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Regional Television In China: The Case Of Wuhan

By

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Regional Television in China: The Case of Wuhan.

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Introduction.

Anybody who has travelled in China recently will have noticed a number of contradictory tendencies emerging: the massive economic discrepancy between the burgeoning coastal cities and stagnating interior; the desire for the modern by the citizens within an ideological framework that is still locked into a mid-nineteenth century world view of class and teleology; an unprecedented separation of the base from the superstructure, where a market economy develops out of step with the official command culture.

The theory that economic freedom and prosperity inevitably lead to political freedom, and such subsidiary benefits as cultural, religious and intellectual freedom. This theory provides the moral-political justification behind, for instance, the United States' s decision to step up trade with China following the Tiananmen Square massacre. After all the thinking goes, why punish the good people because of the bad government? (Gourevitch, 1995)

All of this impact directly upon the Chinese mediascape, especially the field of broadcasting. This separation is particularly acute in television where advertisements for hair shampoo and other commodities compete for the attention of the audience with an orthodox conservative world view that is articulated in the news and current affairs programs. The contradiction between the two worlds has not escaped the media bureaucrats who are responsible for broadcasting and they have begun to develop complex mechanisms whereby they seek to constrain the perceived excesses of television through the application of custom and regulation. What has emerged out of all of this is a confused, and confusing, situation that this paper will attempt to unravel by focusing on two aspects of one dimension of Chinese broadcasting - cable television at the local level.

Like all other aspects of contemporary China, the media too have begun to attract attention. Most of this attention has concentrated on the central aspects of the Chinese mediascape, the institutions and policy formulations of Beijing (Chu, 1994). One important exception is Lull’s China Turned On (1993) whose unorthodox methodology provides real insight into the discursive power of television in China. As Lull argues, "**********". However, despite the fact that the bulk of his ethnographic work is in Shanghai and Guangzhou he never really addresses the issue of regional television, of marginality. The work is underpinned by an assumption that Beijing is dominant despite the importance of Shanghai to the formation of the Chinese television discourse (Wang, 1995). It is possible that the significance of regional television was not as apparent in 1990 as it is now, especially with the introduction of cable on a large scale. Further, neither Chu nor Lull provide any clear insight into the organisation of Chinese television. The assumption again seems to be that Beijing is paramount and the regional television providers little more than relay stations. By contrast I want to highlight regional television, arguing that as the political realities in China change, revolving around an uncertain future that hinges on the solutions found to fill the power vacuum Deng’s death will create, so the communication realities of China change. These changes are associated with technological change, the growing professionalisation of the broadcast industries and the increasingly sophisticated Chinese urban audience who have learned to read between the lines (Lull, 1993).
companies are staffed and controlled by local people who articulate regional interests that are sometimes at odds with the central political and cultural dictates. In short, what I wish to argue is that Gourevitch’s cynical characterisation of the marriage of economic freedom and materialism in nations like China is only superficially true. Cable television does present a serious challenge to the ideological hegemony of the CCP and that its influence, although yet to be fully felt, provides a place for the regional voice. As Harold Innis argued all technologies have a contradictory potential (Drache, 1995).

The Organisation of the Chinese Broadcast Media.

Television throughout China is theoretically under the control of the Ministry of Broadcasting, Film and Television in Beijing who make policy and provide direction and guidance to the regions. Each region and municipality has its own equivalent of the Ministry whose function is to interpret the guidelines provided by the central organisation and generally oversee broadcasting within its jurisdiction. However, there is not a direct line management relationship between the Ministry and the regional bodies. This becomes clearer when we look at television. CCTV is the central television organisation and consists of four distinct channels each with its own characteristics. All regional broadcasters, at whatever level, are required to carry the main CCTV news broadcast each day plus the entire output of CCTV 1. The other CCTV channels are broadcast after negotiation. Thus the regional broadcasters are designated as correspondents of CCTV rather than relay stations.

