

# The nation-state in a globalising media environment: China's regulatory policies on transnational television drama flow

By Yik-chan Chin

Since the late 1990s, China's television industry underwent a major re-organisation. This was particularly evident after China's accession to the WTO in December 2001. The central issues facing China's broadcasting are the construction of large media organizations able to compete on level terms with international media forces, and the establishment of sound guiding principles for state regulation. The following article analyses China's policies regulating flows of transnational television dramas. It demonstrates that, even though transnational media pose a challenge to a national media system and culture, the local state still plays a crucial role in regulating domestic cultural policies and guiding the development of broadcasting.

Since the late 1980s, the process of globalisation has been considered as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations' (Giddens, 1990: 65) at the expense of the sovereignty of nation-state in terms of 'its competence; its form; its autonomy; and, ultimately, its authority or legitimacy' (McGrew cited in Wang, 2002: 207).

In the global media arena, as a consequence of the privatisation of state or public run broadcasting and telecommunication networks and liberalization of the communication policies, it has been argued that the state has found it more difficult to exercise authority over flows of information and cultural commodities (Waisbord and Morris, 2001). In Asia and Europe, governments have been criticised as lacking the power to control their communication policies and leaving everything up to market decisions.

Recent studies have suggested that it is premature to claim the death of the state and to assume a post-state world (ibid.). Governments control and regulate local industries in many important ways and play the central role in the negotiation of international agreements. It is argued that the exaggeration of the erosion of state power is the result of insufficient analysis of the state in the literature on international communication. 'How local is local?' in a globalising world is in danger of becoming an 'invisible' research area (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996: 18).

The changing environment

In December 2001, after 15-years of negotiations, China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This is widely interpreted as a major step in China's integration into the international

framework, both economically and institutionally. In the WTO agreement, the Chinese government commits itself to opening up certain sectors of its audio-visual market for foreign investment, but the broadcasting market is excluded from liberalisation.

Although the WTO agreement has no direct impact on the television sector, a substantial structural and industrial reform has already been ongoing in China's television system since 1996. Many media scholars, professionals and government officials predict that the liberalisation of the broadcasting market for foreign capital is inevitable in the long run. Domestic industry will face a substantial challenge from global media moguls.

Others argue that the overwhelming response to WTO accession has exaggerated the possible impact of global dynamics upon domestic television. Their assessment is that the government will continue to control especially in culturally and ideologically sensitive areas like television (Liu, 2002).

This debate is still going on in China, but the question here is: What are the government's strategies and what has actually been done? I explore this question by focusing on China's regulation of transnational television drama flow.

Television policy in negotiation: between national sovereignty and industrial growth

In the 1990s, Chinese television was heavily dependent on imported TV programming, especially television drama. In this, it was like many newly opened markets, for instance post-communist Russia (Rantannen, 2002). From the early 1990s until 1997, the decentralisation of the TV network and the diffusion of commercialisation throughout the television system promoted what Hong called 'the new explosion of television' (2000: 290).

By the end of 1997, there were 932 territorial television stations with 1,032 channels (China Broadcasting Yearbook 1998). There were also 1,756 cable television stations (Broadcast Asia, 1998, cited in Thomas, 2000). In 1997, it was estimated the annual demand for terrestrial broadcasting programmes was 3,114,384 hours, but the annual production by domestic television stations was only 616,437 hours (China Broadcasting Yearbook 1998).

There was a huge gap between demand and supply. Government restrictions on private capital investment also reduced the production capacity of domestic non-television companies. TV stations imported between 10,000 and 20,000 hours of programming annually (World Radio and TV 1995 in Yin, 2002). In 1994, over 90% of the programming of more than ten municipal cable stations were Hong Kong, Taiwan and other foreign imports (Zhao, 1998).

It has been suggested that media policy is a way for states to express their sovereignty in the face of global challenges (Waisbord and Morris, 2002). This is particularly evident for China: 'in a centralised communication system as China's, central policies are the most critical factor for any changes' (Hong, 2000: 289).

