

Dancing with Chains: Significant Moments on CCTV

Abstract

More than a decade after television became the medium of mass consumption in the West, Raymond Williams published *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* in 1974. Raymond Williams is interested in television not as the outcome of an isolated aesthetic adventure or technological triumph, but as the manifestation of a profoundly social process. Television arrived in China initially as both metonym and metaphor for the state's socialist modernity, but has now also become a symptom of the triumph of global capitalism. In what way can Williams's insights on television technology and social change be revisited and made meaningful to the socio-economic specificity of China in the reform era? By looking at some significant moments on China Central Television in the era of economic reforms since the 1980s, this paper offers an account of the ways in which television as a form of technology plays a crucial role in the various junctures of China's social formations. In doing so, I seek to unravel the tension and dynamism between the creative and innovative impulse of television technology as an industry, the desire of the Chinese state for hegemonic control, and the naked ambition of the global economy ushered in by the Chinese state.

Key words:

Raymond Williams, CCTV, Chinese television, television technology, social change, social uses of television

Dancing with Chains: Significant Moments on CCTV

In August 2005, Li Yuchun, a 21-year-old university student from Sichuan Province, achieved celebrity status overnight for winning the ‘Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Contest’ on Hunan Satellite TV. Watched by more than 400 million viewers, this spin-off of the hit television show, *American Idol*, turned out to be one of the most-watched shows in China’s television history. Li Yuchun has just been selected by *Time Asia* as one of ‘Asia’s Heroes 2005,’ and indeed her picture graces the cover of the special issue of that name. What had caught the imagination of Western viewers is not so much the artistic quality of Li’s performance but the fact that her rise to stardom was the result of voting by 8 million viewers rather than the judgment of a handful of panellists. It is not very often that ordinary Chinese people were allowed to vote, albeit only for a popular cultural idol.

And it came as no surprise that the ‘supergirl’ was created not by Central Chinese Television (CCTV), but by a provincial television station, Hunan Satellite, which has found its niche in producing purely entertaining and rowdy variety shows such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. That does not mean, however, that CCTV has little or nothing to claim in Chinese television’s journey towards commercialization, pluralization and liberalization. On the contrary, for the two decades since the start of economic reforms, CCTV, originally created as the ‘throat and tongue’ of the Chinese Communist Party and initially useful in mobilizing the population in the building of socialist modernity, has evolved into a media organization which is remarkably complex, diverse and plural in terms of its social role, institutional structure, programming, and audience composition. Like many other institutions in post-socialist China such as education, law, and finance, Chinese media not only witness and reflect the tension and dynamism between the state and the market, but they have also embodied and helped shape such a relationship.

CCTV, an integral part of the Chinese media, is no exception. Although it has always been state owned, supervised and controlled, for the past couple of decades CCTV, like many other state media organizations, has had to operate with gradually dwindling government funding. Driven by market forces and commercialisation, the organization has had to diversify its markets, funding sources, and content, in order to survive and thrive as both a ‘mouthpiece’ of the state and a business enterprise. Now, with global capital rather than the state as its main source of funding, Chinese television, including CCTV, has had to become much more watchable and entertaining in order to ensure high ratings, and the consequent advertising and sponsorship dollars. Programs and channels within the same institution are encouraged to embrace innovation and competitiveness with the aim of producing high-standard programs. One of the most revolutionary measures taken in the sector of cultural production in the 1990s was to abolish the previously rigid employment system. For the first time, official news organisations such as CCTV could give permission to producers to recruit their own editors and journalists from all walks of life, on a flexible contract employment system. This change in hiring practices has had profound implications. The old ‘iron-bowl system’, a permanent employment public service structure which was tied with staff members’ promotion, housing allocation and salary increases, bred conservatism, caution and laziness. In contrast, those recruited under the new contract system can expect no public-service-style benefits, but instead are rewarded for good performance alone. Among the staff of *Focal Point*, for example, about three quarters are on contract, many of them young recruits with higher degrees including some who have returned from the West (Chen, 1999). Fang Hongjin, one of *Focal Point*’s producers and directors, is one of these new-breed contract ‘cultural workers’ with no institutional affiliations who are now recruited by CCTV (Fang, 2000). Various measures such as this have made it difficult to maintain a totalising state voice on all issues. As can be expected, reforms within the institutional structure of the

state media have created a new space, and this is characterized by what Zhao calls a ‘multifaceted’ relationship in which the state and the market are mutually constitutive of each other, and are ‘simultaneously reinforcing and undermining each other’ (Zhao, 2000: 21).