The next level of organisation is the provincial, followed by the municipal and the prefectural. Each of these levels has its own infrastructure and broadcast channels. For example, Hubei Provincial Television (hereafter HBTV), based in Wuhan, has two channels. Similarly, Wuhan City has two municipal television channels. Each organisation has its own studios, staff and production schedules. The outcome of this situation is threefold. Firstly, on paper the viewer has a wide choice of programming available. In practice this is not the case as the different levels tend to carry either the same programs or very similar programs. Nevertheless there is competition between the levels. For example Wuhan City Television competes strenuously with the HBTV. On the whole city television is better equipped than its provincial counterpart, is staffed by younger people who view themselves through the lens of professionalism rather than ideological conformity and have access to greater resources. This in part can be accounted for by the leadership provided by the municipal Office of Broadcasting, Television and Film who have pursued vigorously Hong Kong money to resource local broadcasting.

The third outcome is massive duplication, at all levels of programming, resourcing, and staffing reflecting the general inefficiencies of the old command economy. However, there is also a political dimension to the duplication. Jenner (1992) argues that the classic Chinese political model is based on the separation of power and responsibility. The centre retains the power but allocates responsibility to the margins. On close scrutiny one can detect the model underpinning Chinese broadcasting. The Ministry maintains control by determining policy, providing guidelines and imposing strict accounting methods on the regional broadcasters. That is, the provincial, municipal and prefectural broadcast units submit copies of any programs they make to the ministry plus all program schedules. This bureaucratic model is effective when the power relations between the centre and its margins are clear and unambiguous and there is a small volume of product to be monitored. However, as the old centre/margin power relations decay in modern China and the amount of television in the country expands exponentially it becomes ineffective.

Cable television is grafted on to these earlier levels of broadcasting adding to the competition and duplication and generally confusing the model because it adds additional layers to China’s television culture. The cable operations inject more foreign programming into the system.
Cable television has two forms in China; the ICT, which is community based, and commercial cable operations which began in the urban centres in the 1990s. The ICTS, introduced in the 1970s, were a response to changing political and cultural conditions when the centre seemed to be devolving ideological power. The commercial operations are about the increasing commodification of culture in China and thus represent a major challenge to the propaganda function of communication that is at the heart of China's ideological enterprise. In this section I will contrast and compare these two forms of cable television arguing that each form represents a significant development in the emerging Chinese mediascape.

Industrial Community Television

The Industrial Community Television (ICT) concept was introduced into China in the 1970s and attached to factories, manufacturing plants and other institutions. The size of the community varies according to the plant. For example the Wuhan Still Mill television station services a population in excess of 50,000. ICTs have subsequently become an important part of the Chinese communication system and now constitute an indispensable intermediary between the mass media and Chinese industrial workers.

Before discussing the role of ICTs it is important to establish that the term “community” is not a common term in Chinese academia for complex reasons arising out of the negative attitude of Party officials towards the sociology the term embodies. Further, the frequent and unlimited use of the term “community” in Western scholarship, when applied to China, leads to confusion. Therefore it is necessary to define the concept “industrial community” at this point.

After 1949, many new types of factories and industrial companies were established in China. A factory's zone consisted of a production area (sheng-chan-qu) and a living area (sheng-huo-qu). Managers and workers were allocated housing in the sheng-huo-qu according to seniority and their families were provided with everyday services commensurate with their position. A factory in China then is similar in its composition and activities to a “small society” and may own a school, department store, hospital, and even a police station. Because the present Chinese employment system is immobile, a Chinese worker, like most of his/her neighbours, may be born, educated, married, pleasured and buried within a sheng-huo-qu, and the road from the sheng-huo-qu to sheng-chan-qu becomes a metaphor for his/her life. Even more, the factory or company is not only a business unit but also a grass-roots political unit within Chinese political organisation and plays an important role in modern Chinese political structure.

Considering the dominance of the sheng-huo-qu as an organisational model and its major features outlined above we propose to use the term “community” as an analytic tool. As Hillery points out “a community consists of persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more additional common ties” (1955). The significance of the sheng-huo-qu as a particularly powerful variant of community must therefore be acknowledged in the Chinese context.

