

Disconnecting, Connecting, and Reconnecting: How Chinese Television Found Its Way Out of the Box

MICHAEL KEANE¹
Curtin University, Australia

The emergence of online platforms dispensing TV content in China has transformed conventional understandings of Chinese media. Online video companies have revitalized the Chinese media industry while throwing out challenges to the government. Three disruptive moments illustrate how Chinese television is regulated, distributed, and accessed: disconnecting, connecting, and reconnecting. I examine some of the leading online platforms and consider the growing power of Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent—known as the “kingmakers” of the Chinese Internet. I describe how the Internet has created an unprecedented transformation in China’s television industry and how “Internet television” is disrupting the formerly stable and heavily managed sector. Finally, the article explores how new technologies of distribution are allowing Chinese culture to internationalize and to “reconnect” with Chinese-speaking communities.

Keywords: Internet television, television, China, digital disruption, soft power

When James Lull published *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance* in 1991, the People’s Republic of China was in the midst of an upsurge in media production, spurred on by economic reforms that allowed many millions of people to buy television receivers, then a much-desired consumer item. Lull (1991) depicts Chinese viewers gathered around the TV as a family unit, watching serial dramas. The television receiver is a rectangular box in the living room disseminating government messages and entertainment—mainly serial drama—to an enthralled audience.

In the decades that followed, television evolved. Audiences matured. Viewers who were born after 1978, China’s one-child generation, drifted to other audiovisual pursuits such as VCDs, DVDs, and later online games and videos. Responding to the multimedia imperative, television evolved from a one-to-many medium. Channels multiplied, and cable proliferated; satellites were launched, and networks consolidated their assets. The extension of infrastructure was part of a nation-building strategy designed to extend the new audiovisual technology to all corners of the nation. Despite further deregulation and

Michael Keane: M.Keane@curtin.edu.au

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commercialization in the 1980s and 1990s, all aspects of production, particularly permits for narrative content, came under the scrutiny of the media regulator, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (today called the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television or SAPPRFT).

Eventually television got “out of the living room box” in China and moved on to other platforms and devices, including the set-top box, the mobile phone, and the tablet. Cross-platform developments began in the early 2000s, a time when popular reality shows produced by satellite channels attracted large online fan communities and users began to share content while adapting and generating derivative forms. Rather than maintaining a communal family-bonding function, television reception has become an increasingly individualized activity. Parents watch their favorite programs on the home screen in the living room, but many, particularly younger, viewers opt for more interactive platforms and dedicated program apps, in this way sharing with distant friends.

This article examines some of the leading online platforms and describes how they have become part of the government’s digital economy strategy. The Internet has created an unprecedented transformation in China’s television industry. Chinese Internet companies are disrupting the formerly stable and heavily managed television industry. Taking up the theme of digital disruption, I discuss how Chinese television has continued to evolve a dual identity (Bai, 2016) in which economics throws out a challenge to politics. In the evolving multiplatform environment, relations between the state, media, and society are being challenged. Censorship remains a problem for content producers—and audiences—but there are many more ways of finding and accessing content.

To describe challenges now facing the television industry—and the government—I begin with some basic historical background. I show how the government attempted to reform the Chinese television industry according to a sender–receiver transmission model, while the industry (or at least many working within it) sought to emulate the success of foreign television. I draw on three ideas to explain how Chinese television content is regulated, produced, distributed, and accessed: these are *disconnecting*, *connecting*, and *reconnecting*.

While the Chinese television industry has embraced commercialization as a way to compete with foreign media, the dark side is *disconnecting*. Content is caught up in vague definitions of public morality, determined not by independent program classifications but by the ratings of officials in the Ministry of Culture, the Propaganda Department, and SAPPRFT. Through its various media regulatory authorities, the Chinese government is unrepentant about its practice of shutting down content deemed “unhealthy” or “harmful,” either by censoring before production or forcing offending content to be removed from screens.

In contrast, *connecting* demonstrates how audiences and users are finding ways to access a diversity of content, including content that is restricted. Later I draw on the concept of “connected viewing” (Holt & Sanson, 2014) to illustrate how the Chinese TV industry has transformed its services from a one-to-many broadcast network distribution model to a multiplicity of content providers “characterized by interactive exchanges, multiple sites of productivity, and diverse modes of interpretation and use” (Curtin, 2009, cited in Holt & Sanson, 2014, p. 4). A number of leading traditional broadcast

media have themselves become more interactive and “connected” in order to fend of challenges from China’s new “digital champions,” best typified by Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT).²

Finally, *reconnecting* is another way that Chinese television content has gotten out of the box and made its way overseas. Whereas a decade ago people outside China visited video shops in Chinatown areas, brought back DVDs from China to share with friends, or erected satellite dishes on roofs, an array of technological interfaces such as satellite dishes, set-top boxes, and virtual private networks (VPNs) now allow Chinese people around the world to watch and interact with Chinese-produced television shows in real time. In other words, the technologies now available allow Chinese people to reconnect with their homeland, allowing a different modality of soft power (Nye, 1990) to play out. For overseas audiences, accessing a diverse buffet of content becomes as simple as purchasing a digital set-top box on Alipay, Alibaba’s international e-commerce platform. With this technological solution, both the industry and the state ideological apparatus are able to reach out to new audiences as well as reconnect with ordinary people (*laobaixing*), including second-generation overseas Chinese, whose connection with Chinese culture may have lapsed.