Since the 1980s, with the establishment of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT - renamed to the State Administration of Radio, Film & Television or SARFT in 1998), China started to practise the 'rule by law' policy in its television system. Broadcasting regulations in China are divided into three major categories in accordance to their order within the legal hierarchy. The first is the administrative regulations (xingzheng fagui) issued or endorsed by the State Council. The second category comprises department rules (xingzheng guizhang) enacted by the State Administration of Radio, Film & Television (SARFT). Thirdly, a number of normative documents (guifanxin weijian), including decisions, notices, orders and directives issued by the state council or the SARFT are also used for regulatory purposes (Yan, 1998). Apart from this, as broadcasting is controlled by state and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there has been a practice in China of using speeches and written comments by senior officials and Party Leaders to shape the development of broadcasting (Pei and Sun cited in Yan, 1998; Qian, 2002).

In China, the government refers to television programmes imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and foreign countries, or co-produced between domestic and foreign companies, as 'outside border' programmes (MRFT Decree No. 10). The SARFT regulates their import and broadcast.

The regulatory strategies for TV drama flow in China can be analysed from two aspects. First, the government adopts strict control over imported materials, for instance by imposing a quota requesting that only a certain percentage of the foreign content can be broadcast on television, in order to protect national and party political, cultural and economic interests. Secondly, many measures are established to boost the domestic drama industry through international co-operation.

As the most popular genre beside television news, the development of television drama has been profoundly influenced by both the political interventions of the state and the economic forces of market. The government sees television drama as a medium to promote 'the main melody of socialism'. On the other hand, it has been heavily commercialised in terms of its production and distribution.

Television drama became part of popular culture in the 1980s. The imported popular dramas from America, Japan and Hong Kong embodied an alternative model for Chinese producers and audiences. They realised that the entertainment aspects of television programming is at least, if not more, as important than its political function (Yin, 2002a; Guo, 1997).

Meanwhile, ideological liberalisation in the government also led to the redefining the role of media as serving 'socialism and the people', rather than purely for political propaganda. Television not only functions as apolitical 'mouthpiece' but also as 'public media', providing information and entertainment for the public (Yin, 2000b).

During the following decade, the transformation of China into a consumer society created a more popular taste in television. The launch of China's first domestic television serials *Expectations* (*Kewang*) in 1990 symbolised that popular drama had become a mainstream genre (ibid.).

At the same time, the import of 'outside border' television dramas grew rapidly, owing to their sophisticated production techniques and high entertainment orientation, as well as the lack of quality domestic products. By 1999, the number of imported and co-produced dramas reached 1543 (with 763 episodes) (Yin, 2002b; Liu Yannan, 2000).

Table 1. Origins of imported television dramas, 2000

Region	Country	No.	Episode
N. America	USA	101	340
S. America	Mexico	1	24
East Asia	Taiwan	17	313
	Hong Kong	17	259
	S. Korea	15	249
	Japan	14	114
	Singapore	5	45
South Asia	Malaysia	2	4
	India	2	4
Pacific	Australia	6	49
West Europe	France	21	92
	Germany	7	20
	UK	6	12
	Italy	1	4
North Europe	Finland	1	2
	Denmark	2	4
East Europe	Russia	1	2
	Czech	1	2
Total		220	1539

Source: the SARFT(2001). [On-line] Available: <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/page/2000n1-9yfxdyjj.htm> (accessed on 20 March 2002)

These 'outside border' dramas have been taken to represent a commercialised modern mass culture, which is intricately connected with the Western cultural industries. This mass culture is different from, and exists in tension with, the official culture promoted by the government, the elite culture promoted by intellectuals, and traditional popular culture (Zeng, 2002).

