

Going global or going nowhere? Chinese media in a time of flux

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how Chinese media industries have sought to expand into new territories, identifying several mechanisms by which Chinese cultural and media products are traded and consumed: namely finished content, co-productions, formats and online platforms. The article also considers the value of overseas location shooting for domestic programmes and acquisition of international media assets. In respect to media production producers tend to opt for risk avoidance rather than creative exploration. Consequently Chinese producers, investors and practitioners are deficient in knowledge of international markets and audience perceptions because the government has chosen to intervene, select and guide Chinese products. The article suggests this is gradually changing.

Introduction

China's global economic presence is unparalleled: 'made-in-China' goods proliferate in shopping malls; Chinese capital finances speculative, sometimes spectacular real estate developments; and Chinese workers take jobs from workers in developed nations. While the 'hard' influence of the People's Republic of China is indisputable, China's cultural and socio-political presence in the world remains unfulfilled. China aspires to be a 'major power' (*da guo*). While Asian nations have operationalised a form of 'normative soft power' to specify regional values (Melissen 2011, cited in Ang et al 2015), China has recently upped the ante by registering its own vernacular, 'strong cultural power' (Xiang 2013), as well as deploying the largely descriptive term 'cultural soft power' (*wenhua ruan shili*). However, despite government initiatives to foster Confucius Institutes, support the expansion of China Central Television (CCTV) channels, and sponsor cultural outreach missions, Chinese culture and Chinese world views have shown few signs of ascendancy on the global stage outside of overseas Chinese communities. China, a 'partial power', according to David Shambaugh (2013) has a palpable soft power deficit.

In this article I examine how Chinese culture is internationalising. I list several *mechanisms* that have facilitated the internationalisation of China's media content industries. By internationalisation I include the penetration of China's cultural space by 'foreign' players through forms of collaboration. Due to space constraints my objective is simply to offer new ways of thinking about how China's audio-visual media 'goes out', to use the government's operational term for internationalisation. The paper argues that in the future we are likely to see more Chinese cultural ideas embedded in international formats.

The internationalisation mechanisms include (i) export facilitation of government approved film, documentary, news programmes, animation and TV; (ii) overseas filming and the positioning of international faces in Chinese audio-visual content; (iii) coproduction in film and documentary (iv) formats (v) online platforms (vi) and strategic investments in overseas

cultural and media companies. The analysis briefly considers the efficacy of these mechanisms in regards to China's emergent soft power aspirations.

Culture and economy

In recent times culture has become a growth industry, not just because of globalisation, but also in the way it is viewed by policy makers in respect to facilitating 'soft power', a term coined by the political scientist Joseph Nye Jr in 1990 (Nye 1990). While much research has concerned the final output (the film, TV programme, painting, the design, the animation work) – and the economic numbers that underpin success, recent research has begun to focus on the kinds of knowledge and human capital generated through the interactions of different participants in the creative value chain.

While much of the world is looking at how to get into the Chinese market, many participants—media producers, technical workers, screen writers and managers previously resident in Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, have moved to the Mainland. There are several reasons: job opportunities, a sense that China is opening up its media, a decline in regional production, and hence a feeling that East Asia's future is tied to China. The movement of creative personnel is helping China to develop and professionalise its media and cultural industries in spite of the heavy restrictions of freedom of expression.

Meanwhile China is pushing its media into world markets, attempting to redress a 'cultural trade deficit' (Keane 2007). As Wanning Sun (2015) demonstrates in an analysis of speeches and writings by China's policy advisors and state intellectuals, the nation's ambitions to export its world views is widely accepted as a worthy national mission. The massive investment by government in the 'going out' program is partly a consequence of the much publicised 'cultural trade deficit' and a sense among powerful elites and academics that China needs to counter negative reporting from the West, often by foreign journalists. Sun also notes that Chinese scholars view media and communication sectors as 'the backbone of the going global effort' (Sun 2015, 401). Inherent in this view is the idea that Chinese national media champions might challenge international giants. But with media content just 2 per cent of cultural exports in 2012 (Li Huailiang 2016), this scenario is not promising. Elsewhere Sun (2010) has characterised China's 'going global' ambitions as 'mission impossible'.

Of course going to the world always was, and remains, a political mission. Yet if China is defined by the West as its ideological other, as Zheng Yongnian suggests (cited in Sun 2015: 411), perhaps the key variable is the cultural presence of South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan (see Shim 2005; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Chua 2012; Fung 2013; McGray 2002; Berry et al 2009; Black et al 2010). As noted above the PRC has moved to brand itself as a 'great cultural power' (*wenhua qianguo*), emphasising a great civilisation and its enduring moral values. The subsequent rebranding of the mission is undoubtedly a strategy to appease domestic constituents and pander to the populism of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream', a template for national revitalisation.