More than a decade after television became the medium of mass consumption in the West, Raymond Williams published *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* in 1974. A most influential cultural historian in the twentieth century whose work is associated with the emergence of cultural studies as a discipline, Williams is interested in television not as the outcome of an isolated aesthetic adventure or technological triumph, but as the manifestation of a profoundly social process. In his paper ‘The Technology and the Society’, Williams (2002) suggests that the relationship between television technology and social change can be approached by considering, on the one hand, the social history of television as a technology, and on the other hand, the social history of the uses of television technology. Almost a decade after Williams’s seminal work, television had established itself in urban China, and was used primarily as a tool of top-down mobilization. By the beginning of the new millennium, it had become a household item throughout the nation, both rural and urban. Seen in this light, we can say that television technology, which started in China as both metonym and metaphor for socialist modernity, has also become a symptom of the triumph of global capitalism. What does it mean, therefore, if we are to revisit Williams’s thinking on television and social change via the example of Chinese television? In what way can Williams’s insights on television technology and social change be made meaningful to the socio-economic specificity of China in the reform era? Here I propose that the answer lies in unraveling the tension and dynamism between the creative and innovative impulse of television technology as an industry, the desire of the Chinese state for Gramscian hegemonic control, and the naked ambition of the global economy ushered in by the Chinese state. It also lies in

considering the impact that this tension and dynamics has on television content, formats, and the (trans)formation of the social imagination of Chinese audiences.

By looking at some significant moments on China Central Television in the era of economic reforms since the 1980s, this paper offers an account of the ways in which television as a form of technology plays a crucial role in the various junctures of China's social formations. Such an account aims to demonstrate that there is a reciprocal relationship between forms of representation and the society that creates them, and that each historical era produces not only its own stories but also its own ways of storytelling. Of course, a history of Chinese television can be undertaken in a number of ways – for example, by taking either a cultural analysis approach or a political economy approach. While the former might focus on representational strategies, genre, format, style, and theme, the latter might consider a range of factors such as state control, finance, market, industry, censorship, policy, regulation, commercialization and conglomeration of Chinese television. Cognizant of the importance of both approaches and drawing on their respective strengths and insights, this paper, however, follows its own organizing principle, of pursuing the nexus between technology and social change. It poses such questions as: how does television, now surpassed in 'newness' by other communication technologies such as the Internet and the cell phone, continue to be 'effective', relevant, and socially useful in a radically transformed social order? In what ways are the uses of television technology indexical to, and constitutive of, the profound changes taking place in the imagination of self, home, place, time, community, and nation? In what follows, I will dwell on what I consider to be some significant moments – arranged in chronological order – in CCTV's exponential growth and development in the 1980s and 1990s. Admittedly, there is nothing inherently logical or exhaustive about including these moments to form a genealogy of Chinese television in the era of economic reform, except to

say that each of these televisual moments represents an innovative use of technology, not in the sense that the technology is new, but in the ways in which that technology is put to new social uses. Furthermore, each of these moments, in its own way, embodies the paradoxical relationship between television and social change. Television, seen through the prism of these moments, offers (re)new(ed) hope, yet at the same time raises further doubt about the prospects of political pluralism and democratization in 21st century China.

Spring Festival Eve Television Gala (1983)

Television first arrived in China in 1958, but it was not until the beginning of the 1980s that it started to enter Chinese homes. For hundreds of years, the celebration of the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year, had been a family activity, whereby members of families gathered together for the family dinner, followed by various entertainment activities such as playing cards, Mahjong, or chess, or simply enjoying being together as a family. Such hermetic, family-based ways of observing the annual ritual were to change forever in 1983, when CCTV launched its first Spring Festival Eve Television Gala (*chunjie lianhuan wanhui*). Consisting of singing, dancing, comedy skit (*xiaopin*), comedic cross-talk (*xiangsheng*), and other variety shows, the production – four hours in length – featured performances by the most respected and well-known Chinese artists and performers, and offered Chinese television audiences a spectacular feast of unprecedented televisual virtuosity. The event gained nationwide fame and became a success overnight, with CCTV receiving 160,000 viewers' letters following the show.

Since 1983, the Spring Festival Gala has been an annual event, although it has become increasingly difficult for the producers to satisfy audience expectations. The show has grown bigger and more spectacular; and at the same time, it has also become more contrived and orchestrated. Now institutionalized as 'part of the ritual of the New Year celebration', the show is an integral part of the Spring Festival culture itself (Zhao Bin 1998).

