. I will return to this criticism later.

As to the problem of low-quality productions, the professionals feel that they don't have direct control over the quality of private production teams, and they expect the market to eliminate unqualified ones naturally through competition.²⁰ Yet, a strong call for professionalism of in-house employees emerges from their narratives. Specific measures include: raising the bar when hiring outside talents and subjecting this temporary workforce to regular evaluation and training; collaborating with media-related university programs to ensure a long-term supply of trained professionals; and setting up a mechanism for internal evaluation, through which low-quality, low-rating shows will be removed and unqualified long-term employees will be fired. Many of these measures have already been put into action, the professionals note. Their call for professionalism, however, goes beyond the above qualitative measures. The professionalism that they invoke in 11 online postings gauges not only how qualified a producer or a news anchor is, but also how much his/her knowledge base and skill sets are conducive to the commercial blueprint. Peng Xiao of Shenzhen TV, for instance, highlights online Chinese television's urgent need for professional sectors and personnel who specialize in designing and marketing new genres, formats, and channels. The key issue here is how to create, make, and sell, not just TV shows, but also the brand names of the shows and the recognizability of their affiliated channels.

Interpretive Limits

¹⁹ CCTV-10 was created in 2001 to prevent shows with educational and scientific themes from being homogenized. According to Baiming Zhang, a strategic planner of CCTV, CCTV-10, in its first two years, quickly consolidated its identity and established brand names for shows, such as *Exploration & Discovery*, *People*, and *Story*.

²⁰ Eighteen online articles express this view.

A closer look at the TV professionals' proposed remedies reveals their interpretive limits. Despite their disapproval of the commercial symptoms of Chinese television, their solutions — having separate thematic channels for serious content and entertainment; improving the quality of the production teams; and professionalizing all sectors of the TV industry, etc. — tackle only professional, technological, and institutional issues, and are far from addressing the root cause of the symptoms: the commercial logic and its insatiable desire for high audience ratings. Few of the professionals (except one)²¹ who posted online explicitly connect these symptoms to the commercial root or suggest any structural remedies that follow a non-commercial path. To the contrary, they display a positive attitude to the commercial model. Their collective prediction, as indicated online, is that as Chinese television and its market become as mature as those of the U.S., China's TV culture will naturally grow out of this phase of silly entertainment, debased values, and sensational themes. As noted, even senior practitioners such as CCTV's Sun, exhibit confidence online in commercial niche channels to serve China's rural population and senior citizens, who hold very limited purchasing power and, hence, little value in the eyes of domestic and international advertisers.

Professionals, like Sun, fail to challenge the commercial logic that, in the long run, will keep differentiating Chinese viewers along class lines and marginalizing the poor. What will happen to the thematic channels (if ever realized) for serious content and unprivileged groups, if they keep needing cross-channel subsidies and cannot compete with those showing brand-name game shows and TV dramas? If CCTV's marginalization of the rural channel and the current conditions of U.S. television can tell us anything, it is that professional, technological, and institutional improvements, albeit desirable, cannot, in the long run, preserve the service functions of television or guarantee representations of the unprivileged. Through their online comments, many professionals like Sun demonstrate their sense of social responsibility and their continued belief in the socialist ideals that television should "serve the people," and that good programs should have aesthetic values, social conscience, and moral powers. Yet, their narratives also indicate their confusion as to how to realize these ideals within a commercial system, if not their unwillingness to challenge the commercial logic in public. In other words, the commercial logic and its manifestations in government ideologies, structural policies, and social relations in contemporary China set boundaries to how the professionals, as cultural agents, should think, work, and criticize. I now turn to these boundary-setting factors.

Boundary Setting

A wide range of changes that have happened to China's communication systems and its entire economy have proven that China has been reintegrated into global capitalism. Forces behind this reintegration include transnational corporate capital, the bureaucratic capitalists within the Chinese party-state, and an elite group of business investors, managers, professionals, and consumers directly benefitting from this reintegration process (D. Schiller, 2005; Hu, 2003; Zhao & Schiller, 2001; Zhao 2003, 2008). As this reintegration proceeds, the ideology of global capitalism, which regards the market as *the* means of organizing economic and social lives (Herman & McChesney, 1997), prevails in China.