Whereas overseas propaganda in the past was generated by zealous apparatchiks, there is now a view shared among Chinese scholars (see Sun 2015) that different 'interpretive communities'

exist in the world. Li Huailiang (2016), Director of the National Cultural Trade Research Centre in Beijing, notes that different strategies urgently need to be assembled because China's exports markets are too concentrated in South and East Asia. Of course products of Chinese origin sponsor many international sporting fixtures such as Grand Prix and the English Premier League but this is essentially a market driven (i.e. hard power) indication of China's global reach. Cultural diplomacy, another key element of China's outreach, is burdened by the requirements of official language (Link 2013) and the obligation to transmit approved texts. In the main government sponsored events and cultural trade delegations have failed to deliver credibility. Moreover efforts to 'go out' on the cultural front have not been assisted by perceptions of the People's Republic of China as an authoritarian state, a mass purveyor of cheap goods and a land harbouring copyright infringers. In *China Goes Global* David Shambaugh opines: 'we witness a large and growing number of China's cultural activities abroad—but very little influence on global cultural trends, minimal soft power, and mixed to poor international image in public opinion polls.' (Shambaugh 2013: 207)

The status of China's cultural trade

During the period from 1950 to 1978 the rationale for sending culture abroad was propaganda, pure and simple. What was dispatched was approved content, for instance movies and documentaries about the struggle of people to overcome colonialism. This kind of content failed to register any significant interest outside of fellow socialist countries. In the Cold War era the US was talking about the 'peaceful evolution' of democracy while China was flying the flag of socialism, resisting such peaceful evolution by blocking foreign content or erecting protectionist quotas. In the mid-1980s China came in from the cold; some of its traditional stories found new external markets; most were remakes of classic novels well known to Chinese audiences, as well as costume dramas about the lives of emperors and their concubines.

Aside from these kinds of stories there was little real success; even now Chinese content does not travel far outside the borders of the Mainland. Television drama, the most watched form of narrative media in the PRC does not sell well; it is stylistically different than most international genres. Aside from costume dramas, Chinese TV is dominated by stories about the revolution against Japanese imperialism or contemporary modern melodramas dominated by mother-in-law characters. From 2008 to 2011 imports of TV drama were three times that of exports, with the exception of 2009 when imports of foreign dramas were 7 times that of exports (Jin 2015: 241). This was the 50th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and the international market had little taste for patriotic renderings of history. Compared with the diverse offerings of international and regional competitors, Chinese narrative works are an acquired taste; people who have lived through great historical periods are inclined to revisit the past in the movies and TV dramas. As Yingchi Chu (2014), writes, in the main foreign audiences don't know how to read Chinese texts: but is it their fault? The question is: should Chinese producers change the way they make content so that it can reach international audiences? How can this be done?

Herein lies one of the key problems. And I should make this clear that I'm not saying that Chinese content is unsuccessful at home. But it is spread over a large area and because of

this fact there are significantly more channels and media outlets with limited financial resources and commercial know-how. When we compare this with the power of the big media companies internationally, their marketing acumen, and even the power of the TV format companies, we start to understand the scale of the problem. The key issue is risk. Chinese broadcasters, and media companies more generally, are disinclined to take political and economic risks. However, I believe this also points to the answers. Before knowing how China's culture goes out we need to briefly consider how foreign content comes in.

Overseas content has been coming into China through the new internet television companies' platforms. There is a demand for fresh content because platforms like LeTV, iQiyi and BesTV cater to younger and more affluent middle class audiences. This is the key difference between traditional media channels and the new players. Quotas have slowed the flow on mainstream TV; and restrictions on content have stopped many foreign offerings, particularly documentary, that might offend Chinese viewers or portray China in a bad light. Western programming does not feature highly on Chinese terrestrial and cable TV channels, unless we consider formats, which have taken the market in recent times.

Elsewhere exports (of cultural products) tell a different story. In 2010, the dominant export product was handicraft, which is counted in national statistics as 'design.' (Li 2016) This constitutes mostly low value labour-intensive products, hardly creative. 'Exported' processing (*jiagong*), which includes outsourced (*waibao*) and Original Equipment Manufacture (OEM components), comprised a total value of US\$7.13 billion in 2011, whereas imports of the same categories weighed in at a mere US\$0.34 billion. All 'other' cultural exports in 2011 amounted to USD1.46 billion (Jin 2015). The performing arts, for which China is renowned, are a very small contributor to exports. In 2010, 47 percent of this was acrobatics (Li 2016).

