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FOR ASIA AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM

-- TV Entertainment In China

HE YUJIE
This month, television celebrates its 40th anniversary in China. Over the years since the launch of Beijing Television Station, now CCTV, on September 2nd, 1958, television has developed into the most powerful medium of popular culture in China. Of China's population of 1.2 billion, more than 300 million are illiterate or semi-illiterate, scattered mainly in remote pockets of the countryside. Newspapers are for the educated; radio and television, on the other hand, can reach both the literate and the illiterate, in towns and in the countryside. A radio costs little, but radio does not have the immense impact of television's visual appeal. Increasingly, television is being seen as the medium holding the greatest potential, a potential China has yet fully to tap. Part of this potential lies in television's ability to offer viewers education, information and entertainment, all of which are in great demand.
Spring Festival Gala And TV Entertainment In China

On January 27, 1998, Chinese New Year Eve, more than 800 million Chinese people sat before their television sets to watch a single programme. It was the Spring Festival Gala Evening, shown on CCTV-1, and lasting four and a half hours. Broadcast every year since 1983, the Spring Festival Gala Evening has become a traditional part of the Lunar New Year celebrations for eighty per cent of Chinese families, just as important as other traditional activities such as eating dumplings, visiting temple fairs, and setting off fire-crackers. Each year audience expectations are raised, as they anticipate something bigger and better than the previous year. And each year the directors, producers and artists rise to the challenge, presenting a mix of traditional and modern performances that is richer in variety and more spectacular than anything previously seen.

A Mirror On TV Entertainment In China

For this year's Spring Festival Gala Evening, Meng Xin was chosen by CCTV as the director. Such was the pressure on her in the weeks leading up to the event that, so she told a reporter, she could manage only two hours sleep a night. Among the artists appearing were China's most famous dancer, Yang Liping of the Bai nationality; there was pop singer Mao Ning, along with Liu Dehua from Hong Kong and Zhang Xinzhe from Taiwan; there was traditional opera performed by masters Xiao Xiangyu, Han Zaifen and Peng Huiheng; the Chinese art of cross-talk was demonstrated by Shi Shengjie and Sun Chen; comedians Huang Hong and Song Dandan performed a sketch; and among the acrobats were Sun Jiayin and Chen Yang. These are names that may not be well known outside China, yet they are among the most famous and best-loved artists in the country. For the artists themselves, an invitation to appear in the gala is a great honour, a highlight of their career.

The Spring Festival Gala has been described as a first-class banquet, offering
exquisite dishes and every speciality from across the country. China, of course, is a vast country, and this means that the variety of dishes it has to offer is indeed rich. It is also a country of many ethnic groups, and this means that its specialities are also rich in their diversity.

What the Spring Festival Gala Evening represents is the highest level of television entertainment in China, in terms of both quality and variety. Broadcast on China’s only nationwide TV network, it is conceived by the country’s top directors, the technical support is the finest the country has to offer, the artists are some of the most popular in the country, and the programme is a fascinating mix of the best a modern country with a long history has to offer.

In short, for its high profile cast, its scale, and the heavy demands placed on it, the Spring Festival Gala Evening can be described as representative of the highest level of television entertainment in China.

Positive Reflections

By judging the quality and variety of the performances in the Spring Festival Gala Evening ’98, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions regarding the strong and weak aspects of television entertainment in China.

Firstly, the determination of CCTV to create each year a Spring Festival Gala Evening that is grander and better than anything seen before is a demonstration of its stated determination to improve its entertainment programmes. In fact, in response to viewers’ demands, since 1994 CCTV has broadcast two additional variety shows on New Year’s Eve -- the Spring Festival Music, Song and Dance Gala Evening, and the Spring Festival Local Opera Gala Evening. The popularity of such spectacles has given rise to other, similar events held throughout the year, such as ‘Super Variety Show’, ‘Folk Opera and Talk Show’, and ‘Chia Tai Variety Show’. In fact, CCTV regularly marks important days, such as International Children’s Day and China’s National Day, with a television gala. But the commitment to entertainment
programmes goes much deeper than this; two of CCTV's eight channels are devoted entirely to entertainment, with CCTV-3's 17 hours of daily broadcasts featuring mainly traditional local operas and other performances on traditional instruments, concerts, and music videos. Among its most popular programmes are 'Garden for Opera Fans', and 'Operas of a Hundred Schools'. This is not to say, however, that CCTV's other channels neglect entertainment; of all programmes broadcast by CCTV, 42.85 per cent are entertainment. As President of CCTV, Mr. Yang Weiguang has said, "CCTV, fully aware of its obligation to serve China's television viewers, and people around the world who have an interest in China, will continue to produce large numbers of quality documentaries, TV dramas and entertainment programmes. These programmes will reflect both the modern era and Chinese characteristics, with perfect harmony of ideology and art." China's television broadcasting began in 1958, when the Beijing Television Station, now CCTV, began transmission on a trial basis. In fact, in those early days, the only programmes were entertainment shows, broadcast live to a tiny minority of the population. Over the forty years since then CCTV has built up both considerable experience in the production of entertainment programmes, and also an impressive archive, both of which it has used to support the vast network of television stations that has spread nationwide. In fact, China now has no fewer than 980 wireless television stations, and as many as 1,300 cable stations, all competing, and therefore all striving to produce the finest programmes possible. One of the most astonishing figures associated with television in China is the 55 thousand hours of television broadcast each week by its TV stations above county level. One of the chief advantages enjoyed by these local, and relatively small, television stations, is the local culture that can serve as the basis for their entertainment output.