The Changing Landscape

A great deal has been written about Chinese television, mostly about the reception of television serials, the most popular form of programming.³ In the past decade, scores of conference presentations, journal articles, reports, and PhD theses have been generated on Chinese television. The bulk of these emphasize ideology and censorship. The dominant approach among international researchers is program “texts”; for instance, news, serials, and reality shows. Most scholars view texts as symptomatic of the reproduction of the status quo; in other words, television programs show how the state maintains control. Programs are read as proof of resistance to authority, as evidence of the resilience of tradition, or as implicit critiques of contemporary society. However, as productive as textual interpretations of content have been, it is now necessary to consider how Chinese television squares with global developments.

My aim in this article is not to catalog the many political constraints on production but rather to chart the evolution of technologies from the analog television receiver (the box) to cable and digitally enabled platforms and later to smaller-screen devices and set-top boxes—an evolution that has led to new ways of producing, distributing, and viewing content as well as incubating new genres and formats. Television is finding its way out of the box and onto other platforms. Another interpretation is that both producers and viewers/users are becoming more creative in their use of the medium, which is in turn forcing content producers to expand into new formats and genres. In effect, my argument is that the Chinese television industry is moving through technological developments similar to those seen in the rest

² In this article, I refer to an ecosystem of digital players; however, I will argue that the consolidation of BAT represents an unprecedented challenge to the traditional media system.

³ For a selection of these writings, see Bai (2014); Bai and Song (2015); Chow and Ma (2008); Gong (2015); Lu (2000); Lull (1991); Ng (2015); Rofel (1994); Sun (2008); Zhu (2008); and Zhu, Keane, and Bai (2008).

of the world, albeit with considerable restrictions on content and controls on investment from private capital.

If Chinese television is reflecting global trends, then we might ask how the advent of new screen technologies and government intervention in the market are shaping reception practices. Bruce Owen's aptly titled book *The Internet Challenge to Television* describes "four types of present and future television": conventional network TV, cable TV, interactive TV, and Internet TV (Owen, 1999). Writing from the U.S. perspective, and reflecting arguably the most innovative developments in media technology, Owen concluded that the digital world was being buffeted by Schumpeterian "gales of creative destruction" (Schumpeter, 1942/1994). Of these four categories, the most pertinent for the discussion here is Internet television, which allows direct delivery of television programs and movies through on-demand Internet streaming services (Lee & Andrejevic, 2014).

Internet TV is accessed with smart TVs and receivers with a game console as well through the addition of a set-top box, a device that enables the TV set to become a user interface to the Internet while also enabling it to receive and decode digital television signals. The term *Internet television*, therefore, includes businesses that own infrastructure that enables video content to be pushed from a single point to a large audience (Cunningham & Silver, 2013). Of course, television content is also conveniently accessed online, dispensing with the need for stand-alone receivers. In China, broadband Internet and digital television are widespread, as is Internet protocol television (IPTV), which allows access to video on a computer and to the Internet via the television monitor. Because of changing viewing practices, including the sharing of media among users, cross-platform delivery strategies and online marketing are imperative to the survival of commercial broadcasters (Holt & Sanson, 2014).

In *The Internet Challenge to Television*, Owen observed that the development of the medium of television is more complex than just the sum of players involved and their economic motivations. Complexity exists "because of interactions among players and because of the interference of government" (Owen, 1999, p. 4). His point about the interference of government is extremely pertinent in China. In its early years, television—like radio before it—was a technology that invoked the Chinese nation. Propaganda officials regarded people as passive receivers of messages, not unlike the hypodermic syringe model of Western empirical communications research. Mao Zedong famously used the expression "blank sheets of paper"—a reference to how China's propagandists could rewire the minds of the population to the cause of revolution. The function of mass media was to "reflect" reality—namely, the reality of class struggle. Those working in the mass media, whether as journalists or producers, were obliged to regard themselves as "engineers of the soul."

The arrival of television coincided with the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), a period in which the Chinese government sought to develop domestic production of iron and steel. Set ownership came along with increasing prosperity as well as a drop in the price of television sets. By 1973, China had begun experimenting with color television, adopting the phase alternation line system; color transmission replaced black-and-white programming in 1979 (Chang, 1989). In 1982, the Ministry of Radio and Television was formed (in 1986, this became the Ministry of Radio Film and TV, and later the State

Administration of Radio Film and Television).⁴ The following year, the “four level” deregulatory policy (*siji ban*) was instituted, granting local stations some autonomy in financial management and program development. These policies specified that a television station could be established if a certain financial threshold was achieved.