²¹ Yongyuan Cui, the former host of *Tell It as It Is*.

Thus "market" and "commercialization" become the myths, particularly in China's media system. The myths, as shown above, have been evading the critical evaluation of many Chinese TV professionals. As Chadha and Kavoori (2000) contend, the power of Western corporations is demonstrated not only through their control of global flows of media content, but also through their ability to transmit commercial values and shape the developmental path and the organizational model of the media systems in many developing countries. Regarding China's media system, as Shi (2005) asserts, global media have been functioning as a significant driving force for the system's on-going reform, which aims to make Chinese media more capital-oriented within the limits sanctioned by the party-state's official and increasingly capitalist ideology.

This global capitalist atmosphere, I argue, conditions Chinese TV practitioners' ideological mindset and confines their professional creativity. Many of them not only treat the commercial model as benign and inevitable, as shown above, but also look up to U.S. television as their developmental goal and hope to learn from its successful experience. As Wenhua Zhang of CCTV-4 reports online, CCTV-4, a news channel, went through the biggest reform in the channel's history in 2002 by modeling itself after CNN. The channel built a 24-hour information assembly line and an open platform, which resembles CNN's newsroom, where journalists, editors, producers, and news anchors share a large open space that accelerates information flow and unifies production standards. In another online article, Shuping Chen of CCTV's Center for Children and Adolescents, explains that the Chinese cartoon industry needs to learn from Disney and expands its market share through a synergy of cartoon studios, toy manufacturers/retailers, and theme parks. A variety of other commercial techniques/practices of U.S. television are also adopted by Chinese professionals: running promos for channels to enhance their recognizability; concentrating resources on developing brand-name shows similar to Fox's *American Idol* or CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360°*; and creating TV personalities who retain loyal audience groups similar as Oprah does for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Pan and Lu (2003) made a similar observation that many professional improvisations by Chinese journalists are inspired by Western professionalism. The above evidence speaks to the cultural imperialism critique that, within the contemporary global environment, TNMCs (many U.S.-based) are both the source of influence behind the seemingly domestic media reforms in many developing countries and the architect of these reforms. Considering the evidence, we certainly cannot assume that the nature and the specificities of a developing country's media industry purely result from the choices made by its domestic forces.

From another perspective, however, domestic forces do matter. In the Chinese context, the Chinese party-state's strategic implementation of media commercialization and its official discourse of "developmentalism" constitute the second structural factor that confines the critical agency of TV professionals. The party-state is currently the only structural force powerful enough to keep Chinese television's pursuit for profit under check and to preserve its service functions by redistributing resources among different media units. However, the party-state's interventions so far are only to ensure that cultures and values produced by this commercial mechanism do not threaten the bureaucratic capitalist

status quo. It guards itself more against domestic leftist ideas/protests than against foreign capital. Its commitment to public service television is as unreliable as its definition of such television as suspicious.²²

In fact, through global reintegration and commercialization, the party-state, itself, metamorphoses into a post-Communist, bureaucratic-authoritarian regime that combines power and money (D. Schiller, 2005; Lee et al., 2006; Zhao, 2003). This regime, with its monopoly of the economy, benefits from the booming business opportunities presented by TV commercialization. More importantly, through leveraging its regulatory power, the party-state is able to gain a "commanding height" over foreign media groups and incorporate the market mechanisms into its existing media system, which guarantees its own media organs and interest groups a lion's share of the profit brought by commercialization (Zhao, 2008). Even more desirable to the party-state is that the TV industry's prosperous flare and its entertainment content, created by the commercial mechanism, conveniently envelop Chinese viewers in a blissful bubble where existing social problems look less threatening. If commercialization and global reintegration can benefit the party-state in so many ways, no wonder it has been preaching "developmentalism" to its people, including the TV professionals, and painting commercialization — not only of media, but also of the entire economy — as the destined path for China's future. In other words, the neoliberal domestic atmosphere engineered by the party-state explains, from another perspective, why the TV professionals under discussion mostly fail to think and speak outside the commercial box.