Visual art, handicrafts, and cultural artefacts are relatively successful areas of export. Artefacts are now sold in large quantities on Taobao, China's premier online platform. The Chinese visual arts industry has certainly outperformed, thanks to rich patrons residing in China and in overseas Chinese communities who look to accumulate and invest in art; this phenomenon has had a flow-on effect on the brand value of Chinese art and artists in world art auctions.

However, the 'good news' is that outputs of state run media like China Central Television, are rising in quantity. Commercial media organisations have also scored rare successes. Formatted reality shows, adapted in China from international formats, have made sales in Taiwan in the last few years (see Zhao this volume). The Chinese reality games shows, *If You Are the One* (*feicheng wurao*) [see below] and *The Brain* (*zuiqiang danao*) have screened on SBS in Australia, the former generating a great deal of buzz. And the Chinese TV drama series *Empresses in the Palace* (*hougong zhenhuan zhuan*) has been purchased by the US media giant Netflix (Jaafar 2015).

A closer examination reveals a more disquieting story: government cultural export initiatives are literally forcing Chinese culture and media products into world markets but they are predominantly landing in places where Chinese people live. While Netflix's acquisition of *Empresses in the Palace* suggests a breakout, it is too early to tell if this is just a strategy by

Netflix to ingratiate itself to the Chinese government or capture overseas Chinese audiences. Essentially Chinese stories are consumed by overseas Chinese, people from the PRC more so than Taiwan or Hong Kong. Chinese content registers sales in the US, Canada, Australia and South-East Asia because there are large diasporic communities that have the internet, satellite dishes and IPTV, often illegally downloading. In the past many Chinese would return to their home overseas with suitcases full of DVDs. Now this is not necessary. But overseas Chinese consuming content produced for home audiences is one thing: getting 'foreigners' to consume Chinese stories or watch Chinese documentaries is another. The lack of overseas impact can be construed as either a lack of insight into the tastes of overseas audiences or a reluctance to change what works at home.

Mechanisms of cultural trade

Finished programming

There are a number of ways that Chinese culture is exported, varying degrees of success, and as mentioned above, not inconsiderable evidence of failure. In the following I will provide a brief summary of how these mechanisms work.

In the first instance Chinese producers, investors, and cultural companies, usually with government assistance, endeavour to send their products abroad in approved forms, that is *finished programming*. Cultural and media products such as film, documentary, television (usually that of China Central Television CCTV), and performing arts troupes receive endorsement by the government as being officially representative of China; offerings range from traditional performing arts to contemporary formats and genres. These products are unadulterated, unchanged, and in the main unappealing, aside from niche and festival audiences.

In the television industry practitioners often use the term 'canned content', reflecting on the former pre-digital era practice of physical delivery of programmes in canisters. The finished programme (or film) is sold into 'after markets' (Havens 2006); for instance international audiences see *Desperate Housewives*, *Friends*, *Neighbours* etc. as they were made in serial order. That is not to say that reception is similar in different territories. As Chu (2014) notes Chinese film in particular is 'read' differently outside the PRC. The finished nature of the content may be subject to some modification in foreign territories as a result of censorship, dubbing and subtitling. This export mechanism is more push than pull, sometimes it is even called 'dumping', a derogatory term to describe the cheaper costs of buying canned US programmes than originating them.

Finished programming is the focus of most scholarly work on China. Looking at 'flows' of content is arguable an outdated approach when we consider that many audio-visual products are supervised by producer teams from different parts of Asia. What is perhaps more important in the context of 'going out' is the flow of know-how. The Chinese government wants to send its finished programmes, its authentic cultural forms to the world. In the past it has sought to do it without assistance, believe that its stories, its culture is ready for international markets. The government has not taken full note of market mechanisms like TV trade fairs such as MIPCOM and film festivals, which self-select what is

saleable. In the words of Tim Havens: ‘the global trade in television programming includes a good deal of trade in ideas *about* television as well’ (Havens 2006: 7)