In 1994, the gala event was simultaneously broadcast to Chinese communities in North America and Australia. In 1997, while the production commanded a domestic audience of 90.67 percent (Zhao Bin 1998), diasporic Chinese communities all over the world could also watch it via satellite. In 2005, it was broadcast all over the world in four languages including English and Spanish, thereby becoming a truly a global affair. Such a phenomenal audience size means astronomical advertising dollars during the time of the gala, hence the beginning of the tradition of manufacturers bidding – at 3 million to 10 million yuan (US\$360,000 – \$1.2 million) – for spots in the most anticipated show in the country (Martinsen 2005).

The relationship between electronic media and nation-building is well-proven. Writing in the European context, Moores argues that ‘sentiments of nationhood pre-date the arrival of modern electronic media, but television and radio have nevertheless instituted new relationships between the state and the people’ (Moores 1996, 26). In the case of Chinese television, the annual Spring Festival Gala can be seen as a ‘happy marriage between an ancient Chinese ideal and a modern Western technology, whereby happy family gatherings are turned into ‘national reunions’ (Zhao Bin 1998, 46), and for this reason, it deserves a special place in the history of Chinese television.

The secret to the initial success and the longevity of this ‘happy marriage’ lies in the show’s capacity to take advantage of the potential afforded by the technology. It demonstrates the ingenuity of the Chinese state in reinventing ways of indoctrinating and educating the nation. Delivering strong messages of patriotism and national unity but packaging them as entertainment, fun, and family festivity, the gala allows the Chinese state to enter the domestic sphere of private citizens for the first time, to carry out its ideological work in the home. The synchronization of the traditional Chinese calendar with the temporality of official media ensures the ‘regular imagining’ of the nation (Mercer 1992). As

a result, domestic space can no longer be easily cordoned off or distinguishable from the public space. In other words, the idea of the Spring Festival Gala, conceived and started in the early 1980s, at a relatively early stage of economic reform and globalization, was one of state media's first successful experiments with 'indoctrainment', delivering indoctrination by packaging it as entertainment (Sun 2002). Furthermore, if the start of the Television Gala proved the Party's capacity to carry on ideological thought-work in the era of economic reform and market liberalization, its evolution over the last two decades also showcases the Chinese state's ambition to export patriotism outside China. In the same way that the domestic sphere is connected to the national space, national space is now connected with transnational Chinese spaces. Consequently, the ideology of patriotism not only enters the private space of the home, but it also spills over to global diasporic Chinese spaces and places. Delivered by satellite and received with a rooftop dish – affectionately dubbed a 'wok' by many Chinese – scores of Chinese television stations are now beamed daily into diasporic Chinese homes. Though separated by the tyranny of distance, viewers around the world can re-territorialize themselves by tuning in to the 'comfort zone' of the motherland.

River Elegy (1988)

When the six-part documentary series, *River Elegy (Heshang)*, was screened on CCTV in 1988, nobody expected it to generate much impact. In reality, about 200 million people watched the series. It was so popular that scripts were published in full in major newspapers and in book form, to satisfy the demand. The series follows the tradition of using television to present Chinese landscape as spectacle, and in doing so, it does not deviate from the convention of using visual images merely to advance a didactic message. However, rather than inscribing the landscape with 'nationalistic affect', as is the case with *A Story of the Yangtze River (Hua Shuo Chang Jiang)*, *A Story of the Yunhe Canal (Hua Shuo Yun He)*, the images in *Heshang* are metaphors of the backwardness and undesirability of Chinese culture

and civilization. Generalizations about Chinese culture abound, and so do essentialistic dichotomies of 'the Chinese' versus 'the West'. However the series is innovative and, as it turned out, controversial in at least two ways. First, it appropriates televisual images, in particular those of civilizational glory and excellence, to construct different and, in some cases, oppositional meanings. Second, and more importantly, these national icons were translated into televisual images not to instil pride and confidence in the nation, but to provoke intellectual debate by casting doubt on the capacity of a Chinese cosmology to survive the inevitable processes of globalization. Juxtaposing images of the Great Wall and the Yellow River with narratives and statements about Chinese culture and civilization, the series pushed an overall argument that China needed to abandon an inland worldview for an maritime perspective (Barme and Javin 1992).

The series deserves a special place in the history of Chinese television, not simply because it was immensely popular, and its main writers were later exiled following the Tiananmen incident in 1989, and that it represents a disruptive reading of the symbols of Chinese culture. The series also made history because it was perhaps the first time when Chinese television, a medium for the masses, was used by cultural elites and for the purpose of intellectual debate. In a way, it had taught the Chinese intellectual elites a lesson about the power of televisuality, a lesson demonstrably well earned, judging from the media savvy pro-democracy student protesters in Tiananmen Square the following year.