Apart from the transnational capitalist ideology and the neoliberal orientation of the Chinese party-state, China's communist history of direct media monopoly and strict control of everyday cultures sets up a contrast, against which commercial, "independent" media appear more desirable to many TV professionals and ordinary viewers.²³ Such desirability complicates their view of the changing TV system. From their perspective, the rapid growth of TV stations, channels, and genres/formats under commercialization provide them with a larger space to cultivate and practice their professional skills and to learn from their foreign counterparts. Moreover, the commercial model grants them a certain degree of autonomy from the strict control of the party-state. Although they still cannot produce and broadcast programs that challenge the status quo, they are now able to diversify their markets, funding sources, and

²² The party-state is not giving up its ideological control. It is not committed to building a democratic public sphere. Chinese media's service functions are still defined within the limits set by the party-state, since the media industry still owes its legitimacy to the ruling regime. For instance, under the current party discourse of social harmony, TV should be informative, but not to the extent of revealing information that could potentially stir up left-wing protests or facilitate coalition building among workers.

²³ In contrast to the media organs monopolized by the communist party, commercial media do have their democratizing impacts. Yet this does not mean that the commercial model is purely democratic. The undemocratic impacts of the commercial model are the very focus of this paper. What we are witnessing in China is that the mode of media control has shifted from a political monopoly to a joint control by political and commercial forces. Both forces' commitment to a true democratic public sphere is questionable.

programming in the name of serving viewers and surviving commercial competitions (Sun, 2007). Some even seek to push the boundaries of the party-media system by devising non-routine practices in local domains and by tapping into the party-state's desire to soften its ideological messages (Pan, 2005; Pan & Lu, 2003). Considering the larger maneuvering space between the professionals and the party line that is enabled by commercialization, it's no wonder that the professionals under analysis express a quite positive view toward the commercial logic.

More importantly, as scholars criticize (Hu, 2003; Pan, 2005; Zhao, 2008), these media professionals, especially the elite strata consisting of bureaucrats and managers of the party-state media, are deeply implicated in the commercialization process as a vested interest group. The most telling evidence of the party-state's co-optation of these professionals is found in their personal biographies and job titles, as many of them are cross-appointed as both top-ranking media officials and administrators or policy makers within the party-state. Media commercialization and consolidation have brought them unprecedented opportunities to enrich themselves (Zhao, 2003, 2008). Thus, they are reluctant to unsettle the party-state's current political economic structure for the sake of social justice and political democracy. Meanwhile, the lower strata among the professionals also realize that their job security and material rewards depend both on their respect for political boundaries and on their willingness to soften their oppositional edge (Pan, 2005). Therefore, considering the professionals' implication in media commercialization, what they have said of China's commercial television in *TV Criticism* (its commercial symptoms and institutional or professionals remedies), as well as what they have self-censored consciously or unconsciously (the negative impacts of the neoliberal ideology and the need for an alternative reform scheme), all attest to the power and influence of the globalizing neoliberal capitalism in China.

Finally, the socio-historical contrast between China's communist history of cultural indoctrination and its current commercial, "open" cultural environment preconditions Chinese TV viewers' opinions and viewing choices, which, in turn, influence the attitudes and practices of the professionals. Viewers are extremely weary of party ideology that, before the reform era, had politicized almost every aspect of human life and preached austerity, self-denial (Xu, 2007), and self-sacrifice, while keeping the majority of the population under poverty. In contrast, the consumer ideologies of pleasure, individualism, and self reliance appear quite empowering for the Chinese public. For the younger generation that grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, "the 'correct' political line seems less relevant than entertainment and lifestyle information" (Lee et al., 2006, p. 584). Thus, the Chinese public — at least those who have a voice — displays an overall positive view or at least some tolerance of the rise of entertainment in Chinese television because, to a certain extent, silly laughs can nurture their propaganda-weary social psyche and potentially cultivate an anti-authoritarian grassroots culture. Also, within the commercialized television system, they enjoy being served — although commercial services have limits and actually hinder the rise of a true public sphere in the long run — and having some power to decide the success or failure of a program, power they were long denied as pupils of party dogmas. This popular mood, I contend, may have strengthened many TV professionals' belief in the commercial model.