To use the allegory of the banquet again; one of China's greatest advantages in preparing an entertainment feast is the incomparably vast array of ingredients at its disposal. Chinese artists for five thousand years have been practising and perfecting the arts of singing and dancing; traditional operas have been flourishing across the country for centuries; acrobatics are considered to have their origins in China; puppet shows are a traditional art form that flourish in even the most isolated parts of the country; then there are the more modern arts of comedy and cross-talk, juggling and
magic shows. China's sheer size adds to the richness of the ingredients; in the case of traditional opera, for example, provinces, and even cities, have developed their own unique forms of this art. The richness of choice is even greater, thanks to the inclusion of items from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with their greater openness to outside influence. And then, there are the 55 ethnic minorities in China, with their own distinctive cultures, and songs and dances developed over many centuries. To add to all this richness, there are the hundreds of regional dialects that serve to influence the development of diverse forms of narrative and singing arts.

In short, China's long history, vast size and cultural diversity combine to produce a tapestry of entertainment that is rich in colour, and profound in content. While responsive to new trends, it embodies a strong desire to preserve China's traditional culture.

Negative Images

There are, however, problems with entertainment programmes in China, chief among which is the slow pace of change, resulting in a lack of variety of style. Audiences are being exposed more and more to outside influences, as foreign goods, particularly western ones, flood the market. But television has been slow to adapt to the changes in outlook and values this exposure brings. More significant, perhaps, is the increasing exposure of China's people to western cultural influences, including satellite television; the slowness of Chinese television in reacting to these influences is merely making the problem more acute; a viewer may want to remain loyal to his national television, but if it fails to meet his expectations, he will, however reluctantly, seek what he wants elsewhere.

The excellence of China's traditional style of entertainment programmes is undeniable. But there are many genres of television entertainment that remain wholly or partially unexplored on Chinese television. Only recently has director Ying Da introduced the concept of situation comedy to Chinese television viewers, with 'I Love My Home'. Undeniably, compared to the past, when entertainment programmes consisted of
nothing more than singing, dancing and cross talk, the variety is incomparably richer, but compared to what is seen in other countries, there is certainly room for improvement.

Too much of China's television entertainment follows the basic format of a presenter or presenters introducing a series of performers. This, sadly, is true of even the Spring Festival Gala Evening. An experiment with changing this format in the early 90s, when hosts were located in cities across the country, received a mixed reaction. And gala evenings aside, many of the more 'routine' programmes are merely film of artists performing on a stage. It is almost as if the programmes are designed for a studio or concert audience, rather than for people watching on television. The problem is exacerbated by the style of the presenters, who seem to create a greater intimacy with their audience in the studio, rather than with the viewers at home. This compares unfavourably with western entertainment programmes, where the studio audience is often virtually ignored by the presenters, eager to appeal to the viewers at home. While China's huge population offers an advantage as a rich source for the production of television programmes, it also exerts a restraining influence. As people become more sophisticated in their demands, the need arises for greater variety. Producers tend to respond to this need by making use of local sources of entertainment; as a result, programmes sometimes appeal only to minority audiences. What is then neglected in their variety of content, however, is quality of presentation.

