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BUILDING A DREAM: THE MAKING OF PUBLIC TV IN TAIWAN

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Ladies and Gentlemen Distinguished Guests:

I am highly honored to have the opportunity of coming to Seoul from Taiwan for participation in this prestigious "Seminar on The Impact of the Changing Media Environment on Public service Programming," sponsored by Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre. As far as all the television viewers in the Republic of China on Taiwan are concerned, to establish a Public Television Station that really belongs to everyone in the country, has always been a remote and far-reaching dream. Actually, such dream dated as far back as the time when TV broadcast first appeared in Taiwan, more than three decades ago. At that time, only several scholars with great concerns over the development and situation of the nation's TV media, discussed the feasibility of making the dream come true. The dream did not induce any broad interest from the general public, however. It requires to turn the clock back to the date on February 6, 1980, as such ideal dream began to build up.

Speaking at a seminar on that particular day, Premier Sun Yun-suan, Cabinet chief of the Republic of China, declared that it was about time the country should create a Public Television Station, a broadcast network not commercially-oriented, but with the special emphasis on the significance of presenting cultural and educational programs. Immediately after, the Government Information Office (GIO), a branch of the Government Administration in charge of the mass media, appointed a Task Force to map out a draft on setting up the "Public Television Program Production, Center." The Task Force consisted of 10 Specialists and Scholars, who concluded the draft in March of 1983, after two years of planning. Unfortunately, the draft was eventually aborted due to inadequate funds, resulting in sharp disappointment from the public. Under strong criticism and tight pressure from the public opinion, the GIO made another proposal in 1984 to meet the transitional needs--by organizing "The Broadcasting Development Fund."

After revising the "Radio and Television Broadcasting Statute," the *010 allocated a weekly 15-hour broadcast on time slots to split the channels from three commercial stations, beaming various types of public service programs, produced by "The Broadcasting Development Fund."

We were told that the practice of broadcasting public service programs on commercial channels was also carried out in Hong Kong for years. Although such format has had certain defects in terms of broadcast results, nevertheless, the pattern undoubtedly opened a new page for Public TV programs in Taiwan, striving one step ahead for the beautiful dream to come true. After the experimenting of this practice for some time, more demerits were discovered. For example, the three commercial TV stations protested that the inclusion of public service programs hampered their advertisement revenues, in addition to the monitoring ratings. Furthermore, the Public TV
programs also lost its self-dependence and integrity, making it difficult to carry out its conviction of serving the public. Under such circumstances, the Government, therefore, decided to set up a truly complete and independent Public Television Station.

At the end of 1987, the GIO submitted "The Draft for Public Television Station" to the Government, and under close coordination with the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Defense, it successfully accessed UHF channels and a piece of public land in the outskirt of Taipei for the construction of the Station. The Legislative Yuan, the nation's highest lawmaking body, approved the first-year budget proposal for the Station in early 1990. In July of the same year, "The Public Television Station organizing Committee" was born. The highest power structure of the Committee centered on 22 Board Members, made up of outstanding figures from all walks of life and who are credited for their distinctions.

Among members of the Committee, nine of them were elected Standing Committee members. They regularly convened to make major decisions on important matters during the preparatory period. Prominent Anthropologist Dr. Chen Chi-lu was appointed Chairman of the Committee, while myself, a veteran TV Journalist and Diplomat, was named President, in charge of the overall construction and preparatory works.

Besides the 22 Committee Board Members, who are responsible for supervising the preparatory plans, the GIO earmarks the Station's annual budget and reviews its expenditures. Therefore, for practical need and theoretically speaking, the GIO should be the Government Agency in charge, or immediate supervisor, of the Public Television Station Organizing committee. The GIO's mandate and regulatory powers should cover the following scopes:

1. It should assist the organizing Committee to study and draft the "Public Television Act," and help expedite the final passage of the bill at the Legislative Yuan.
2. It should take up the responsibility for mapping out the annual budget for the station during its 5-year preparatory and construction period.
3. It should render assistance to help install the Station's hardware systems, help train its personnel, and work out plans for its software programs.