In 1984, China launched its first communication satellite; within a few years, thousands of relay networks enabled programs to be accessed in remote locations including Tibet and Xinjiang (Hong, 1993). By the end of the 1990s, satellite delivery and fiber-optic cable allowed television signals to extend their reach to an unprecedented degree, far displacing radio and the print media as the preferred medium by which people received information. By 1990, there were more than 1,000 cable television stations, a number that would double in three years (Liu, 1994). The profusion of television stations producing similar-looking low-budget content was in sharp contrast to the development of commercial network television in capitalist countries.⁵

Ruoyun Bai (2016) writes about the bifurcation of the television system into public and profit-making spheres, sometimes referred to within China as “public institution” (*shiye*) and business enterprise (*qiye*), a process that began with the four levels policy and escalated with the commercialization process known as the “reform of the cultural system” (*wenhua tizhe gaige*), which was trialed in 2003. In 2006, further reforms were initiated, increasing this bifurcation. In 2009, a document entitled “About Promoting the Reform of Separating Production From Broadcasting” stipulated that stations should form private production entities with private capital (Bai, 2016).

Despite such industrial reforms, the television sector remained largely constrained by the administrative boundaries imposed in previous decades. For instance, provincial terrestrial television channels cannot operate at a national level, except for one nominated satellite channel from each province, although municipal stations such as Beijing Television are allowed more than one satellite channel.⁶ Even in provincial capitals, the competitive strength of operations of provincial broadcasters is limited by an obligation to target a provincial-level audience. Understandably, the broadcasting sector in China has sought to break free of excessive governmental intervention while relying on the government for protection against overseas competitors. Industry spokespersons, particularly in the more entrepreneurial networks such as Shanghai Media Group (SMG) and Hunan Broadcasting System (see below), have lobbied the government to release shackles on content, recognizing that a large part of the audience is gravitating to online platforms and more innovative genres. In short, a combination of disruptive technologies and a proclivity of Chinese net users to seek out creative modern content has

⁴ The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television is the result of a merger between the State Administration of Radio and Television and the General Administration of Press and Publication in March 2013.

⁵ With the term *network television*, I am referring to the broadcasting system by which large media organizations or networks provide programs to television stations or pay television providers. Examples include ABC, CBS, and NBC in the United States (with Fox later gaining prominence).

⁶ Beijing Television operates a satellite documentary channel.

made Chinese television what it is today: a complex hybrid of the old and the new, the public and the private.

Disconnecting

The limited capacity of Chinese stations to originate programs in the 1980s precipitated a demand that was temporarily filled by foreign programs. While a great deal of foreign content (mostly TV serials) found its way on to screens in the mid-1980s (Hong, 1993), by the end of the 1990s, the government had managed to restrict the inflow through a combination of quotas and censorship (Keane, 2015). Censorship and self-censorship have always existed as a means to mold content to reflect “core socialist values” or whatever slogan emanated from the politburo. Television serial scripts are required to be submitted to the regulator before a permit is issued. In other cases, the broadcast of already-approved serials may be interrupted when they are deemed offensive by senior government leaders. Quotas were an industrial mechanism to limit the amount of foreign content a channel could purchase and were applied initially to serials. In 2013, the tide of foreign-originated formats was stemmed by the imposition of a one-foreign-format-per-season quota (Keane & Zhang, 2016).

Disconnection in the name of national security provides an effective way to filter foreign content. In the south of China, foreign content has been more accessible. For instance, viewers in Guangdong have accessed Hong Kong satellite signals since the late 1990s through the use of satellite dishes. Following China’s entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001, a number of overseas satellite television channels, such as BBC World and Rupert Murdoch’s STAR TV, were granted landing rights in Guangdong Province. The reality of broadcasting was, however, precarious. In 2006, for instance, according to Chin (2011), the Guangdong Broadcast Bureau found 5,000 occasions to block content. The disappearance of the BBC World service from the small screen came to be a regular occurrence because of its critical coverage of issues such as Tibetan and Taiwanese independence. The lesson for foreign players was becoming very clear: Disconnection was a stick that the state could wield with impunity.

By the turn of the century, the Internet was changing the way people, especially younger Chinese, accessed content. Disconnection on the Chinese Internet would come to be an everyday reality, although VPNs provide some assurance of connectivity. Some estimates suggest that 20% of total Internet users, or 93 million people, in China have access to VPNs (Globalwebindex, cited in J. Li, 2016).⁷ The use of VPNs, along with piracy, provides a way to access disconnected content or programs that are unavailable in China.