### State interventions in cultural development

Media policy in China is 'framed' by the notion of 'public interest' or 'public good', and aims to 'develop the attribute of the Chinese population by raising people's moral and intellectual quality (suzhi)' (Keane, 2001: 789). The Government, therefore, has been actively involved in this debate, on the ground of preserving national culture, despite its mainly political and economic concerns. It has applied various regulations and administrative policies to ensure that the prime time dramas are domestic 'mainstream melody production' (zhuxuanlu zuopin). These promote officially recognised culture on the one hand, whilst reducing the volume of imported popular dramas on the other.

In 1990, the MRFT started to limit the 'outside-border' material to 20% of the total air time allocated to dramas on all channels. During prime-time (6 p.m. to 10 p.m.), the volume of imports may not exceed 15% ([1993] no. 799). In 2000, SARFT began to tighten control even further. From January to June, one department rule and four relevant normative documents were released. The notice ([2000] no. 5) excludes imported dramas from 7:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., when more than half of the country's population are watching TV (Zhang, 2001: 74). Two major factors contributed to this change. First, from a broader perspective, it is part of the new wave of reform in broadcasting since 1999 in conjunction with accession to the WTO. Secondly, the growing supply of domestic drama provides the material base for a reduction of imported contents. Figures published by the government showed that from 1980 to 1998, the volume of annually produced domestic drama increased more than 52 times (Lu, 2002: 121).

Table 2. Origins of imported television dramas, 2001

Region	Country	No.	Episode
N. America	USA	55	164
	Canada	2	4
S. America	Mexico	0	0
East Asia	Taiwan	6	102
	Hong Kong	19	288
	S. Korea	7	138
	Japan	1	14
	Singapore	2	20
South Asia	Malaysia	0	0
	India	1	2
Pacific	Australia	0	0
West Europe	France	7	14
	Germany	10	22
	UK	4	8
	Ireland	2	4
	Portugal	2	4
	Italy	5	10
North Europe	Finland	0	0
	Denmark	0	0
East Europe	Russia	0	0
	Czech	0	0
Total		156	1212

Source: the SARFT(2002) [On-line] Available:

<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/page/2001nyjj.htm> (accessed on 9 Sep 2002).

This policy has had a considerable impact on the imported programmes, especially those from Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. Because of cultural proximity, regional products have been more popular than American ones. The former occupy the prime time schedules, while the latter are usually used to fill up late night or early-morning airtime. As Table One shows, in 2000 the total number of television dramas imported from the East Asian region was 68 (980 episodes). Yet, one year later, Table Two shows it sharply dropped to 35 (562 episodes). None of these was broadcast either during prime-time or on more than three provincial satellite channels. Recently, this quota policy has been extended to cover imported cartoons. Besides, the government aims to diversify the origins and contents of imported materials, for instance, by setting a maximum quota, 25% of the total, for royal court (gongting) and martial arts (wuda) dramas (SARFT[2000]no. 5).

Secondly, government has applied censorship to both domestic and 'outside border' television dramas since the very beginning (MRFT Decree No. 5, 1991; MRFT Decree No. 10, 1994). All television stations in China are owned by the state, foreign ownership is not permitted. Domestic television stations are also prohibited to lease channels or change the ownership of their channels. This state-owned system allows the government to exercise strict censorship.

In order to institutionalise the process, the SARFT issued a special departmental rule, SARFT Decree No.1 (1999), governing the examination of television dramas. According to the Decree, imported dramas must have an 'invigorating ideology, higher cultural and aesthetic values' and must be examined by both provincial authorities and the SARFT before distribution. Only dramas which have been granted a 'television drama distribution permit' by the SARFT can be broadcast. In 2001, five imported dramas - three from Hong Kong, one from Japan and one from the USA - failed to pass the censorship (SARFT, 2001, accessed 24 Aug, 2002)

On the one hand, the opening of China to the world has contributed possible threats to national culture and the state's power of control, at least from government officials' point of view. On the other hand, the state has been struggling to reaffirm or protect its cultural integrity and communication sovereignty through various legislative measures and administrative interventions.