To say the Chinese government plays a guiding role in managing cultural and media exports is a gross understatement. The problem is it knows what it wants to send out, less about what audiences want to see. In July 2005, the central government issued a directive, ‘Advice on Further Strengthening and Improving the Work of Exporting Cultural Products and Services’ and in the following year, the Office of the State Council together with seven other state institutions announced ‘Policies on Encouraging and Supporting the Production and Export of Cultural Products and Services’ These two documents outlined new mechanisms for those businesses (enterprises) targeting international markets. On paper it seemed like a comprehensive and fair-minded approach. All enterprises engaging in the export of cultural products were accorded equal treatment, whether they were state-owned or private. The policies encouraged outward bound enterprises to set up overseas offices that might facilitate exports, for instance, television programs and other cultural goods and services. In addition, official organizations were established at central and provincial level, allowing cultural enterprises to apply for preferential taxation policies; for instance, business taxes were waived or reduced in respect to overseas profits. Significantly, and in the best tradition of Chinese officialdom, organizations that demonstrated rapid progress in exporting were granted awards. Yet despite these incentives, the cultural trade deficit remains, and Chinese media is failing to capture the imagination of ‘foreign audiences’.

Shooting abroad

In recent years viewers have become accustomed to stories about the zany adventures of Chinese abroad, or alternatively viewing episodes of Chinese reality TV in foreign locations. This is another way to ‘tick’ the policy box called ‘going out’. Adding foreigners as guests into Chinese TV shows (Gorfinkel and Chubb 2014), filming Chinese natives in foreign locations, and casting overseas Chinese on reality shows is a way to demonstrate ‘going out’ bona fides, even if the shows are not directed at ‘foreigners’. In film there are examples such as *Lost in Thailand (ren zai jiong tu zhi Taijiong)* and following this, *Lost in Hong Kong (gang jiong)*. Other overseas adventures include *Finding Mr Right (Beijing yu shang Xiyatu)*

Where are We Going Dad? (baba qu na’er?) is a popular television game show about celebrities and their offspring bonding in unusual and often exotic locations. Adapted by Hunan Satellite TV from a Korean format, it was filmed in New Zealand (Rotorua) and Fiji in 2014. In 2015, the producers ventured to Margaret River in Western Australia to shoot two episodes which were entitled ‘back to the Stone Age’, an ironic thematic choice considering that Margaret River is a location known for wineries, fine restaurants and film festivals. The presence of a Chinese-owned winery at Margaret River no doubt swayed the decision as well as location sweeteners from Western Australian Tourism. At the same time the popular dating show *If You are the One (feicheng wurao)*, was recruiting Australian-based Chinese contestants for a special ‘down under’ issue. The show has previously shot eight overseas specials including the US, Germany and New Zealand. The key issue here is that while the contestants’ personal videos are filmed abroad, they are all Chinese natives living abroad. They are brought to China to be part of the show. On other occasions the show has featured ‘foreigners’ living in China.

Co-productions

The third mechanism is *coproduction* projects, usually in film. Here the door opens both ways. Co-productions are a means to share financial risk or bring financial or creative partners together in a form of joint venture. They may be an equity stake, investment in production in return for distribution rights, or a creative partnership. The topic is addressed elsewhere (Berry 2014) and in some detail by other contributors in this issue so I won't elaborate on particular examples. My observation is that many of these are co-production projects doomed to failure, not so much for a lack of goodwill and government support but perhaps because of government support. When governments get involved creativity generally goes out the window in order to appease cultural sensibilities.

Formats

The fourth mechanism, the *formatting* strategy, has shown to be the most effective method of internationalising, although to date almost all of the formats have come from overseas into China, in other words a one way street. If we look at formats as a means to outsource risk we begin to understand why they have been successful in China. Formats are a type of coproduction. However unlike the film production model they are based on pre-existing success in other territories. Most of the formats have come into China in the past decade, leading the media regulator to institute a 'one format policy' in 2014; in other words a restriction on the number of foreign formats that can be imported by a broadcaster each season (Keane 2015). The effect of the format trade is that Chinese looks and feels a lot like international TV: *China's Got Talent*, *The Voice of China*, *X Factor China*, etc. as well as clones like *Supergirls* (*chaoji nvsheng*, Hunan Satellite TV) and *Dictionary of Happiness* (*kaixin cidian*, CCTV2).