In 2003, the bit torrent site BTChina was launched to host popular TV shows and movies, particularly the latest U.S. shows and Hollywood hits. As Zhao and Keane (2013) discuss, online video sites proliferated. Many engaged in piracy. The content these sites provided was widely shared, creating

⁷ It is hard to accurately account for the number of VPNs used in China, because usage is not condoned. While some VPNs may be used to access foreign websites, it is probably the case that the majority are for entertainment purposes, including access to foreign content and pornography (personal discussions with industry insiders).

an expectation among users that access was free. The most well-known site, Tudou, began in April 2005. Other sites, such as Youku, 56.com, and Ku6, attracted user-generated content, either original or remixed works. In December 2007, however, the Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Program Services dealt a blow to privately held BT-based online video websites (Zhao & Keane, 2013). The provisions were intended to appease the international community and extend domestic ideological control online. They required online video business operators to obtain programming permits or shut down their businesses.

This was a watershed moment. Because of China's obligations to clean up piracy in respect to its international trade obligations, the online industry was forced to professionalize. Most were disconnected—that is, their operations were shut down. Enterprises (*qiye*) with significant assets and good connections with government became the leaders in the online content battlefield. Arguably, viewers lost out. Content increased in value, and this was reflected in the way that the surviving online sites competed for the spoils. More than anything, however, it signaled a move from the small screen in the living room to even smaller mobile screens.

Connecting

Whereas disconnection is used as a stick to punish offenders, advances in technology eventually shifted the balance in favor of viewers. Television is more than ever about screens and users. More than ever before, it is viewed on multiple screens, a phenomenon that has facilitated the generation of TV-like content, in contrast to traditional formats and programs such as serial drama and news programs. TV-like content is effectively a hybrid of online video-style content, including user-generated content and content professionalized from amateur creators. Holt and Sanson (2014; see also Cunningham & Silver, 2013) have described how media companies globally are exploring multiplatform strategies, experimenting with interactivity and user engagement. Holt and Sanson (2014) call this "connected viewing"—essentially the evolution of traditional screen practices, digital technology, and socially networked communication.

The rapid expansion of digital media technologies is accelerating the evolution of Chinese television. Digital media have been adopted by younger audiences who spend little or no time "watching the box" in the living room. According to a comparative study conducted in 2012, online content on TV is viewed the most in China—possibly due to consumer interest in viewing foreign programs that may not be available via traditional TV (see PRWeb, 2012). In many respects, the Chinese television industry has become a cross-platform entity with large digital companies providing the impetus for the generation of original content, which can be measured more effectively by "hits" than by conventional ratings. This phenomenon, which is global in scale, requires TV networks, producers, and program investors to reconsider their business models. The relationship between traditional TV and online video sites is transforming the way that TV is conceived, made, and consumed in China. In many respects, the new players are adopting international licensing practices while remaining mindful of their obligations to the state, which has facilitated their domination by eradicating illegal sites and maintaining firewalls to prevent foreign competitors, including YouTube, from accessing the Chinese market. In short, there are three principal mechanisms by which the online sites provide TV and TV-like content to their communities.

The first mechanism is to seek out and purchase popular overseas content. A good example of this practice is the online video company LeEco. Formerly known as LeTV, the company was established by Jia Yueting in Beijing in 2004, a time when a number of online entities such as Youku, Tudou (now Youku Tudou), and Ku6 were jostling for positions and streaming content that was pirated, along with many other bit torrent sites. According to its CEO, LeTV outlaid substantial money buying up a war chest of broadcast rights at cheap prices (Guyang, n.d.). When the Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Program Services came into effect in 2008, the prices of copyrights escalated. LeTV was subsequently able to reap profits from redistribution rights.

The second mechanism is to purchase popular TV shows. In addition to content purchased from overseas providers, including Hollywood and South Korea, the online sites acquire content from traditional TV channels. This was the case with LeTV's acquisition of *Empresses in the Palace* (also known as *Legend of Zhen Huan*, 2012), originally produced by the Beijing Television Arts Centre, a production unit responsible for many of China's most popular dramas in the 1990s, including *Scenes From an Editorial Office* (1991), *Beijingers in New York* (1993), and *Expectations* (1990). Probably the biggest purchaser of ready-made content from the television production system, however, is the streaming platform iQiyi, which by 2015 had accumulated 10 million paid subscribers. In 2014, one of the most watched TV series was *Tiger Mum* (*huma maoba*), jointly invested in and produced by Dragon TV and Tianjin Satellite TV. Secondary broadcast rights went to the online platforms Youku Tudou, Sohu, Tencent, iQiyi, and LeTV.

A third model is commissioning content. iQiyi has also been a front-runner in commissioning and coproducing content, forming partnerships with foreign entities such as Lionsgate, Paramount, NBCUniversal, and BBC Earth (Frater, 2015). In 2014, its self-produced TV series *The Lost Tomb* (*daomao biji*), an action adventure genre with elements of the supernatural based on a successful Internet novel by Xu Lei, swept the market. In such cases, successful content can be sold back to the traditional TV sector. The problem inherent in this model is that SAPPRT is becoming more stringent in regard to content produced and screened on streaming video sites. Previously such content was reviewed after release (in contrast to the traditional TV industry model of approval before production). In February 2016, SAPPRT announced that it would seek to "retrain" staff responsible for monitoring online content, implying that the online sector had managed to exploit the system.