As is clear from the Tiananmen incident, televisuality can be both authoritarian and democratizing; and this duality most powerfully manifests itself in *River Elegy*. Through shows such as *A Story of the Yangtse River*, *A Story of the Yunhe Canal*, and *River Elegy*, television demonstrated the power of technologized images to affect the ways in which the nation is imagined. Electronic media, Rey Chow points out, delivers 'immediacy and efficacy' in a way which traditional modes of representation such as literature and writing can

not. Electronic images are powerful because, again as Chow argues, they are ‘clear, direct and seemingly transparent’, exposing, revealing and capturing ‘entire histories, nation and peoples on the screen’ (Chow 1995, 10).

While *River Elegy* demonstrates the power of the visual image in evoking the Yellow River and the Great Wall, it also at the same time points to the new possibility of polysemy and ambiguity afforded by visual technology. Jing Wang, for instance, reminds us that *Heshang* is not just a verbal text; it also speaks to the audience through the camera and, as such, may sabotage the attempt at ideological closure pursued by the verbal text. She argues that the tension between the visual and the verbal leads to ambiguity rather than exclusiveness in the series:

The ending of *Heshang* thus tells us two different stories: one the conquest of the river by the ocean, the other, the miracle of a spatial breakthrough of the imprisoned. Because visual imagery has a life of its own and is less susceptible than verbal imagery to ideological constraints, the spectacle of the merger invites conflicting interpretations. In so much as the conclusion is seen rather than derived from a logical statement, the last few minutes of the documentary embody the tour de force of a conceptual ambiguity beyond the grasp of verbal logic. (Wang 1996, 134)

Above all, the popularity and controversy of the series presented a serious technologically based challenge, in an unprecedented way, to a tradition of didactic representation – whether it be the propaganda and mass mobilization work of the Party, or the paternalistic and pedagogic initiatives of the intellectual elites. The combination of verbal and visual, unique to television, meant that a hegemonic and top-down pattern of indoctrinating and educating the masses had becoming increasingly difficult.

Yearnings (1991)

The 1989 Tiananmen Incident and the Chinese media's failed ambition to bring about a 'regime change' presented a lesson to many of those concerned. The Chinese Party state learned – ironically from the pro-democracy students on the Square – the importance of harnessing and manipulating media visibility to gain national and global support. To the pro-democracy students and intellectuals, including media practitioners and those engaged in cultural production, it became clear that a reconceptualization of democracy may be in order so that the costly pursuit of democracy with a capital D could be replaced by a democratizing process which was necessarily gradual, partial, and local. Post-1989 cultural production in China, particularly on Chinese television, reflects this paradigm shift. For the first time on Chinese television, the life of ordinary people and their everyday lives have become representational fodder, not because they are model workers, peasants or soldiers who exemplify the extolled virtues of state ideology, but simply because they are about the loves, losses, joys and tragedies of personal lives in individual households. One year after the Tiananmen Incident, *Yearnings (Kewang)*, a 50-episode television drama series, captured the imagination of an entire nation. Centring on two families and their experiences during the Cultural Revolution, the series is a 'melodramatic tale of romantic loves found and lost, of a baby abandoned and raised with no one knowing her "true" identity, of families rent apart and tenuously held together' (Rofel 1994: 700). As a top-rating and most widely watched series, *Yearnings* was also China's first soap opera. Together with a number of subsequent and equally successful series such as *A Beijing Native in New York (Beijingren Zai Niuyue)* and the *Stories of the Editorial Office (Bianjibu De Gushi)*, *Yearnings* marked the maturity of Chinese television drama as a genre and consolidated the genre of Chinese-style soap opera (Liu 2000).

This aside, *Yearnings* is a landmark series which facilitates, represents and heralds a number of shifts in cultural production in post-Mao China. As writers who have commented

on the series suggest, *Yearnings* not only brought to the fore the fraught relationship between elite culture and ‘plebeian culture’ (Liu 2000, 28), between intellectuals and the masses (Wang Yi 1999); it also signified the willingness of the Chinese state to retreat from the personal realm (Rofel 1994). What is little observed yet equally significant, however, is how television dramas such as *Yearnings* mark the beginning of a different form of sociality that hinges on the formation of a new relationship between television, everyday life, and the subject-formation of individual viewers.