There is also an unfortunate tendency to follow existing ideas and formulae, rather than pursuing innovation. There is the example of the entertainment programme, "Happy Camp", shown on Hunan Cable TV. It is a game show, with a host, and a guest host who is often a well-known star. They put questions to a studio audience, all the time making jokes in an effort to make the audience laugh. The problem is that the success of this programme prompted other directors simply to copy it, even though they could find no hosts capable of carrying it off. The result has been that the hosts usually appear very awkward and ill at ease.
General Reflections

The overall impression of entertainment on Chinese television is of high quality, great colour, and rich variety. A country with a long history, magnificent cultural heritage and multiple ethnicity is adapting all these advantages to the television screen. But China is now a rapidly modernising country that is opening increasingly to the outside world. As a result, its people are demanding higher quality, and even greater variety, not so much in content, as in form and presentation. And this is where China needs to make greatest progress. In short, China needs to adapt its undoubtedly impressive cultural heritage better to the modern medium of television.
Television has been the most powerful branch of popular culture in China, and the medium of mass communication with the widest function and appeal. Ours is a country of over 1.2 billion people, more than 300 million of whom are illiterate or semi-illiterate, scattered mainly in remote pockets of the countryside. Newspapers are for the educated, while radio and television can reach both the literate and the illiterate, in towns and in the countryside. A radio costs little, but radio does not have the immense appeal of TV's visual impact. More and more we began to see television as the medium holding the greatest promise and whole potential China had yet fully to tap. And television has been playing the part in bringing education, information and entertainment to the Chinese people who badly needed all three.
Asianess, Centre Stage

Since the beginning of the 1990s, satellite TV broadcasts from the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Australia and other non-Asian countries have entered the Asian TV market. The companies have not only made enormous commercial profits, but also advocated their own values, ways of life and social systems, posing a serious threat to the politics, economic systems and traditional cultures of Asian countries. Asian countries have long-standing traditional cultures, with their respective characteristics. The various cultures of Asia are an important part of world culture. To protect and develop the national cultures of various Asian countries is a great contribution to human culture.

The Eyes Of The World On China's Culture

If you tune in to CCTV's channel four every day, you can join a worldwide audience watching its only English-language entertainment programme, "Centre Stage", featuring performances of modern and traditional songs, dances, acrobatics, magic, and cross-talk, with English subtitles providing translation and explanation. This is CCTV's way of showing to the world the culture of China. Each weekend, the Centre Stage team prepare a special edition of the programme, with reports, features and interviews, focusing on China's arts scene. What makes Centre Stage Weekend of particular interest is the fact that, as the only entertainment programme on Chinese television broadcast in both Chinese and English, it attempts to spread Chinese culture around the world, at the same time as providing entertainment for people of Chinese origin living overseas. Its unique approach also means that it is probably more open than any other television programme on Chinese television to foreign influence.
Telling The World

Centre Stage Weekend is described as western in style, but with Chinese characteristics. The producers have incorporated ideas from other countries, from programmes such as 'Entertainment Tonight', CNN's 'Showbiz', and from the various entertainment programmes of Star TV. But these influences generally relate only to the style and presentation; ultimately the aim of Centre Stage Weekend is to promote traditional Chinese culture and art.

To give some examples of Centre Stage's work; in recent months, there have been interviews with the great German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, and conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Kurt Masur. There have been interviews with Chinese pop stars, including Mao Ning, who recently recorded a Chinese version of the theme to 'Titanic'. There have been features on the traditional songs of the Dong nationality living in China's southwest, and on 11-year-old Ren Fei, who made her concert debut as a player of the traditional stringed instrument, the gujung. In short, the programme offers an impressive mix of western and Chinese art; the Chinese audience can learn about the western stars who come to play in their country, and overseas audiences can discover something of the rich cultural heritage of China. As the producer of Centre Stage says, "The audience is mainly foreigners who want to know about Chinese culture and arts, as well as current cultural affairs." Three features presented on Centre Stage Weekend over the past year serve to illustrate how it promotes Chinese culture and values around the world. In an interview, Joan Chen, star of such Hollywood films as 'The Last Emperor', spoke frankly of the difficulties she and her family had encountered as a result of her revealing appearance in certain films; thus she offered a fascinating personal insight into the differences between Eastern and Western cultures, and how they affect the individual. In another interview, a young man far less famous described a foreigner's fascination for traditional Chinese art. Ran Fulu, a Vietnamese student, has developed a deep love for the art of Peking Opera, and he explained both the pleasure and the pain associated with learning this most difficult of arts, starting of course with the language. And then viewers were introduced to Guan Xuezeng, a...
name little known even outside Beijing. He is the leading exponent of an art called Beijing Qinshu, developed from the much older art of Quyi, or story-telling in narrative and song.