The evolution of China's traditional broadcasters from state propaganda institutions to commercial entities demonstrates the problems facing the government as it attempts to rein in digital disruption. Some of China's leading traditional broadcasters have moved rapidly to online and multiplatform strategies, but most of the pack have tried to maintain faith with an older demographic, serving up a diet of TV serial drama, talk shows, and formatted talent shows. Since the mid-2000s, Internet protocol television has emerged as a contender for market share. Whereas satellite channels are accessible in a number of ways, primarily as part of a cable TV package, IPTV is contingent on bandwidth. This technical bottleneck means that people who can afford faster broadband are the consumer base. IPTV trials began in 2005, concurrent with digital television. The key players in the market were China Telecom and China Netcom. While telecoms fall under the regulatory control of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, licenses to produce and distribute television-like content come from SAPPRT.

China Central Television (CCTV), the earliest and largest broadcaster, has sought to stay in touch with the online transformation. In 2009, China Network Television (CNTV), an IPTV platform, came into existence, making the content of the national broadcaster and its multiple channels available to Internet users in North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. CNTV provides several language options, including English, French, Spanish, Russian, Korean, and Arabic as well as "local" languages such as Mongolian, Tibetan, Kazakh, and Uyghur. Of course, being the "publicity" face of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party, much of the content is pedagogical. The Chinese-language version is the most widely accessed, and users can avail themselves of a set-top box to access other channels associated with CCTV. CNTV's competitors in the IPTV space include Shanghai Media Group's BestV, Hunan Broadcasting Service's Mango TV, and Phoenix TV's Hong Kong platform.

The Shanghai Media Group is another traditional media company now competing online. It is a subsidiary of the Shanghai Media and Entertainment Group. The parent entity was formed in 1997 in a wave of media groups aiming to shore up China's media arsenal in the expectation that China would join the World Trade Organization and be forced to compete with Western media forces. In 2009, SMG formed its own separate entity and moved to become a more financially viable entity, with an IPO listing the ultimate goal (Bai, 2016). At the time, the leaders of SMG were no doubt conscious of the winds of change blowing through the entertainment content business. BestV New Media Company, the IPO-listed company under SMG, has interests in mobile television, smart television, online video, and broadcasting integration as well as movie, television, and multimedia production. The formation of the IPTV platform called BestV capitalized on what was perceived to be the platform of the future. BestV offers a range of options for consumers willing to pay, from high-definition digital TV with a buffet of premium content such as the U.S. National Basketball Association and the English Premier League without advertising to standard-definition digital services with advertising. In hopes of migrating some of its customers from IPTV to "over-the-top" content,⁸ the company offers a smart TV with both functions. Other dedicated services include apps through which viewers can customize their viewing, allowing family members to simultaneously access programs on tablets and mobile devices, and local community television channels that allow people in the community to receive medical and social security information. The expansion into smart TV and cloud TV are strategies to monetize over-the-top content. At the same time, the long-term future of IPTV in China looks cloudy, according to Li Ruigang, the former chairman of SMG, with the main competition coming from online streaming websites, which are rapidly being cannibalized by China's big players Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (see below). Alibaba in particular has bought significant assets in online media, over-the-top, and digital TV platforms, including WASU TV (Hangzhou), Sina Weibo, and most notably a major investment in Youku Tudou. After leaving SMG in 2015, Li Ruigang headed up a new smart TV start-up called Whaley Technology, backed by Alibaba and Tencent, which have committed to provide content (Gu, 2015).

⁸ *Over-the-top* refers to the delivery of video, audio, and other media over the Internet without a multiple system operator being involved in the control or distribution of the content. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Over-the-top_content.

Another online model currently being tested is to restrict content production and distribution within a branded entity. In the case of Hunan Broadcasting Service's Mango TV, content made exclusively for the parent company is distributed online through its branded platform. In this case, the content has already navigated the regulatory gauntlet. Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV) represents a traditional broadcaster trying to commercialize its brand in the face of competition from born-online video companies. In 2006, the Hunan Happy Sunshine Interactive Entertainment Media Company was established as a subsidiary of HSTV with a focus on developing content delivery through new media. HSTV's new media platforms have more resources than independent online video platforms, which means there is no need to explore new forms of businesses from the ground up. Hunan's strategy in new media includes its Internet TV, branded as Mango TV under Hunan Broadcasting Service. Mango TV aspires to be a strong brand in the competitive online market by building on Hunan Satellite TV's success as a production entity. The question remains whether this will be a sustainable approach to gaining back its audience from other online video sites. The key is producing hit shows. The drawing power of HSTV's programs has so far resulted in a significant increase of users within a short period of time. Apart from developing HSTV's own online video platform, Happy Sunshine is advancing its options in the Internet TV business. In collaboration with television manufacturers such as Samsung, Changhong, and TCL, it delivers television service on smart TVs with built-in set-top boxes. The partnership with set-top box manufacturers brings over-the-top content to audiences. Television content comes from channels under CCTV, provincial TV stations, and local TV channels under Hunan Broadcasting as well as other genre-specific channels such as cartoons and educational content. Apart from close-to-live broadcasting with a window of 30 minutes, time-shifting features allow users to catch up with the content they have missed. Audiences can also review programs broadcast within seven days on demand. In addition, the service provides access to a library of about 2,000 films.