In his article ‘Drama in a dramatised society’; Raymond Williams, writing about television dramas in the early 1970s in the West, argues that the cultural significance of drama has been fundamentally altered by the quantity of dramatic performances ‘we’ are now exposed to. The crucial development, according to Williams, has been the introduction of television. In its origins, drama was occasional in the literal sense: its significance was closely associated with the fact that it was performed on specific occasions, usually with some rituals, if not religious significance. From the late twentieth century, however, it has become quite common for television viewers to watch two or three hours of drama every day. One of the effects of this, Williams argues, is that drama has become built into the ‘rhythm of everyday life’, and as a result we live in a ‘dramatised society’ (Williams 1989). The quotidian nature of the production and consumption of televisual narratives – ordinary people watching the private life of ordinary individuals like themselves, as is the case with *Yearnings* – marks a profound shift in the ways in which the nation is imagined. This shift is not immediately transparent unless we look at how the everyday is set off against its ‘others’ – those things which we think of as *not* everyday. These include extraordinary events which by their very nature stand outside the everyday (the handover of Hong Kong to China would be an obvious example), and heroes or figures who appear to transcend the everyday lives that most of us lead (Olympic gold medallists or space shuttle astronauts). In contrast to pre-

existing narratives of the nation featuring national heroes, sublime landscape and history-making events, melodramas such as *Yearnings* also mark what Rofel calls a ‘partial withdrawal’ of the Chinese state, which has ‘enabled a discursive space for the individual’ (Rofel 1994, 709).

The saturation of television in Chinese households and the growing popularity of television drama series in China in the 1990s ensures that on any given day, a Chinese viewer can expect to be either in the beginning, middle or end of one or more television drama series. Most of these series are 20 to 40 episodes in length but some, like *The Great Qin Emperor*, which has 136 episodes, are much longer. Their episodic nature means that viewers’ quotidian spatial and temporal arrangements are reprioritized to accommodate the television program’s schedule. It is commonplace for families to have dinner earlier or later than before, or even to schedule their socialization around television programming, so as not to miss their favorite drama series. The integration of television dramas into daily life has profound implications. It is no longer possible to separate televisual time and space from everyday time and space. Similarly, it has become problematic to talk about social life in terms of the distinction between the lived and the imagined. Conversations, exchanges and debates, at home and in social settings, centering on or arising from a television series during and after the viewing time, have become integral to a new way of socialization. Television dramas, increasingly fit to be described as ‘drama in a dramatised society’, not only record and narrate social change; they are in fact also constitutive of new ways of conducting social life *per se*.

(*Focal Point*) Jiaodian Fangtan (1994)

If ‘killing boredom’ (*jie meng*) was the key to winning audiences in the early 1990s (and television drama series such as *Yearnings* are most effective in achieving that), media

industries realized that to keep audiences, they had to deliver programs which not only ‘kill boredom’ but also, and more importantly, ‘defuse anger’ (*jie qi*). The shift in the mid 1990s from killing boredom to alleviating anger is understandable, since the further marketization brought about by economic reforms at that time had bred resentment and anger among the population against the widening gap between rich and poor, and between those privileged with power and the powerless. Along with the deepening and widening of economic reforms came the more palpable, routinized and ubiquitous reality of social injustice, inequality, corruption and bureaucratic misconduct - a situation loathed by the population generally, but also unacceptable to the Chinese government, since it cast doubt on the soundness of economic reform and threatened the political legitimacy of the Chinese state.

Enter *Focal Point*. This program first went to air on April 1st, 1994, and its promotional logo is an eye, connoting the show’s function to watch and monitor (*jian du*). Since its birth, this harbinger of investigative journalism in China has remained the highest-rating (30%) television show in the country, with a regular viewership of 0.3 billion. Starting at 7.38 pm every day after CCTV’s prime time news bulletin, the program lasts thirteen minutes, each edition dealing with a specific topic, issue or incident. In the period since its inception, *Focal Point* has become such an integral part of the popular consciousness that it is nowadays impossible to imagine Chinese television without it. One often hears remarks such as ‘I may miss my dinner, but I wouldn’t want to miss *Focal Point*’. Disgruntled people threaten their opponents with threats such as, ‘If you keep doing this, I’ll tell *Focal Point*’. Sometimes the program is simply referred to as ‘Judge Focus’ (*jiao qing tian*).

Although *Focal Point* was created to address the public desire to see evils exposed and punished, the show came into existence with specific instructions and directives from the central government, which saw the usefulness of a national television show for policing and exposing wrongdoings on behalf of the government. From its inception, *Focal Point* has been

endorsed and blessed by numerous government leaders, including the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and President Jiang Zemin. Producers of the show follow a strict formula prescribed by the state propaganda mechanism. This includes four domains of reporting, namely promotion of an ideology consisting of socialism, patriotism and collectivism; implementation of new social and economic policies and regulations such as a new housing system and pricing regulations; exposure of activities which are strictly banned by the Party and the government including prostitution, pornography, and corruption; and finally the investigative reporting of various large-scale criminal cases. The show also follows three criteria in identifying the targets for exposure and criticism: cases in which government policies are disobeyed or regulations violated, such as the unlawful occupation of farming land; cases in which the public interest is endangered, such as the polluting of rivers by factories; and cases in which state interests are damaged, such as smuggling and embezzlement (Yan 1999).