In the Chinese pre-television era, the major communication media in the Chinese industrial communities were public gatherings, notice boards, broadsheets (chaing-bao), loudspeakers and, we should add, the small group discussions that constituted the ‘pervasiveness, penetration, and intensity with minimum technology’ (emphasis added) (Barnett, 1982) or “mass line” communication system in China. These old media, regarded as the organs for grass-root unity by the Party and government, functioned at a univocal level. The voice from the top spread downwards to individuals through public gatherings and loudspeakers, and there after small group discussions percolate upwards through broadsheets. The vertical and horizontal axis of this communication model amplified the pervasiveness of the system. However, with the introduction of television and its location in the industrial communities the propaganda function of the old media has gradually weakened with the effect of creating a new sense of pervasiveness that is at odds with the original, reflecting the impact of the social reforms begun in the late 1980s.

ICTs were introduced as an extension of, and supplement to, the national television network in the 1970s when the Chinese government set up microwave relay trunks to broadcast CCTV (Chinese Central Television Station) nationwide. Many industrial communities, especially those in marginal urban areas, opened TV relay stations that provided an amplified TV signal for domestic consumption. By the beginning of the 1980s, following the social reform process, the relay system broke down in the face of competition
from the cable, or circuit TV, which the industrial communities set up to provide programming for their communities. This service was frequently little more than extended video movie programming, used to ‘season’ the CCTV’s single channel broadcasts with some form of entertainment. In 1984, which is an important year in Chinese television history, the central government prompted local levels of government to establish television stations using their own funds. Many industrial communities joined this wave of activity in the belief they would either gain more financial support of technical advantage. The communities expanded their television capacity installing complex cable systems and in some cases their own broadcast standard studios.

The slogan “Own channel and own program” represents the changing status of the ICTs within the Chinese system. From the 1980s to the present this system has matured to include satellite TV reception in its programming repertoire. Most ICTs now relay two channels of CCTV, plus locally produced programs into the homes of the Chinese worker. Until October 1993, when the new rules relating to access to satellite broadcasting were introduced, they also programmed Star television into their repertoire.

An ICT is operated by staff members who are employees of the industrial community, either the industry itself or members of the community. Their number may vary according to the size of the industrial complex. In most cases the ICT is either an independent department within the community or it is attached to another section of the complex such as professional education, information, propaganda or the trade union of the factory. Further the name may vary from community to community. They may be described as “factory zone TV station”, “electronic education labour unit” or “video office”. In essence each of these units, irrespective of its nomenclature, fulfils a similar function within the industrial community.

The property of the ICT, including facilities and plant, belong to the industrial community. The manager of the host institution has ultimate power over the ICT’s operations. Whether this model will persist as the economic reforms take hold is difficult to predict. Nevertheless it is clear that the transition from state ownership of the means of production to modified system of worker control of these means within the Chinese industrial system will affect the economic organisation and functioning of the ICTs. For example, at the Hubei General Textile Mill, Pu Chi, the ICT had its subsidy withdrawn by the management of the factory. To survive the station became a what the Americans call a ‘mom & pop’ cable operation.

ICTs often work under the direction of CCTV and/or local TV stations especially in the areas of professional training, technology provision and program production. The Ministry of Radio, Film and Television and the local bureaux effectively control ICTs through policy implementation. Thus, despite the capacity to provide Star TV no ICT dare screen it because of the new policy on satellite television.

Theoretically, the communication media in China work under the guidance of the Propaganda Department of the CCP. In recent years, however, this control has weakened. There is an assumption on the part of many ICT operatives that grass-roots operations should be the principal determinant of control. Consequently ICTs like Wuhan Steel have begun to place greater emphasis on their own news production despite the obligation to broadcast CCTV 1 news bulletins. Moreover, ICTs like Wuhan Steel have systematically upgraded their equipment to the extent where they can think seriously about producing their own programs beyond news, propaganda and local variety shows.