The widespread influence of the neoliberal ideology, China's global reintegration orchestrated by the party-state, the TV professionals' own implication in this process, and a propaganda-weary popular

mood in post-communist China have delimited the professionals' interpretations of the commercial model. The first three factors attest to the capitalist triumph in China and in its media, while the last factor illustrates how China's particular socio-political history has left a vacuum where the neoliberal ideology can grow and emerge as the counterpart to the failed communist cause. Whether the professionals are able to recognize and criticize commercialism thoroughly, both in private and in public, depends on a drastic reorientation of China's political philosophy, which is not likely to occur in the near future as the party-state has become "the world's biggest holding company" that is also authoritarian in nature (McGregor, 2007).

Cultural Imperialism — Programs, Formats, and System Models

To conclude the above analysis, I would like to go back to the idea that cultural imperialism, as it happens in relation to China, needs to be analyzed at multiple levels. First, on the level of direct broadcasting, as mentioned earlier, many transnational channels in China are still subject to government regulations (Chin, 2003; Curtin, 2005; Zhao, 2008) and rely on "gray distributions" (Ventani, 2005). Second, on the level of program/format importation, the market share and the cultural influence of imports in China are compromised by the Chinese viewers' preference for domestic productions over foreign ones (Wang, 2007) and by government regulations as well. The current regulations state that "all imports must get the approval from the relevant supervising department, and that no TV station can broadcast imported programs for more than 25 percent of its total programming" (Yan, 2000, p. 515).²⁴

Ziyang Zhang, Director of CCTV International (a unit responsible for gate-keeping CCTV's importation), reveals online the unit's standards for selecting foreign imports: they should not conflict with or show disrespect for Chinese traditions, values, and customs; they should not contain stereotyped representations of China and the Chinese people; and they should not carry messages that discriminate against other developing or underdeveloped countries. Even after obtaining official approval, foreign imports, especially foreign formats, often go through a local makeover. Many professionals reflect online that local reproductions that blatantly clone foreign formats rarely appeal to Chinese viewers and hold little value in the global market.²⁵ In short, U.S.-based globalizing formats and programs do not enjoy predictable, "authentic" re-presentations in China. The end results are a variety of hybridized programs by Chinese TV professionals. Along with the hybrid artifacts produced by TNMCs (Chalaby, 2006), these

²⁴ Official importation in recent years no longer monopolizes Chinese viewers' consumption of foreign content, since many foreign films, TV series, and documentaries are illegally accessible online or through pirated DVDs. Yet viewers watching underground content are primarily young, urban, educated, and computer-savvy. Older generations and the rural poor, who make up the majority of the viewing population, still depend on official importation for foreign content if they are interested in it.

²⁵ Due to space limitations, I will not discuss the glocalizing practices narrated in *TV Criticism*. In general, the professionals' strategies include: re-editing or cutting "improper content;" showing the programs as they are, but offering a "proper" interpretive framework for viewers; fusing imported formats with Chinese cultural elements; adapting the format — for example, its tempo — to fit the viewing habits of Chinese viewers, etc.

hybridized programs, on the one hand, demonstrate the vitality of receiving cultures and the agency of local media workers, but, on the other hand, they avert our attention from the issue of power (Kraidy, 2005). As Kraidy cautions, hybridity is the product not only of human agency, but also of power. Thus, scholars need to evaluate the context and intentionality of its production to engage the issue of power.

I agree with Kraidy that interrogating the context of hybridity is an effective way to bring the issue of power back into our theoretical discussions. Meanwhile, as the Chinese case demonstrates, another effective way to engage the issue of power is to look at cultural homogenization that happens *within* individual countries as these countries take up the commercial model, internalize the neoliberal capitalist ideology, and precondition the cognitive and the ideological dimensions of local media practitioners, who, either on purpose or in complicity, participate in the replication of media consumerism in local settings. This media consumerism is characterized by rampant entertainment, political apathy, erosion of service television, and marginalization of audience groups who have little purchasing power. Such cultural homogenization happening within a country, or "internal imperialism," as it is termed by Oliviera (1993), is a phenomenon with which I now start the following theoretical discussion.

What is Chinese Television Telling Us?