In terms of format, *Focal Point* was inspired by its counterparts overseas, including America's *60 Minutes* (CBS) and *20/20* (ABC), both champions of exposé journalism (Zhu and Ying 1998, 132). Its success had also spawned a plethora of similar shows on various provincial television stations aiming at exposé journalism, the most prominent being *Today's Topic* (*Jin Ri Hua Ti*) on Beijing Television, and *Pay Attention* (*Guan Zhu*) on Shandong Provincial Television. The practice of *bao guang* – exposé journalism, literally, 'bringing to light something hidden in the dark' – became the defining and much fetishised form of television journalism throughout the mid and late 1990s (Zhang 1999, 9).

Many stories on *Focal Point* are not news because they do not have conventional 'news value': they are not new or unusual occurrences, nor are they concerned with significant people or events. They resonate with audiences not because they communicate information which audiences do not know, but because they expose certain typical

individuals and practices that are already common knowledge, but have so far been unexposed to, or ashamed by, the pressure of public opinion. A story about the misconduct of Shanxi's traffic police generated a wide audience response, not because such practices were unheard of, but just the opposite: they were ubiquitous throughout the country. Likewise, the significance of the story of a girl in Heilongjiang whose ten-year lawsuit was finally brought to an end by 13 minutes' exposure on national television lies in the audience's widespread frustration with and understanding of China's inefficient and inadequate legal system.

It is precisely because of stories such as these that some writers are thoughtful about the use and possible abuse of exposé journalism (Zhang 1999, Chan 2002, Li 2002). The privileging of, or excessive emphasis on, the ameliorative role of exposé journalism may run the risk of clouding the real issue at the heart of media reform and democratization, which is editorial independence in news-making. It is even feared that by exposing undesirable behaviours and phenomena to please both the government and audiences, the truth-seeking goal of journalism is compromised. Writing about the status of Chinese television in the late 1990s, Zhang comments that producers of *Focal Point* may never have realized that their expose journalism could be doing a disservice to the future of Chinese television:

We desperately need programs such as *Focal Point* in our society today. In times of social transformation, with an inadequate legal system and rampant corruption, the role of the media as the monitor of social conscience is particularly important, and as a result, people place too much hope in television. However, to monitor is not the same as to transmit and communicate. *Focal Point* should represent one aspect of television, not its entirety. Too much emphasis may result in the media becoming just another propaganda tool. (Zhang 1999, 32)

Oriental Time-Space (1996)

Focal Point appeals to viewers with its promise to humiliate and shame shady characters for their corrupt or unethical behaviour, thus exposing the dark side of economic reform. To ordinary people who are angry but powerless, the exposure – literally, through visualization – of corruption, injustice and unethical behaviour is vicariously therapeutic. However, state legitimacy is hardly sustainable if the population at large is confined to the position of spectator, even though an anti-corruption focus is always a ‘crowd pleaser’, and even though programs such as *Focal Point* function more as a watchdog on behalf of, rather than over, the state and government. For viewers to have a sustained engagement and identification with the program, television must make them feel that their perspectives are represented, their voices are heard, and their sense of self-worth and belonging affirmed, not in spite of but precisely because of their mundane dilemmas, uncertainties and issues.

This is precisely what *Oriental Time-Space* intends to deliver. Arriving on the scene in the mid-1990s at more or less the same time as *Focal Point*, *Oriental Time-Space*’s programming is scheduled thematically, day by day, with ‘columns’ such as ‘Everyday Life Space’ (*Shenhuo Kongjian*) and ‘Tell It as It Is’ (*Shi Hua Shi Shuo*) achieving the widest resonance. Promoted – very effectively – as the program on which ‘the general public can tell their own stories’ (*jiang shu lao bai xin zi ji de gu shi*), this suite of daily television columns quickly captured the imagination of young and old viewers alike by becoming the only program on CCTV which recognized the potential of television to be the medium for the masses.