The organizing Committee's mission will be considered accomplished, on the condition that the "Public Television Act" is passed, hardware systems and software facilities are installed. Under such circumstances, the private corporate "Public Television Foundation" and the "Public Television Station" are legally established in accordance with the regulations stipulated by the "Public Television Act" adopted by the nation's lawmakers. By then, a TV channel--intended for the people from every corner of the society in Taiwan--will lawfully belong to a non-profit making and private corporate organization. The Board Directors of the "Public Television Foundation" will have the supreme power to rule the "Public Television Station." Although, in principle, the Station will be governed by a Government Agency, and yet the Foundation's 19 Board Directors will be authorized by law to supervise the Station's operations and set down its policies. Either the GIO, or the
projected Ministry of Culture, is likely to be the Government Agency in charge of the Station. However, the ruling agency will merely serve as a symbolic formality. That's all.

In reality, the future "Public Television Station" will purely be a private organization. Its primary status will be a non-commercial, non-governmental, and non-partisan corporate establishment.

The Station is held responsible to the Board Directors, to the Congress, to the public and to the press, for all of its performance and functioning. The development for all these, is our long-cherished dream. Even if the dream has not yet been fully materialized, but we firmly believe that, next year (1996), a shining and brilliant Public Television network will emerge in Taiwan, joining the public broadcasting family of Asia.

The "Public Television Station" not only will serve the 21 million people in Taiwan with programs in the fields of culture, information, education, and entertainment, but also will take up greater responsibility for the promotion of cultural exchanges and interflows for the entire Asian Region. With an apparent aim to make stronger contributions to the Asian areas, The "Public Television Station" will be the first TV network in Taiwan to beam its signals via INTELSAT 7 F2 311-Transponder in 77 MHZ frequency. Its spill-over or footprint will cover parts of Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, in addition to Southern and Central Mainland China. Therefore, with advanced science and technology nowadays, Delegates sitting here in this room, if you are interested enough and at a certain time during 1996, you will be able to receive our program signals over the skies in your country. What is worthy of getting excited about, is that the reception will be totally free of charge! In this case, will anyone say then, Global Village is merely a dream? of course, the program quality will determine the future success or failure of the Station.

At present, there are three commercial TV systems in Taiwan. They all have long historical backgrounds. The Government is expected to grant a license to the fourth TV network some time this year. In August 1993, the Congress cleared the hurdles for the "Cable Television Act." Around 200 Cable System operators are scheduled to relay their program signals on roughly 100 channels. The number does not include the blooming satellite TV operators. Regardless of so many channel numbers, it is rather often that many viewers complained about the shortage of fine programs. For Taiwan's commercial stations, the most popular programs are the Drama Series, variety Shows, Cartoons, Game Show and News Reports. Over the years, because of market demands and the impact of commercial sponsors, the quality of the Drama Series has been gradually declining, while the Variety Shows are produced in poor tastes due to talent shortage, and animation films are full of violence, causing worries over the effects against the youngsters. Some news media raised the doubts that whether the background of some TV Station owners have influenced the fairness and neutrality of the news reports, the programs of which are generally popular among viewers.

In fact, through numerable surveys and analysis reports conducted over the
years, we have learned that the TV programs normally share by the public should contain local characters, national integrity, and international popularity. They should consist the best selected components for culture, history, arts, science and technology, sports, education, and natural environment, etc. In terms of news information, we hope to see some just, fair dependent, but not one-sided, viewpoints. We also need public forum programs that provide equal opportunities for the public to debate, enabling public voices to be heard. Naturally, except the wide coverage of news reports, what the TV viewers eagerly expect to watch are some in-depth reports, such as News Magazines and Documentaries.

Those needs mentioned above are not simply public expectations, this is because our Station has already classified them into our program production plans and program schedules. Also, we have based on a survey conducted by GALLUP ORGANIZATION INC. Taipei Office on "Public Leisure Life" to work out program schemes for "Mass Audience," "Target Audience," and "Minority Group." For instance, we will reserve 15 percent to 20 percent of our program hours for many creative programs designed for young spectators, in an attempt to protect the rights and needs for children and the young viewers. We even dispatched some of our producers to undergo training courses at CHILDREN'S TELEVISION WORKSHOP in New York to learn about its production procedures and the reason for the success of the world-renowned "Sesame Street."

We have made special arrangements and designed programs aimed at women, elderly people, consumers, and hearing-defect viewers. We are quite proud to inform you that, among TV broadcasters we are going to be the first network to allot scheduled broadcast hours weekly, purely for aboriginal natives. What we have done are that we recruited and trained some aborigine reporters and cameramen. Through their viewpoints and opinions, we produce program as depicting their life styles and culture. According to official statistics, there are around 370,000 aborigines in eastern and southern Taiwan, divided into nine major tribes.