Of course, Centre Stage is not the only programme on Chinese television that promotes Chinese art and culture. One of the most popular shows in Beijing is an annual competition broadcast on Beijing TV, for foreigners singing Chinese songs. Recently, CCTV has launched another annual competition, for foreigners singing Peking Opera. These may seem fairly insignificant efforts to promote Chinese culture, yet they reflect a determination to resist the onslaught from outside influence.

Learning From The World

Centre Stage, as the only English-language programme broadcast from China around the world, stands at the forefront of China's assimilation of foreign ideas into its entertainment programmes. Its staff are regular viewers of entertainment shows from other countries; several of the programme's staff have travelled and studied abroad.

But with its declared intention of being western in style with Chinese characteristics, Centre Stage tends to limit the influence of other Asian countries. This is not necessarily its policy, however. The problem is, the limited access its staff have to the entertainment programmes of its Asian counterparts.

Protecting Our Values

China's TV workers are striving constantly to produce quality programmes reflecting their national culture. Domestically-produced programmes make up over 80% of total output. Less than 20% of programmes are imported. China's purpose in
importing programmes from other countries is to promote the development of the
national culture. In 1997, China Central Television imported 3,658 hours of
programmes altogether, including entertainment programmes. As the director of
CCTV International, Mr. Zhao Yuhui, says, "It is necessary to import foreign
programmes. But the imports must be selective. This is a prerequisite that favours the
development of national culture, and a principle that is to the advantage of promoting
international cultural exchange." In 1997, CCTV also sold three thousand hours of
programmes. Among the best-selling programmes are those concerning Chinese folk
arts and cultures, including dramas such as "A Dream of Red Mansions", "Journey to
the West", "Romance of the Three Kingdoms", and "The Water Margin", highlighting
the traditional culture of China.

China, and CCTV in particular, are determined to promote Asian culture through
television. As the experience of Centre Stage shows, this is made more difficult by the
growing influence in the region of Western TV networks. Mr. Zhao put CCTV's case
as follows: "We hope to discuss the development of national TV and the protection of
traditional culture through exchange and cooperation between Asian countries, and so
form a competitive policy regarding satellite TV from outside Asia. We also hope to
strive together with our colleagues in Asia for the development of satellite TV in the
direction of favouring the stability and prosperity of Asia."

At A Crossroads

As is clear from the effort to improve entertainment television, China currently finds
itself at a crossroads, between East and West, and between ancient and modern. The
easy way to take would be the wholesale adoption of the western ideas that are
flooding China, and to enter an age where tradition and heritage are forgotten, and
flashy, instantaneous and commercialized entertainment is the norm. Resisting this is
the determination and wisdom of those who believe that what China, and Asia as a
whole, have to offer the world is too precious to be lost.
Of all programmes shown on television, entertainment programmes are the most popular. But as the pace of modern life quickens, so people's demands for television entertainment are changing rapidly. When people complain there is nothing of interest on TV, it means the entertainment programmes are failing to meet their expectations.
The Way Forward - To A Sleepless Night

Every Friday night Beijing TV broadcasts the programme, 'Sleepless Beijing' on its first channel. The programme features a variety of music, both traditional and modern, a round-up of the latest cultural news, interviews, a segment on lifestyles, and a feature on motor vehicles. Aimed at a younger audience, it combines pure entertainment with a discussion of issues relating to modern life in China. But this is not the only way in which it is breaking new ground. In the past, television broadcasts were limited to a few hours daily. But 'Sleepless Beijing' represents a step forward, in that it responds to the demand of a younger audience for late-night weekend entertainment.

In recent years, Chinese society has undergone change that is perhaps more rapid than in any other country in the world. More than just the economic development, the one-child policy has fundamentally altered the structure of society, which in China as in other Asian countries, is based so strongly on the family unit. One less obvious change is the introduction of a five-day working week over the past four years. All these changes affect people's attitudes towards television.

Twenty years ago, a television set was very much a luxury item, available to only a few families. China's economic development means that television is now more accessible to more people; it also means, however, that alternative forms of entertainment are now competing with television. Another effect of the rising living standards is to bring fundamental changes to society. People are no longer satisfied with simply sufficient food, shelter and clothing; their demands are becoming much more sophisticated. All these changes must be reflected in television entertainment.