Nevertheless, understanding political culture in contemporary China is not as simple as applying the binary opposition of Western liberal traditions versus a socialist authoritarian system. The situation is far more complex. There is no clear-cut distinction between the state and the market, the liberal and authoritarian; rather they are intricately interrelated with each other (Zhao, 1999). The contemporary Chinese state is 'simultaneously saying "yes" and "no" to transnational capitalism' (Sun, 2001: 90).

In other words, the Chinese state does not operate outside the circuit of transnational capitalism and globalization. Although it has a huge domestic market and a relatively powerful central government, like most developing countries, the demand for capital, technology and sophisticated business skills, which have all been seen as significant elements for helping the television industry to 'become modern', have all made it impossible to say 'no' to capital and cultural flows from outside.

The desire of the state to be actively involved in the process of globalization and the goal of 'go abroad' (zouchuqu) of its media industry (SARFT[2001]no. 1494), also reinforces the 'open-door' policy. The Chinese state is constantly renegotiating its communication policies between protectionism and cooperation, between national sovereignty and industry growth.

This ambivalence is reflected in its policy on the co-production of television drama between domestic and outside organizations. In the 1990s, due to the huge demand for programmes and government restrictions on foreign imports, a large number of local production companies emerged. As China bans the foreign ownership of programme production companies, the engagement of outside labour and capital for programming production through co-operation with domestic partners has become a very common practice.

As early as 1994, the MRFT Decree No. 10 already legitimised the status of co-produced dramas. The regulatory provision (MRFT Decree No.15) released one year later re-affirmed the acceptance of foreign labour, capital and technology in TV drama production.

Meanwhile, government also sets up certain rules for cooperation, in order to protect local interests and boost the local drama industry. First, it requires that for every 20 episodes of co-produced drama, the local company must have finished 60 episodes of entirely domestic products. Secondly, the proportion of domestic creative personal must not be less than one third in the co-production team. Thirdly, domestic capital must contribute at least one third of the total budget. In addition, the domestic copyright must belong to the local company. (SARFT Decree No. 2; SARFT [2000] No.5). Besides the reasons we have discussed above, these policies also aim to explore overseas markets through the involvement of foreign investors.

In 1999, 41(763 episodes) of co-produced dramas were distributed. In 2000, this rose to 51 (990 episodes). It is worth noting that more than 80% were co-produced between China and Taiwan. The rest involved Hong Kong, Malaysian, Singaporean and South Korean companies, while none of them is from Europe or America. As discussed before, one of the underlying reasons of this regional co-operation is the sharing of similar culture and language.

With China's entry into the WTO, the engagement of transnational media capitals will further

complicate the picture. Zhao Bin, for instance, has anticipated that 'the future forces reshaping the Chinese media are more likely to be found in the interaction between the Chinese state and international media moguls' (2001: 303).

#### Conclusion

It has been argued that dominant media theories, which were developed in the 'heartland nations' (the United States and Britain) of the West, have not provided adequate explanations of the local media systems in other countries (Lee, 2000; Ma 2000; Nain 2000). One of the reasons is that western theorists have tended to take the capitalist, democratic political system for granted, and glossed over the significance of state control or guidance of the media.<sup>1</sup> The neglect of the power of state, particularly in transition countries like China, can be also seen in the current debate of globalization.

Without downplaying the influence of global upon the local, it must be noted that in China, political power has attempted to play a manipulative role in guiding global capital and cultural flows. The flows of transnational television dramas and media capital reinforces the nationalism and national awareness of cultural and communication sovereignty, while the local also co-operates with global capitalism and helps to propel the process of globalization.

Meanwhile, the state has been shifting its control over the media from an authoritarian model to a bureaucratic-authoritarian one. In other words, the Chinese government maintains its control over media increasingly through legislative measures rather than coercion and direct instructions. In this article, these points have been exemplified in a series of administrative regulations, departmental rules and normative documents, which demonstrate how the Chinese state effectively manages transnational capital and programming flows while sustaining its political control.