The conceptualization of cultural homogenization, as it happens between culturally bounded nation-states and on the level of program or format flows, reaches its theoretical limits when scholars consider active audience negotiations, hybrid cultural productions (both by U.S.-based TNMCs and by national/local institutes), and the postcolonial phenomenon of cultural fragmentation and diversity (Appadurai, 1990). However, it is crucial to caution against a mode of cultural homogenization that happens within individual countries as a result of their adoptions, albeit in various manners, of the commercial media system. This *implosion* of commercial cultural values is happening in China and appears to be a common theme underlying the media development of a number of countries around the world (I will elaborate on this later). It is to this observation that many cultural imperialism scholars' earlier criticisms (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Oliviera, 1993; D. Schiller, 1996; H. Schillar, 1991) prove to be continuously relevant and insightful.

To understand this implosive mode of cultural homogenization, we need to challenge two assumptions: 1) nation-states are internally homogenous; and 2) the development of their individual national media systems is entirely domestic in origin and free from transnational influences. As Kraidy (2005) argues, countries labeled as "local" in the global cultural exchange should not be perceived as holistic or free of internal power exercises. Instead, individual nation-states are often fragmented, consisting of political, economic elites, the poor and the marginalized, and many groups who fall in the middle of the spectrum. In terms of China, the previous communist regime becomes more and more capitalist in nature. Its ruling bloc now is comprised of the bureaucratic capitalist party-state, transnational corporate capitalists, and an emerging urban upper-middle class (Lee et al., 2006; D. Schiller, 2005; Xu, 2007; Zhao, 2003, 2008). To sustain itself, this ruling group now appeals to the masses through the rhetoric of developmentalism, nation-building, and patriotism, while using coercive measures to suppress the voice of the new left, the working class, and the rural poor (Pashupati, Sun, & McDowell, 2003; Zhao, 2008). Its regulation of foreign capital is to guarantee its monopoly of the Chinese

media market before TNMCs colonize it without the participation of its own bureaucratic capitalist elites. The friction between TNMCs and the party media organs, considered against the strengthening linkage of China's political economy to the global capitalist system, is indeed evidence of an "intercapitalist rivalry" (Zhao, 2008, p.180). In other words, the policies and practices of this bureaucratic capitalist party-state regarding foreign capital have a clear economic, rather than ideological, purpose.

Evidence found in the online narratives indicates that it is the party-state, representing the interests of its neoliberal elites, that officially embraces the global capitalist ideology and treats marketization as the destined path for Chinese television. It is the party-state that prescribes media commercialization as the strategy to compete with TNMCs. It is also the party-state that, through co-optation or repressive measures, delimits the agency of Chinese media professionals. Even though the party-state constantly preaches that television should serve the masses, as scholars reveal (Fung, 2006; Shi, 2005), it sees no problem allowing its television industry to collaborate with global media forces such as Viacom (MTV) to, for example, construct an apolitical youth culture that is primarily based on entertainment and consumption. It also sees no problem exchanging favors with these global media forces. For instance, AOL Time Warner and News Corp. are allowed to broadcast to China's southern city of Guangzhou, as long as these two TNMCs carry China's own programming (CCTV-9) to U.S. cable systems (D. Schiller, 2005). As the neoliberal elite group further secures their control of the party-state and steers it away from its socialist legacy, we will see more of these economic collaborations, but less ideological antagonisms. In other words, the development of Chinese television tells us that a country's national media system may not function in a national spirit — serving its masses, for example — and that its outline and features result from the globally interconnected processes of media production, distribution, and consumption. What we see in China is domestic neoliberal elites joining forces with global media corporations to control the Chinese media market (although not without negotiations) and creating a culture of entertainment and consumption that is defined by rowdy and low-quality programs, a rise of infotainment, and a lack of thematic diversity. Such a culture suppresses the discussions of gender, class, and religious inequalities and averts attention from serious social issues such as inflation, pollution, unemployment, expensive housing, inadequate health care, etc. Indeed, as Dan Schiller (1996, p. 98) criticizes, "It was in the social separation of domestic elites, and their incorporation into the structures of transnational capitalism, that the threat of cultural industry was, literally, localized." A nation-centric view, on the other hand, which presupposes the homogeneity of the local and its disconnection or even opposition to the global, surely fails to notice this transnational collaboration (Zhao, 2003, 2008).