In some industrial communities, ICTs may work in conjunction with the trade union. Basically unions in China are not political organisations but social institutions that provide welfare and entertainment for the workers. There is a tendency for the unions and the ICTs to conspire on programming issues where ICTs operate as part of the union’s cultural work along side dance parties, shows, games, movies and art exhibitions and thus the union may be regarded as an essential component of the ICT’s programming structure.

An ICT has a captive audience that is fixed, known and unified. It provides quick and substantial feed-back to ICT management on programming issues. The voice of the audience increasingly has great effect on an ICT’s operations. This can be observed in two ways: firstly, through request programs that have become a feature of ICT operations. Ostensibly a form of revenue raising, the request program is also an effective way of monitoring audiences. Secondly, ICTs have become an effective means of mobilising public opinion on issues specific to the community. One example occurred in Pu Chi where management sought to raise rents. The union, members of the community used the ICT to articulate their discontent.

While the government-managed TV system slides into a form of semi-commercialism, some ICTs try to
Chinese culture. However, ICTs retain the potential to fulfil their public function. Because of their size ICTs
and initiate new policy, difficulties arise. In the first place popular opinion assigns this activity to the older
by both officials and the audience as an education and leisure medium rather than a propaganda tool. This
view presents Chinese leadership with a dilemma: on one hand ethical behaviour is the foremost concern
for authority according to Confucianism and Maoism, but on the other hand the Party has promoted
modemisation which appeals to the people. This is an amoral pursuit according to traditional doctrine and
provides television with an ambiguous position within Chinese orthodoxy. The entertainment role of
television within the ICT accentuates this problem. When the Party seeks to use the ICT system to proclaim
and initiate new policy, difficulties arise. In the first place popular opinion assigns this activity to the older
forms of communication, now delegitimised. Secondly, officials find they have to change their conventions
of address to accommodate the by-choice, family-based, leisure-oriented medium. Thus all the amusing
programs flashed on to the screen of the family’s television have acquired deep political meanings.

This shift to leisure consumption and video exhibition from community based distribution systems poses
serious questions about the role of ICTs in the sheng-huo-qu. Their traditional role as public broadcaster (in
a narrow sense) providing and producing community news, talk shows, documentaries and discussion
programs must be questioned. ICTs appear to be little more than conduits for the commodification of
Chinese culture. However, ICTs retain the potential to fulfill their public function. Because of their size ICTs
can be a real interactive medium that encourages a participatory communication process. The contradiction
between the leisure/entertainment nexus on one hand, and the public/participatory on the other remains
to be solved. The audience and its desires will be the key to this issue.

Another crucial function of the ICT is its mediating role, between the central system and the community.
CCTV, as the only national network, now has four channels that depend on local TV stations and /or ICTs
to relay programs. As a correspondent of CCTV (and the local station) the ICT plays a major distribution
role. It also supplements the CCTV and provincial television with its own programs. As Pasteka observes
"what is especially important about this form of communication is that those smaller units have their own
media by which they can express themselves and also impart information. Those smaller units are small
enough to be able to preserve the individual role of their members and they are big [social] enough to have
official status and financial means to realise the right to co-create and impart information to their members"
(1979,**).

However, despite their significant local role the ICTs may succumb to the new economic order as the Pu Chi
experience attests. They cannot command the same resources as the new commercial cable operators. In
fact they have become attractive acquisitions for the cable operators in the larger urban centres. They have
proved effective intermediaries between the central organisers and the local audiences which they nurtured
over the past decade. In April, 1995 WHCATV made overtures to Wuhan Steel ICT to assume broadcasting
to the mill community. As costs to the consumer were involved it became a union issue and was unresolved.
Nevertheless it is indicative of future trends.

Commercial Cable Television.