Can Chinese made formats go out? To date this has not occurred in the sense of China originating a successful format. Reality style formats, 're-made' in China from international recipes are sold to neighbouring territories as finished Chinese programmes. The example of the reality style TV dating programme *If You are the One* illustrates how formats remade in China can go abroad even to Anglophone countries with their Chineseness on display. The programme was purchased in 2013 by Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), a publicly funded network, more or less on a whim following its success in China. It has succeeded because it was not a government-endorsed program closeted within the 'going out' project. Following its success however, the government was quick to claim it. Another interesting fact is its origins. The format travelled from Australia where it was originally conceived as *Taken Out* (Seven Network/ Fremantle Media) to the UK where it became *Take Me Out*, and finally to China where it had a new incarnation, first at Hunan Satellite TV (*Let's Date /women yue hui ba*) and then at Jiangsu Satellite TV. Such flash in the pan successes underpin the core problem of knowing what the world wants.

To return to the point about outsourcing risk, Chinese media industries are risk averse in comparison with international counterparts. Obviously there are political requirements such as ensuring there is a good balance between entertainment and education. Media are largely state-owned or linked to state institutions and for this reason the system's ecology is

not designed to accommodate risk taking or innovation. Accordingly a great deal of knowledge is focused on 'know-to'; in other words producers need to know when to try a new idea and when to be circumspect; they need to know how to navigate policy directives. This category of know-how is endemic to the Chinese media system and is confusing to foreigners. Moreover, Chinese television production is centred in Beijing and this proximity to censors does not convey an image of risk taking or creativity. The question then is: how does China change its direction? From this perspective the globalisation of the format trade offers Chinese media a way to innovate; first; much of the commercial risk is taken by the originating company (right-holder); and second entertainment formats are by and large apolitical. In this sense Chinese media is assimilating foreign know-how and beginning to recreate its genres and formats to target foreign markets, not just Diasporic communities.

Other mechanisms

Two other mechanisms are worth noting briefly by way of conclusion: these are *online media* and *buying assets* abroad. The overseas reception of Chinese programming and online content has already been alluded to. China is sending its stories and news to citizens abroad and to others who may choose to watch online. Platforms have proliferated and content can be viewed in real time anywhere in the world with the right connection. The other side of the equation is that Chinese originated content such as micro-movies, TV dramas, music videos, and possibly even cat videos, have a chance to compete on international platforms such as Youtube, even if China's equivalent platforms like Youku Tudou are not allowed to reciprocate. As mentioned above Netflix's acquisition of *Empresses in the Palace* may be a sign of things to come; if Netflix opens the door more, then it might find the door opening in China. Certainly its Chinese partners, LeTV are welcoming. .

Arguably an easier option for cashed up Chinese cultural and media companies to 'go out' is to procure overseas assets, usually through a combination of foreign direct investment in 'greenfield' projects and mergers and acquisitions. Dalian Wanda Group's acquisition of the US AMC cinema chain in September 2012 was the first large-scale foreign investment by a Chinese cultural entity. It provides Wanda with the means to distribute more Chinese cinema through AMC's 346 locations in the US, should it wish to do so, on top of its 86 outlets in China. This foreign asset procurement strategy is welcomed by the Chinese government, together with Dalian Wanda Group boss Wang Jianlin's ambitious plans to transform Huangdao, near the north-eastern Chinese city of Qingdao, into the film production centre of Asia. Another takeover that has implications for China's soft power and is indeed a case of 'going out', is Alibaba's acquisition in December 2015 of the liberal flagship the *South China Morning Post*. The SMCP has long been critical of the Mainland in the spirit of independent journalism. The Vice President of Alibaba has 'hinted' that the paper will publish more positive stories of China (Wen 2015).

These kind of takeovers are ultimately less risky than trying to sell Chinese culture to the world market. As Li Wuwei (2016) writes, one important reason for Wanda to target AMC in its first-time overseas acquisition is that the core value of AMC is contingent on tangible assets such as the theatres and cinema screens. He says that it's easy for Wanda to make a comparatively accurate evaluation of those assets and manage them after acquisition. The

pay-off is an extension of industrial and commercial know-how. In the case of Chinese players there are certainly ambiguity issues; for instance understanding international law (Li 2016). China's media industries also confront cultural and political obstacles in pursuing such assets. Of course the same caveat applies to businesses entering China.

In conclusion, the Chinese government is making great efforts to send its culture abroad. This article has looked at the relative success of cultural trade to date and concluded that China lacks know-how of international markets and audiences. Government interference has been beneficial for some, usually preferred platform providers, but this comes with the risk that the audiences perceive the traded content or performance as propaganda. In media industries co-productions and formats are a means to outsource risk and accumulate know-how. Much of this know how has come, and continues to come from East Asia. Other mechanisms such as overseas shooting of domestic television show and the insertion of non-Mainland faces on TV screens gives the impression that China is going out, albeit in a more superficial way.

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