Inspired by the format of CBS’s *60 Minutes*, both *Focal Point* and *Oriental Time-Space* nevertheless perform different roles in recording and bringing about change in the sociality of the Chinese people. The former works best to ‘expose’, whereas the latter endears itself to audiences on the strength of ‘documenting the real lives’ of ordinary people (*ji shi*). In other words, *Oriental Time-Space* is motivated by a humanistic desire to treat individuals,

big or small, with respect, and the best way to show respect, according to the producers of the 'Everyday Life Space' column, is to 'let people speak, and encourage them to speak truthfully and honestly' (Zhu and Ying 1998, 165; my translation). To reflect this philosophy, the show adopts the 'talk show' format familiar in the West, consisting of a host, invited guests, a live audience, and dialogues between and among them. The topics covered are diverse and determinedly 'mundane', yet they have wide resonances, ranging across such topics as whether keeping birds is a good hobby, whether children should be brought up by their grandparents, and how to find employment after being laid off by state enterprises. Guests and audiences air differences, share experiences, and offer advice. Through identification with the guests and studio audience, viewers watching at home feel that they are also participating in the conversation. What matters is not so much what is being discussed. Much of the success of 'Tell It As It Is' lies in the approachable, humorous, yet charismatic host, Cui Yongyuan, one of the best-known television hosts in China, and a household name across the nation. Well-liked for his demonstrable willingness to listen, empathize and understand, Cui also impresses viewers with his capacity to harness difficult and emotional moments on the show.

Chinese audiences, long being used to being spoken *to* and *on behalf of*, are duly appreciative of the space, albeit in a mediated, staged, and limited way, to express their own agency and subjectivity. In this sense, although *Focal Point* has been hailed as the hallmark of the media as truth-seeker, the birth of *Oriental Time-Space* may be regarded as representing a more significant moment, whereby the impulse of democratizing television is allowed to bear on Chinese state television:

Before *Oriental Time-Space*, Chinese television posited viewers as deferential listeners and respectful spectators. Columns such as 'Everyday Life Space' have created space for egalitarianism and the consciousness of 'the common person' [*ping min yi shi*].

Ordinary people can be on television; their experience is dignified through televisual representation. (Zhu and Ying 1998, 138; my translation)

Hong Kong handover (1997)

As the strength of exposé journalism lies in its capacity to ‘shed light’ – literally – on the dark side of social life, it is a form of media practice which has served the state agenda very well. Similarly, programs such as ‘Tell It As It Is’ and ‘Everyday Life Space’ work to reinforce the view that ordinary people’s lives and experiences are validated rather than diminished. However, the state’s efforts at self-legitimation and nation-building need to continue to be innovative in their use of media and technology if China also wants to showcase the ‘bright side’ of economic reform, parade the state’s achievements, and carry on its ideological work of patriotism both at home (in both senses) and abroad. One lesson that the Chinese authorities learned from the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 is the importance of the camera in cultivating a ‘positive’ image for both the nation and the world. If the Spring Festival Eve television gala works through the annual synchronization of familial space and time with that of the state, then the adoption, towards the second half of the 1990s, of the ‘media event’ or ‘television event’ (the televisual transmission of nationally significant events, live) is another example of the state’s intention to harness technologies to advance its grand nation-building agenda.

While new to China in the second half of the 1990s, there had been any number of media events in the West before this, the most famous of which include the first human landing on the moon, the funeral of John F. Kennedy, the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, and Diana’s funeral. In their well-known work on this cultural practice, Dayan and Katz (1992) point out that media events entail the ‘interruption’ of routine – they intervene in the normal rhythm of broadcasting and that of audiences’ lives. They are also

'live' in the sense that the events are broadcast as they occur in real time. What distinguishes media events from other kinds of television program that are also transmitted live is that they take place outside television studios, in 'real' settings. What qualify as media events, according to Dayan and Katz, are events that, on the one hand, are live and remote from television audiences and, on the other, are interruptive, but pre-planned. These events celebrate unity and reconciliation, speak to very large audiences, and in this sense, are necessarily 'hegemonic.'

With the 72 hour non-stop telecast of the ceremony of Hong Kong's return to mainland China on June 31, 1997, one quarter of which involved simultaneous live transmission, CCTV marked the beginning of the era of 'live transmission' on Chinese television. This media event symbolized a recognition of the injustices done to the Chinese by British and other colonial powers over the past century, and signified a closure to the historical aggression against China by the British. The climax of the event, the flag ceremony, in which the Chinese flag was raised to replace the British one over Hong Kong, can be read as both a literal and a metaphorical reclaiming of Hong Kong from British colonialism. The ceremony can also be read as the triumph of the 'one China, two systems' policy, as well as of China's desire and capacity to live with or even embrace transnational capitalism.