The rapid transformation of China's television industry echoes developments globally in many other ways, not least being the profusion of second-screen technologies—namely, companion apps that help viewers individualize their consumption while enabling the sharing of trending topics on social media. Lee and Andrejevic (2014) write:

Second-screen apps fulfill the various goals of interested parties: television networks that want higher ratings, audience monitoring companies that dream of voluntary ubiquitous monitoring (on a large scale), advertisers that dream of more detailed information about their audience, and an audience that allegedly wants more interactive and social television experience. (p. 48)

The Chinese cousins of international apps such as Zeebox, Viggie, Miso, and GetGlue include Panda TV, Acfun, Bilibili, and CBox, which also allow people outside China to access and share selected Chinese content (see the final section).

Digital Champions

In 2014, the buzzword emanating though China's online world was *Internet thinking* (*hulianwang siwei*). In 2015, this term would be embodied in a government blueprint called Internet+ (Gao, 2015;

Keane, 2016b). Few media industry events were immune from this discourse, signaling a perception that small-screen-connected devices were the future of the content industry. Leading the charge are Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent, effectively a Chinese-style oligopoly with close connections to the government. In the north of China, Wanda, a powerful real estate company led by China's richest man, Wang Jianlin, began to assert itself in the content industries. Disruption became a leading theme in the industry with the CEOs of companies like Sohu, Xiaomi, LeTV, and Wanda self-identifying as "disruptors" (Tse, 2015). In many respects, these online players are China's equivalents to Google, Netflix, and YouTube (Cunningham & Silver, 2013). With their large reserves of cash and equally large ambitions to be known as "China's digital champions," they have impacted on traditional incumbents—the media networks, TV channels, production bases, and studios. The creative destruction of the old regime, typified by state broadcasters and compliant producers, is leading to uncertain environments as the new companies seek to tap into the evolving tastes of born-digital consumers.

Initially technology companies, these cashed-up IPO-listed enterprises have sought to make content their business. Because of the massive market for "eyeballs," it makes sense to covet the spoils of the television industry, and this includes buying the resources of competitors, including streaming video sites, commissioning new content, and even manufacturing smart TV sets. Key players are engaging in an arms race that is occurring through the kinds of mergers and acquisitions characteristic of capitalist marketplaces as well as competition for exclusive content. Instead of paying the costs of buying "foreign" content, which must navigate regulators, many are commissioning content. In the case of Sohu.com, one of the dominant streaming sites, this strategy resulted in an upturn in 2015, following a previous strategy of paying out big money for U.S. shows (Frater, 2016). Preempting the Internet+ concept by some two years, Baidu launched TV+, a smart TV, before merging iQiyi, its majority-owned streaming video platform with PPS, another online platform that it acquired. Alibaba, meanwhile, acquired China's leading online video company Youku Tudou in 2015 in its bid to become a major content player, supplementing its TBO Tmall Box Office, the Chinese equivalent to Netflix. Tencent, meanwhile, has upped the ante, supplementing its own streaming site QQLive by buying a share of Sohu.com.

Aside from BAT, the biggest challenge seems to be coming from Dalian Wanda. Initially the company was involved in real estate, large shopping malls called Wanda Plazas; however, since dipping its toes in culture in 2006, Wanda has embraced film, performing arts, theme parks, KTV chains, newspapers, and art collections. Its film industry aspirations are well known, acquiring the U.S. AMC theater distribution chain in 2012 and Australia's Hoyts in 2015 as well as a leading stake in Legendary Entertainment.

Reconnecting and Going Out

As audiences have become more fragmented and selective, the Chinese television industry has had to reconsider its mode of operation. What kind of programs should be tailored for local consumption, and what kind of content best serves national audiences? Furthermore, how might content be distributed to international consumers? The next stage of television's development is, therefore, internationalization. However, while internationalization may be the long game, a more feasible scenario is "reconnecting"—that is, using new media technologies to reach out to overseas Chinese audiences, in this way exerting a

distinctive form of soft power (Nye, 1990) that attracts people who are already conversant with the Mainland media but who have, for various reasons (including apathy), lost contact.

Many strategies currently exist to assist Chinese culture, content, and ideology to go global; for instance, government-endorsed cultural representatives including Confucius Institutes, China Central Television (CCTV), visual artists, filmmakers, and performance troupes are taking Chinese culture to many parts of the world with varying degrees of success. Chinese television producers are enjoined to “go out” (*zou chuqu*), and the lead player in this respect is the national broadcaster CCTV. Writing about CCTV’s exploits, Ying Zhu (2012) says that CCTV is entrusted by the government “with the duty of advocating on behalf of China and Chinese culture overseas” (p. 169).