To ensure the program quality of "Public Television Station," the "Public Television Act," which is still under the process of legislative screening, has defined clear-cut outlines for the Station's broadcast and program productions. The key points are: 1. Upgrading the nation's cultural standards and promoting the development of education and culture. 2. Adhering to the principles of objectivity and fairness. 3. Keeping the multilateral nature for its programs. 4. Respecting individual honor and protecting his/her privacy. 5. Withholding comments on lawsuit cases under investigations or pending verdicts. 6. Not to promote any propaganda or publicity for any political party or religious group. 7. Not to violate laws and orders, or decency.

As far as we know, public service broadcasters around the world, may not turn out to have been sweet dreams. In every region, although each one has its own different political, economic and cultural backgrounds, and yet it faces the same problem and challenge just like anywhere else.
In the future, "Public Television Station" of Taiwan is expected to cope with the following problems: Firstly, the most important is the question of its financial resource.

Currently, the draft of "Public Television Act" stipulates that the Station’s future financial supports mainly come from Government donations, and secondly from contributions by large private business enterprises, in addition to individual donations by TV spectators. Revenues from sales of the Stations program video tapes or lease fees from its facilities are also part of the financial incomes. Such practice is similar to the system implemented by PBS in the United States. To our best knowledge, our Station can operate and develop smoothly, only under the condition that it can access steady and independent financial resources. What worries us is that whether or not Government subsidies will be affected by the levels of Government financial revenues and expenditures. In the same sense, it is not a common habit in Taiwan for business enterprises to contribute funds, making it difficult to collect private donations.

The second question is that our Station is intended to be a non-profit-making establishment. Generally speaking, our staff members receive less salary wages when compared with those working for the commercial stations. In the problem of demand and supply amidst Taiwan’s media manpower resources, higher wages will undoubtedly induce the defection of the Station’s personnel. The outpours of the Station’s staff members will result in turning the "Public Television Station" as a training institute, seriously impairing its development and existence.

The third challenge is the question of program ratings. Since our Station does not intend to compete with its commercial counterparts in the field of advertisements, the station therefore can only fight for its monitoring ratings. Low ratings will definitely draw criticism from various circles, affecting the annual budget screening to be conducted by the Congress. In my opinion, the reasonable compilation of ratings should be conducted on Target Audience basis by people meter method, rather than the overall ratings of the mixed groups as compiled by the commercial stations. We believe that reasonable ratings can be accessed, if we offer high quality programs in coordination with people’s daily leisure life schedule. Of course, likewise, our Station must make the utmost effort to promote the publicity for its programs.

By all means, the long-heralded "Public Television Station" is only a part of the Public Broadcasting system. We hope to include Public Radio into the entire system in the future, as soon as possible. The Industrial Development Bureau, a branch of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, is actively studying how to develop High Definition Television (HDTV). Our Station will coordinate with the HDTV project, hoping to conduct initial experimental tests through our broadcasting system.

Taiwan’s Public TV Station has limited resources. It will encounter unlimited demands from the general public. Therefore, we need the related Government agencies to extend their helping hands for unconditional
assistance and support. Meanwhile, we will make our utmost efforts to work closely with social capital resources, such as academic research institutes and foundations, for the purpose of co-producing high quality programs. We also need lots of volunteers of public services from Taiwan's society to help our Station ease the problem of insufficient manpower.

In other words, the future "Public Television Station" belongs to the people. Facing the era of multi-channels in Taiwan, we feel that our Station is not just another choice, but the "Right Choice."

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is difficult to condense a 5-year PTV story in Taiwan into 15 minutes of speech. However, public TV is no longer an impossible dream. For all the people who have worked so hard throughout the years, they have nothing but only one wish that their efforts may shape the Television World into a Wonderland, instead of Wasteland, and discover the colorful new World of Tomorrow, rather than escape to the black and white old World of Yesterday.

For bitter or sweet, we all are a bunch of hopeless dreamers, and we will remain to be such, until the day when the dream of public service broadcasting can be shared by all the people on this planet. So, good luck to all the dreamers, whoever, and wherever you are.

Thank you.