It is claimed that there are now over 1000 cable television operations in China (**). This figure may include
the ICTs, but it does indicate a massive shift in Chinese television suggesting a new discourse of television
is emerging, because cable provides a wider range of texts, both local and imported to the viewer. In effect
the cabling of China represents the next step in the commodification of Chinese culture, a distinct shift away
from the public broadcasting ethos that prevailed until the introduction of advertising to television in 198**.
To understand the impact of cable television it is necessary to look briefly at Chinese television in the 1980s.

Television was a late addition to the Chinese mediascape, its scope and range severely circumscribed by economic and ideological factors. In comparison to the other media television's status as a propaganda medium was somewhat ambiguous. Both the audience and the Party perceived it mainly in terms of entertainment rather than ideologically, which is not to say it fulfilled no propaganda functions (Wang, 1995). However, the view of television as entertainment created a set of expectations among audiences. In the 1980s the urban populations in particular began to achieve a degree of prosperity that permitted expenditure on consumer goods. Televisions and VCRs were high on this new consumerist agenda. Paralleling these developments on the domestic front was a decision of the Government to allow television equipment to be imported free of tax by the television stations (Wang, 1995). Two major consequences arose from this decision: the number of television stations in China increased from 49 in 1982 to 593 in 1993, and by the same year it was claimed 80% of China received a television signal (Wang, 1995). In some quarters this has been referred to as "TV's Great Leap Forward" - a code term for disaster.

The expansion outlined above proved problematic on two fronts. Chinese television production was unable to cope with demand and there was a massive influx of foreign programming. Again the 'patriots' took a dim view of the situation, referring to it as the 'Eight-power allied forces fight back' - a clear reference to the pre-revolutionary period of Chinese cultural history. Moreover, much of the imported of the imported programming appeared trivial, challenging the Confucian and Maoist view that entertainment should be serious and worthy. Nevertheless it proved a seductive model and influenced Chinese television production which has adapted the melodrama, variety show and karaoke genres to local conditions.

Adding to these problems was the introduction of satellite broadcasting from the mid-1980s to April, 1993. Any television station with an antennae, including the ICTs could pick up the Star TV signal and relay programs to the audience. It has become apparent that the Government was always uneasy about this 'invasion' of their sovereignty but little about it until Rupert Murdoch's takeover of Star. In April, 1993 new laws relating to satellite broadcasting were promulgated, limiting possession of satellite dishes to three-star hotels and above, foreign enclaves and official institutions. This decision inadvertently made cable television a much more attractive prospect to both investors and the Government. In the first place, the Chinese had developed considerable expertise in cable television, albeit at a modest level, with the ICTs. Secondly, cable appears to be more easily controlled than satellite broadcasting, a view shared by other Asian governments, because it remained under the control of local professionals who had been enculturated within Chinese television practices. Thirdly, developments within telecommunications meant that other services could be developed in connection with television. However, to achieve the necessary infrastructure meant massive infusions of money which opened the doors to Hong Kong and Taiwanese media entrepreneurs.

Wuhan Cable Television Enterprise was established in 1991 as a joint venture between Wuhan City Foreign Relations Department and Chinese Television Network (hereafter CTN) in Hong Kong and began broadcasting in 1992. CTN is a subsidiary of ATM Media Holdings, Hong Kong. It is the first international Chinese language satellite broadcaster providing Mandarin language services to North America and Europe. The incursion into Wuhan represents a significant development for the company and probably signifies its intentions in the post-1997 era. CTN provided the start-up capital, equipment and technical advice but plays no part in the day-to-day running of the station. However, the CTN chairwoman is also on the board of WHCATV.

WHCATV is technologically sophisticated, capable of audio and visual transmission, videotext transmission with the potential to develop interactive multi-media. Its distribution system consists of 250 kilometres of cable composed of a mix of 840 and 565 coaxial and fibre optic cable. It currently provides a twenty-two program service made up of eighteen piggybacked channels (CCTV, HBTV, Shandong Provincial Television, ESPN etc) and four channels of its own. It now claims a 300 000 client base who pay a Y280 (US$22) joining fee and Y90 ($7) annual fee. Installation is free.