“Going out” refers to the official mission to propagate Chinese culture offshore; it is the state’s response to cultural globalization or Westernization, often framed as cultural security. In the early 1990s, the phrase “please come in” (*qing jinlai*) was used to attract foreign investment, although the invitation to come in was not extended to sensitive areas like media and culture. As discussed earlier, in the section “Disconnecting,” many barriers have been erected to stop foreign culture from polluting the minds of Chinese people. Fifteen years after China joined the World Trade Organization, the non-Chinese world still comes up against firewalls, censorship, and confusing policy interpretations. Peter Nolan (2013) observes that while large Chinese firms are beginning to “go out,” global companies are increasing their efforts to break into China. China’s leaders now believe that national cultural security (*guojia wenhua anquan*) can be strengthened by not just resisting globalization (increasingly difficult because of the Internet) but making a move to reverse cultural imperialism. Li Wuwei (2016), a senior policy advisor, writes: “Movies, plays and novels that are engaging have proved to be more effective in disseminating Chinese culture than diplomatic delegations” (p. 116).

Television shows that address an international community are increasing, adding to the content already produced for domestic consumption and reinforcing the notion of cosmopolitanism, particularly the Chinese national who has made it abroad. Competition shows like Zhejiang Satellite TV’s *The Brain* (*zuiqiang danao*), which features international contestants competing against “native” Chinese, complement televised events like the *Chinese Bridge Chinese Fluency Competition for Foreign College Students*, which displays the Chinese linguistic pyrotechnics of foreigners (Gorfinkel & Chubb, 2015). In effect, a ramping up of offshore television shoots, including reality shows such as *Where Are We Going Dad?* (*baba qu na’er?*), *Running Man* (*benpao ba xiongdi*), and *If You Are the One* (*feicheng wurao*) (Keane, 2016a), as well as the insertion of international competitors into formats like *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo hao shengyin*) and *I Am a Singer* (*wo shi geshou*) illustrate that there are many ways that Chinese culture can “go out.”

Chinese television is now a global phenomenon, reaching out to the “world’s largest audience” (Curtin, 2007)—that is, the population of Mainland China (1.3 billion and counting) as well as Chinese people in other territories, and particularly in the Asia-Pacific. The difference today is that technology allows Chinese TV to go global. Chinese television sells reasonably well in Southeast Asia for reasons of cultural proximity as well as a significant Chinese diaspora. Reports indicate that Chinese television is concentrated in certain markets: the United States, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (H. Li,

2016). Such markets have a high density of Chinese immigrants and people whose native language is Mandarin Chinese. Although Hong Kongers speak Cantonese as their dialect of choice, there are many migrants from the Mainland living or working in the former British colony. The key point about Chinese television abroad is that it is largely consumed by diasporic populations.

In countries where the Chinese population is a minority, the market is differentiated by region; for instance, many people who speak Chinese come from Taiwan or Hong Kong, and they often have different political affiliations vis-à-vis the Chinese Mainland than those who have come from the Mainland, whether as migrants or overseas students. The most comprehensive study of how overseas Chinese people access television in Australia was undertaken by John Sinclair, Audrey Yue, Gay Hawkins, Kee Pookong, and Josephine Fox (2000) in the late 1990s and published in a book entitled *Floating Lives* (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2000). At that time, seeking out Chinese television content was not easy. Some existed on specialist public broadcasting television networks—for instance, the Australia Special Broadcasting Service. Other options were subscriptions to pay TV channels that targeted the Chinese diaspora by packaging content from a number of sources. One of the most popular sources of Chinese television, however, was video stores in Chinatown areas, something available only to people living in large cities. Another way of accessing content from the homeland was for returnees to bring DVDs, usually of TV serials, that could be shared among friends and family. Quite often these would be pirated DVDs purchased on the street in China. All these methods of access, aside from the Australia Special Broadcasting Service, required a physical form such as the video or the DVD.

The Internet has changed the dynamics of international reception and engagement by audiences. As mentioned above, the ways that people access content in China has changed, allowing those who are prepared to seek out foreign content more options—some legal, some not legal. Internationally, the scenario is somewhat different. Chinese residents overseas already have access to as much local (e.g., Western) content as they wish. Now they have easy access to the content of their homeland in real time or in catch-up viewing mode. There are a number of ways that overseas Chinese can get their fix of programming made in the Mainland.

The most common way to receive Chinese programming until recently was the roof-mounted satellite dish. Satellite TV works by broadcasting video (and audio) signals from geostationary satellites to satellite dishes. A satellite dish is a special kind of antenna designed to focus on a specific broadcast source. Most satellite TV is now encoded digitally. This enables satellite broadcasters to offer more television channels using the same amount of satellite bandwidth. Satellite dishes are common in China as well as abroad. In China, they were the default reception technology in embassy compounds and foreign hotels prior to set-top boxes. In overseas communities, they were, and still are, common, usually purchased through vendors, often working out of Chinatowns. Once mounted on a roof, the satellite dish can receive programs, except those that might be encrypted.