However, it must be admitted that this paper is just an initial attempt to explore how the local negotiates with global dynamics. Lee comments that a state which 'has been previously aloof to domestic challenge, [can in the end], yield[ed] to technological pressure and to the overwhelming politic-economic pressure of an external hegemonic power' (2000: 133). In the face of future ideological, economic and political challenges from the global, the development of the media policy of the Chinese state needs much further investigation.

#### Note

1. This can be seen in the overwhelming of economic goals over the political and ideological agenda in the development of media industry by both critical and liberal traditions (Garnham, 1990; Jan van Cuilenburg and Denis McQuail, 1998).

## References

Giddens, Anthony (1990) *The consequences of modernity*. London: Polity Press.

Guo, Zhenzhi(1997) *The history of China television*. Beijing: Culture and Art Publication House. (in Chinese)

Hong, Junhao (2000) 'Reconciliation between openness and resistance'. In: Wang, G., Servaes, J. and Goonasekera, A. (eds.) *The new communications landscape: demystifying media globalization*. London: Routledge. 288 -306.

Keane, Michael (2001) 'Broadcasting policy, creative compliance and the myth of civil society in China'. *Media, Culture & Society*, 23:783-798.

Lee, Chin-Chuan(2000) "State, capital, and media". In: Curran, James and Park, M-Y (eds.) *De-Westernising media studies*. London: Routledge: 124-138.

Liu, Hong (2002) 'China media conglomerates and the WTO'. (in Chinese) [On-line] Available: [http://academic.mediachina.net/xsjd\\_view.jsp?id=369](http://academic.mediachina.net/xsjd_view.jsp?id=369).(accessed on 16 Aug 2002).

Lu, Di (2002) *The risks and opportunities of China's broadcasting industry*. Beijing: China People's University Press. (In Chinese)

Liu, Yannan(2000) 'The study of China's TV drama market and its future development' In *Radio and Television Department of College of Communication*. National Chenchi University (ed.) (2000) *Culture transition - a essay collection of 2000 International Chinese radio and television forum*. Taiwan: National Chenchi University. (In Chinese)

Ma, Eric Kit-wai (2000) 'Rethinking media studies: the case of China'. In: Curran, James and Park, M-Y (eds.) *De-Westernising media studies*. London: Routledge:21-34.

Mohammadi, Ali (1998) 'Electronic empires: an Islamic perspective'. In: D. Thussu (ed.) *Electronic empires*. London: Arnold: 257-272.

Morris, N. and Waisbord, S. (2001) (eds.) *Media and globalization: why the state matters*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Nain, Zaharom(2000) 'Globalized theories and national controls: the state, the market, and the Malaysia media'. In: Curran, James and Park, M-Y (eds.) *De-Westernising media studies*. London: Routledge: 139-154.

Qian, Wei (2002) *Politics, market and media*. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. (In Chinese)

Rantannen, Terhi (2002) *The global and the national: media and communications in post-communist Russia*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publications.

SARFT (2002) *TV Dramas not permitted for distribution in 2001*. [On-line] Available: <http://www.sarft.gov.cn> (accessed on 24 Aug, 2002)

Sreberny-Mohammadi, A. (1996). 'Globalization, communication and transnational civil society: Introduction'. In: S. Braman and A. Sreberny-Mohammadi (eds.) *Globalization, communication and transnational civil society*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press: 1-20.

Straubhaar, J. D. (1991) "Beyond media imperialism: assymetrical Interdependence and cultural proximity". *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. 8(1): 39-59.

Sun, Wanning (2001) 'A Chinese in the new world: television dramas, global cities, and travel to modernity', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2(1):81-94.

The Yearbook of China Broadcast Editorial Committee (1999) *China broadcasting yearbook 1998*. Beijing: Beijing Broadcasting Institute Press.(in Chinese)

Tomas, Amos Owen. (2000). 'Transborder television for Greater China'. In: French, David and Richard, Michael (eds.) *Television in contemporary Asia*. London: Sage: 91-109.