The fact that the city Foreign Relations Department was instrumental in establishing the service is highly significant. It permits the station to negotiate cross-cultural and foreign broadcasting rights in its own right, bypassing Beijing who have agreed to allow stations to import directly children's programs, scientific and educational programs without reference to the central bureau. WHCATV is currently negotiating with a number of American broadcasters direct on program supply. As from 1 May, 1995 TNT supplies one new
release movie via satellite per day. The station can then decide whether to screen it or not, depending on whether it conforms to Chinese cultural norms. ABC (USA) is supplying two hours of children's television per day free of charge so long as WHCATV carries the American advertising. While this cannot be interpreted as a return to the era of 'foreign worship' of the early eighties it does signal a radical shift in responsibility and, I would argue, a significant diminution in central control of television in China. It is also logical to assume that the large cable operations in the major cities, such as Shanghai and Guangzho, have also grasped the opportunity to assume greater responsibility for their programming strategies.

Finally in regard to Wuhan, it is important to look at the location and staffing policies of WHCATV. It now occupies the old provincial film studios which have ceased to operate. This in itself signifies a dramatic shift in the Chinese mediascape. Film attendance in China has plummeted from a high of 22 billion attendances per annum to one billion in 1993 (Wang, 1995). The cable station operates an Open Employment Policy. That is, it hires and fires its staff, determines its own salary levels. This is significant on two accounts. State control is effectively disarmed because it does not assume the right to assign people to an occupation, unlike the other media. It also means the 'iron rice bowl' concept, the Chinese social security system outlined in the section on ICTs where the state through its institutions provides for its citizens from birth to death is effectively removed. Consequently WHCATV is staffed by a team of young people (average 28 years) who have exchanged one ideology for another.

**Conclusion.**

The tendency to view the Chinese mediascape as a unified and homogenous entity must be challenged. Increasingly Chinese is becoming fragmented, economically, and socially. However, the unity of Chinese culture, where many languages, ethnicities and regions have been bound together through a script and centralising ideologies appears to remain intact. I would argue that arises from the fact that no technology has yet proved sufficiently powerful to challenge the hegemony of the Chinese script until the last decade. The challenge of television has been implicitly recognised by the central government, hence their 1993 promulgation on satellite broadcasting. However, changing economic patterns and demographies coupled with personal expectations has meant that television has become a social and cultural fact in China. Consequently the state has been compelled to satisfy demand, albeit with a medium that is in most respects antithetical to classical tenets of Confucianism and Maoism. As Lull (1995) correctly points out television has fundamentally altered the fabric of Chinese urban life and attempts to return to a Confucian model of communication will be difficult to achieve.

Nevertheless, the culture of control decays slowly. The Chinese Government's decision to emphasise cable over satellite broadcasting represents an attempt to retain both national sovereignty and political and cultural hegemony. However, built into cable is an inherent regionalism that suggests increasing cultural fragmentation and contradicts the essentialist policies of a command economy. Satellite communication lends itself much more readily to spatial and cultural hegemony but the unacceptable side to satellites for the Chinese are manifold. Chinese culture and polity would be in direct competition with other world views, that are uncontrollable and offensive. The decision to encourage cable, within guidelines, is an attempt to resolve this dilemma. However, as I suggest that in relation to Wuhan is that cable television has a dynamic of its own that run counter to the demands of centralising polity. Unwittingly the Chines authorities have set in place a communication infrastructure that both encourages regionalism and provides the space for the articulation of difference.

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1 These comment are based on research conducted in Wuhan in April, 1995. I would like to thank my colleagues Professor Wu Gaofu and Wang Handong, Wuhan University for facilitating this research and all the broadcasters who willingly gave up their time to answer questions. The interpretations placed upon their answers are solely my responsibility.


3 The following is based on interviews conducted in Wuhan in April, 1995. I would like to thank Wang Handong who translated during the interviews, and the interviewees who gave freely of their time and knowledge. I have decided not to specify names for complicated reasons.