The transmission of the Hong Kong handover ceremony has been hailed by Chinese media scholars as the single most significant event in the history of Chinese television, and as such it signals the 'full-fledged modernization of television language on Chinese television' (Zhu and Ying 1998: 123; my translation). Since 1997, CCTV, encouraged by the success of staging the handover event, has hosted a number of spectacular media events, including the opening of the Yellow River Xiaolangdi Dam and the completion of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam Project. In light of the domestic and international controversies

surrounding both irrigation projects, live transmission of these ceremonies clearly had the intention of showcasing to the Chinese people and the world the wisdom and competence of the Chinese government. The press conference held by U.S. President Bill Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin during Clinton's visit to Beijing in 1998 was transmitted live, complete with questions and answers between journalists and the most powerful figures in the world. The press conference sent an impressive message to the international community about China's willingness and ability to participate in the global political and economic order. Similarly, the military parade on October 1, 1999, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, was also scripted as a narrative of 'contest' and 'conquest.' For the Chinese government, the anniversary was an opportune time to instill pride and cohesion in the nation, but, more important, to reassure the international community that the Chinese government was in firm control and that transnational processes would continue to benefit from China's stability, prosperity, and openness. Other media events on CCTV have included the transmission in 2001 of the announcement of Beijing's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, as well as the more recent successful launch – and return – of the manned space shuttle in 2005.

These media events differ from the Spring Festival gala in that while the former resorts to the synchronising of official and familial time, the latter events operate by interrupting and suspending the everyday. In addition, the former takes place in a controlled environment and is rehearsed to the point of perfection; the latter events draw attention to themselves, but at the same time run the risk of going spectacularly wrong. After all, Beijing may have been humiliated to hear that it did not win the Olympic bid; nor was there a guarantee that the space shuttle would return safe and sound. The fact that the Chinese state has been willing to gamble is testimony to its growing appetite for spectacle, glamour and political showmanship. And for this reason, it is safe to predict that the 2008 Olympic Games

in Beijing will be the most spectacularized media event in the history of Chinese television (Sun 2002a).

Conclusion

On a number of occasions, the Chinese media have been compared to a ‘dancer with chains’ (Fang 2003). This metaphor is instructive in that it reminds us, on the one hand, of the political and economic constraints which may inhibit processes of democratization and political pluralism, while on the other hand, it makes us appreciative of the nature of this beast called television – both as an industry and as a popular cultural form. In fact, we may go so far as to say that the innovation and creativity of Chinese television, including CCTV, cannot be truly understood unless they are considered in the context of the media’s impulse to ‘dance’ in spite of, or perhaps even because of, the chains. The start of nation-wide economic reforms in the early 1980s coincided with the arrival of television in most Chinese households. The implications of this are worth considering: a history of Chinese television is necessarily an account of Chinese society and its people’s becoming modern. Similarly, an account of social change in China in the two decades of reforms must include an explanation of how television has reworked the social semiotics of the self, family, community, and the nation. It would not be meaningful to view Chinese television as a Trojan horse, brought in unwisely by the Chinese state, only to turn around and pose serious challenges to the state. Nor would it be wise to speculate, as Rupert Murdoch once did – much to his regret – whether media technology would eventually usher in a ‘regime change’. Instead, what do warrant our careful consideration are the ways in which a partial, local and gradual process of reform in the media sector has been made possible by, and, in turn has contributed to, some significant social changes in contemporary China.

This chronological account includes some significant moments which are popular television programs in their own right. The screening of these programs has had a dramatic or profound social impact, in that they have themselves either become an institution or changed viewing habits, or, in some cases, both. Each of these televisual moments presents a unique attempt to ‘undo’ the state meta-narrative, but only with the sanction and permission of the state per se; each is a moment whereby a particular version of capitalism, which has thrown up a particular model of modernity, learns to accommodate the desires of the state in order to profit and thrive. While the break-away from state orthodoxy adds cachet to new forms of representation and production, it also only highlights the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a total departure from the state.

If the above account gives a generous, encouraging and positive glimpse of a few moments that indicate the evolution and growth of Chinese television in the 1980s and the 1990s, this is because these moments, however modest, partial, and gradual, deserve encouragement and affirmation. Similarly, if the above account also implies that CCTV’s impulse and energy for innovation and creativity had plateaued by the beginning of the new millennium, this is because, however strong the impulse for innovation and change, ‘the dancer’, like Monkey Sun Wukong in *The Journey to the West*, cannot escape the confinement of a powerful state, on one hand, and a relentless market, on the other. Viewed in this light, the birth of the ‘Chinese supergirl’ on Hunan Satellite, and the world’s response to this phenomenon, is profoundly poignant yet perfectly understandable.

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