Waisbord, S. and Morris, N. (2001) "Introduction". In: N. Morris and S. Waisbord (eds.) *Media and globalization: why the state matters*. Rowman & Littlefield: Oxford: vii-xvi.

Wang, Georgette (2002) 'Restrictions on foreign ownership and national sovereignty: whose issue is it?'. In: Chan, J.M. and McIntyre, B.T.(2002)(eds.) *In search boundaries*. Westport: Ablex Publishing: 207 - 222.

——(2003) 'Foreign Investment policies, sovereignty and growth'. *Telecommunications Policy*, 27(3-4):267-282.

Wang, Jing (2001) "The state question in Chinese popular cultural studies", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2(1):35-52.

Yan, Mei Ning (1998) *Protection of free flow of information and regulation of transfrontier television: case study of Western European and China*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of Law, University of Essex.

Yi, Wang(1999) 'Intellectuals and popular television in China: Expectations as a cultural phenomenon'. *International journal of cultural studies*, 2(2): 222-245.

Yin, Hong (2002a) 'Meaning, production, consumption: the history and reality of television drama in China' In: Donald, S H. et al. (eds.) *Media in China: consumption, content, and crisis*. London: Routledge Curzon.

—— (2002b) 'Meaning, production, consumption: the political economy of television drama in China.' (in Chinese) [On-line] [[http://academic.mediachina.net/lw\\_view.jsp?id=273](http://academic.mediachina.net/lw_view.jsp?id=273)] (accessed on 30 Aug 2002)

Zeng, Qingrui (2002) 'The confusion of art institution, culture industry and popular culture (Part I)'. (in Chinese) [On-line] Available: [http://academic.mediachina.net/xsqk\\_view.jsp?id=840](http://academic.mediachina.net/xsqk_view.jsp?id=840). (accessed on 28 Aug 2002)

Zhao, Bin (1999) 'Mouthpiece or money- spinner?: the double life of Chinese television in the late 1990s'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2(3): 291-305.

Zhao, Yuezhi(1998) *Media, market and democracy in China: between the party line and the bottom line*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Regulations issued by the SARFT and State Council on broadcasting cited in this article

Administrative regulations

State Council Decree No. 228 (11/08/1997) 'Regulations governing the administration of radio and television'

Departmental rules

MRFT Decree No. 10 (03/02/1994) 'Provisions governing the importing and broadcasting of 'outside border' television programmes'

SARFT Decree No.1 (07/04/1999) 'Provisional provisions governing the examining of television dramas'

SARFT Decree No. 2 (15/06/2000) 'Provision governing television dramas'.

Normative documents

MRFT [1993] no 799 (22/11/1993) 'Notice on further strengthening regulations of broadcasting overseas television drama'

MRFT [1995]no.547 (28/08/1995) 'Notices on further strengthening and improving the regulations of importing and broadcasting 'outside border' television movies and dramas'

MRFT[1996]no.338 (20/06/1996) 'Notices on strengthening broadcasting regulations of radio, television and cable television'

SARFT[1999]no.489 (02/08/1999) 'Notices on strengthening the regulations of re-broadcasting 'outside border' television dramas in local television stations'

SARFT[2000]no.5 (04/01/2000) 'Notices on further strengthening the regulations of importing, co-producing and broadcasting television dramas'

SARFT[2000]no.91 (24/02/2000) 'Notices on strengthening the regulations of importing radio, television programmes and movies'

SARFT[2000]no.137 (07/04/2000) 'Notices on strengthening the regulations of importing and broadcasting animation television programmes'

SARFT [2002]no.690(05/07/2002) 'Notice on practically strengthening the examinations of television drama examining'.

Source: The General Office of the SARFT (2000 & 2001) A collection of important radio, film and television working documents (year 1993 – 2001). The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television: Beijing, China. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television [On-line] available: <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/index2.html> (accessed on 23/08/2002).

Yik-chan Chin is at the Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, United Kingdom. E-mail: [daisychin@yahoo.com](mailto:daisychin@yahoo.com)