China's one-child policy, of limiting most couples to just one child, has been in force for more than twenty years. In the past, when parents had several children, they were often content for just one of them to be successful, and so capable of supporting them in their old age. Now all their hopes rest with a single child, and this means the child,
when young, must study. This has two implications for the country's television workers: that the country's children have less free time to watch television, and that parents expect children's programmes to have a higher educational content.

The introduction of a five-day working week means people have more time to watch television. They are also becoming more critical of the cultural and ethical content of the programmes. Improving entertainment programmes to suit more varied and refined tastes is a topic that is being widely discussed, in private, and in public through the various media. TV people complain that it is becoming harder and harder to make entertainment programmes, while viewers complain that there is nothing of interest to see. For producers, it is difficult to create programmes that make everyone happy. Even for the best chef, it is hard to cook food that appeals to everyone. On the other hand, the development of people's living standards, and the increasing forms of entertainment, mean people's tastes and attitudes towards entertainment programmes are changing. Their demands are rising, and this requires the creation of programmes with both refined and popular appeal.

The increasing competition among television networks presents another problem for programme makers. Viewers now have up to 60 channels from which to choose, and this means that if a programme is to attract an audience, it must have immediate appeal, otherwise people will simply press a button on their remote control and move on.

Even if it succeeds in attracting an audience, an entertainment programme needs more creativity and continued improvement. It should be changed constantly to satisfy viewers' changing tastes. After an entertainment programme is launched, ratings tend to be high. If these high ratings are to be maintained, a change of the form is often required. Otherwise, viewers may tire of it, and once this happens, they will probably never return.

Rising To The Challenge
Television in China enjoys one major advantage in the struggle to maintain its position in people's lives. People believe implicitly in what they see on the television. Even among those who lived through the "Cultural Revolution" there is a general respect for the broadcast media. Television and radio, as well as newspapers, are still the main ways of obtaining information. And people have another perception of the role of television, that of educator.

Television programmes for children and young people are considered an important component part of their education. TV stations across the country set great store by children's programmes, because children are the nation's future, and their own future adult audience. One major innovation introduced by CCTV has been the launch in 1996 of its 'Six One Hundreds Project'. The goal was to create a 100-episode series on famous people, a series of 100 cartoons, 100 children's songs, 100 fairy tale dramas, 100 popular science programmes, and 100 quiz shows. All these targets have already been met, and the reception among children has been enthusiastic.

As is the case worldwide, China's teenagers and young adults enjoy the latest pop songs. Music videos first appeared on Chinese television screens in the early 1990s. They have grown quickly in popularity, among the young especially. Music videos originated in the West, but China's artists have been quick to adapt the art to their own songs, creating images that are appealing, sometimes tinged with emotion, and often incorporating special technical effects. Also, artists have been successful in adapting music videos to a Chinese style and content. One of CCTV's latest entertainment programmes is "The City Of Music Video". It is also one of CCTV's most innovative programmes, with pop singers invited to perform before a studio audience composed mainly of young people, who then have the chance to ask their idols questions. The climax of the show is when the host invites a few members of the audience to sing along with the stars. Already, 'The City Of Music Video' has built up a large and enthusiastic following.

For those who prefer classical and traditional music, CCTV has launched another programme, 'Bridge Of Music'. It gives a more mature audience the chance to
appreciate the likes of Pavarotti and Beethoven, as well as China's own traditional music.

These are just some examples of new developments in China's entertainment television. Generally, these changes reflect the fact that people's demands are changing, to become more selective of what they watch. Also, television stations are recognising the need to appeal to a younger audience, not just to children, but to young adults who are growing up in a society very different from what their parents knew. It cannot be denied that much of the difference is a result of influences from outside Asia, but at the same time, China's programme makers should be applauded for their efforts to adapt, rather than succumb to these influences, to incorporate the essence of Chinese culture into a form that appeals to a modern audience.
The 20th century has been a period of great change in China. A hundred years ago, China was a weak, feudal country under the domination of foreign powers. Now, as we approach a new millennium, China is poised to play a central role on the international stage. It is a role that offers great challenges and great expectations. At the same time, China is central to the future of Asia, and is resolved to protect its own interests, and those of the whole of Asia, in the international arena. Television in China has achieved unprecedented development over the twenty years of the country's opening. In the past ten years, the television industry worldwide has been transformed by the introduction of new technology, that has given countries the opportunity to project themselves to an international audience. China is already broadcasting its television programmes around the world. Using television, the medium of the 20th century, China will promote its own, and Asia's values, into the 21st century.

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