Besides Zhao and D. Schiller, many other scholars have also been promoting a less nationally centric view of media globalization. Sinclair (1990) criticizes a nationalized distortion of world media industries. Morris (2002) contends that scholars' focus on the national/ethnic identity of a media system overlooks the cultural heterogeneity within the nation or ethnic group. H. Schiller (1991) argues that new cultural domination is less American than multinational and corporate. The TNMCs, according to Artz (2003), seek surrogates in local settings and differentiate global audiences along class lines rather than geographic boundaries. I share these scholars' non-nation-centric view of transnational media interactions. This view doesn't regard the nation-state as irrelevant, not so especially in relation to China, where the party-state still actively exercises its regulatory power to absorb the market system into its authoritarian regime. Rather, this non-nation-centric view allows us to better trace the contour of this

globally conditioned, but more implosive mode of cultural homogenization that I have been illustrating with the case of Chinese television.

This mode of commercial cultural homogenization is globally conditioned, because it is the powerful TNMCs that have been cultivating a worldwide neoliberal environment of deregulation and marketization, which inspires or generates various commercial media systems in developing countries. Meanwhile, this mode of homogenization is also implosive, because once a country's media system internalizes the commercial model, it homogenizes cultural values from within, where the country's own domestic forces appear solely responsible for the transformation, while the powerful TNMCs appear innocent of the cultural imperialism charges.

Under this mode of cultural homogenization, the newly commercialized media systems and the powerful TNMCs operate under the same commercial logic and replicate each other's commercial values, although, from a national or ethnic perspective, their individual media cultures may be very different and their strategies of commercial operation may be highly diverse. They also marginalize unprivileged groups in similar ways and display similar transnational (sometimes global) ambitions and capacities. The newly commercialized media industries may one day grow into (some already are) mini-TNMCs, which share interests with traditional media giants and can be viewed as imperialist by groups and individuals who do not benefit from the processes of commercialization and globalization. In other words, the dichotomy of the U.S. vs. the rest can no longer capture the nuances of the current corporate cultural imperialist warfare, which happens more often between two camps: the first includes the global working class and various culturally marginalized groups; and the second is represented by TNMCs and their local replicas around the world.

The changes and growth of South Korea's and Brazil's media industries can further illustrate the above argument. Scholars (Chan & Ma, 1996; Jin, 2007; Shim, 2006) show that, since the early 1990s, South Korea's media industry, in its response to the increasing influence of U.S.-based TNMCs, went through a rapid commercializing process. It consolidated its own media enterprises and has been actively emulating the strategies/techniques of these TNMCs. It quickly emerged as a regional production center and increased its exporting of content ninefold between 1997 and 2004, selling soap operas, animations, entertainment shows, and documentaries to other Asian countries. Its penetration in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Japan led *Financial Times* to comment that "Korean creative industries are staging their own version of cultural imperialism by expanding into neighboring Asian markets" (Ward, 2002). Meanwhile, the commercial drive of South Korea's media industry generates concerns similar to the ones raised in this essay, for example, concerns over the erosion of the Korean public service media in the name of national interests and global competitiveness (Shim, 2006).

Brazil's Globo is another widely studied regional media corporation that has a significant influence in Latin America and an increasing presence in Europe (Biltereyst & Meers, 2000) through its famous telenovelas. Yet scholars (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Oliveira, 1993; H. Schiller, 1991) assert that telenovelas reproduce commercial values and reflect the hegemonic power of the consumer logic, despite their incorporation of Brazilian folk cultures. Thus, the transnational popularity of telenovelas should not be treated as a successful resistance to corporate cultural imperialism. Rather, the experience of Globo

demonstrates the corporate incursion into a relatively autonomous media system, leading it to emulate not only the commercial model, but also the commercial strategies of producing, distributing, and marketing (Lopez, 1995). Furthermore, Globo is now actively developing transnational corporate strategies to gain direct control of or at least participate in foreign broadcasting in countries such as Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United States (Biltereyst & Meers, 2000).

Other regional media corporations that require critical examination include Zee TV in India, Televisa in Mexico, RTL in Germany, Orbit in Bahrain, etc. In addition, China's CCTV, as its commercial drive and transnational vision indicate, surely does not want to be left behind in this race and probably will surface as another influential TNMC in Asia. These growing forces both negotiate and collaborate with traditional media powers. Their collective actions, I argue, may induce cultural hybridity, but it is a hybridity that, nonetheless, cultivates similar desires for consumption and delimits the cultural space where mass viewers could develop alternative consciousness.

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