Chinese websites such as Youku Tudou and iQiyi provide domestic viewers with a considerable amount of free content. This content is restricted in other territories by digital licensing rights that function to allow the sale of content packages to aggregators. One way around this is by using a VPN; these can be purchased and downloaded for several dollars a month and allow access behind the Chinese firewall. As

mentioned above, in China, VPNs allow Chinese people to access foreign websites and social media that may be blocked by the Chinese government. However, the set-top box is now the default technology for accessing Chinese programming overseas. In the past, many of the boxes sold to consumers were illegal because they contained software that could access illegal peer-to-peer pirate TV networks that operated from China. Now set-top boxes come with a range of options and can be purchased overseas on Alipay, Alibaba's international online market.

Another convenient way of accessing Chinese content is YouTube. As mentioned earlier, many tens of millions of people in China, including Party members, use VPNs to access mostly entertainment content, and often porn. There are now more than 300 Chinese channels on YouTube. Unlike channels in China showing Western movies and TV series that utilize fan-subbing services, most Chinese YouTube content is not subtitled, suggesting that the target is not foreigners but rather overseas Chinese. For Chinese people living outside China, YouTube provides a way to access entertainment programs that are "geoblocked" (Labato, 2016) on Chinese domestic online platforms such as Youku Tudou, iQiyi, and Leshi (LeTV). YouTube is popular because it provides access to many new shows without a paid subscription. In this way it brings the Chinese diaspora into closer contact with homemade content.

Many Chinese TV stations utilize YouTube to deliberately reach out to the diaspora; for instance, Hunan Satellite TV, CCTV, and Jiangsu Satellite TV received global video views of 329 million, 212 million, and 193 million, respectively, on YouTube in 2014 (Zhao, 2016). CNTV, the Chinese online version of CCTV, even has an official channel. Evidently most of the CCTV/CNTV video view hits have come from the Spring Festival Gala, the annual Chinese New Year entertainment show. However, the top video views globally on YouTube in 2014 were formatted television shows led by *If You Are the One* (*feicheng wurao*) (Jiangsu Satellite TV), *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo hao shengyin*) (Zhejiang Satellite TV), *I Am a Singer* (*wo shi geshou*) (Zhejiang Satellite TV), *Happy Camp* (*kuai le dabenyin*) (Hunan Satellite TV), *Where Are We Going Dad?* (*baba qu na'er?*) (Series 2) (Hunan Satellite TV), and *Running Man* (*benpao ba xiongdi*) (Zhejiang Satellite TV) (Zhao, 2016; data from GoChinaTV). The countries that most use YouTube to access Chinese content are those with Chinese-speaking audiences and communities: Taiwan, the United States, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Canada, Singapore, Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Thailand (Zhao, 2016).

Concluding Remarks

The relations between the state, its media, and society in China have changed in many ways since the late-1990s, a time when the Chinese television industry began to professionalize. Joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 forced China's media to become more competitive, to professionalize, and to reach out to new audiences, even while its ability to innovate remained hampered by regulations emanating from SAPPRFT. By the mid-2000s, the television receiver, once a status symbol in the living room, became just another terminal. The Internet, mobile phones, and tablets quickly offered alternative ways of accessing television and television-like content. By the second decade of the 21st century, online media players were commissioning new kinds of programs and targeting younger audiences. Traditional television companies such as the Hunan Broadcasting System looked for ways to compete with the online

players whose commercial resources and user databases were being plundered by the king-making Internet companies.

This article explores how Chinese TV “got out of the box.” Taking into account the relations between the state, the media industries, and audiences—sometimes referred to as “the three olds” (*lao ganbu*, *lao ban*, and *lao baixing*)—I describe an evolutionary trajectory of disconnecting, connecting, and reconnecting. Disconnecting alludes to the heavy state intervention into media typified by censorship, quotas, and the takedown of content from online sites. Disconnecting remains a feature of the Chinese media environment, although the advent of online media has provided more ways for viewers to access content that might be deemed problematic. At the same time, connecting allows for interactive engagement, greater experimentation of ideas and formats, and the ability to view at any time. This is in stark contrast to the one-to-many broadcast model of the 1980s and early 1990s, where the audience was positioned in the living room, often as a family group.

The third trajectory, reconnecting, is perhaps most interesting. Reconnecting allows Chinese speakers worldwide to access programs and participate in media events, including reality shows such as *The Voice of China*. While this might seem a fairly trivial example, it needs to be pointed out that such shows are popular not only on Chinese domestic video sites such as Youku Tudou and on TV channels accessible by satellite and set-top boxes but on YouTube, particularly in countries with large Chinese-speaking communities. In effect, it can be argued that the online platforms are aggregating a form of Chinese soft power. It might not be reaching out and influencing foreign audiences, but it is speaking to Chinese communities globally. This process of reconnecting in real time to one’s culture via online technologies evidently provides Chinese television with an expanded audience, not just 2 billion eyes (Zhu, 2012).

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