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# As a Hundred Television Formats Bloom, A Thousand Television Stations Contend

MICHAEL KEANE

Michael Keane is a research fellow at the Creative Industries Research and Application Centre (CIRAC) at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia.

*This paper looks at the growing trend towards television format adaptation as an industry development strategy in China. As China's television industry professionals imagine a commercial future, this vision is tempered by the reality of a deficit of quality content. Program schedules exhibit limited variety and are dominated by cheap variety show formats, royal court television dramas, game shows, and news. In search of new ways to stimulate audiences, producers have looked outside China to formats successful in Taiwan, SAR Hong Kong, Japan, Europe and the U.S. The localization of foreign programs represents a more useful experiment for China's domestic industry than the importation of finished programs. Unlike finished programs the format can be 'filled' with culturally specific content, and where licensed co-productions ensue there is potential for added value in terms of technology transfer. I argue, however, that the strategy of format adaptation is a short-term solution to program development that is unlikely to stimulate a creative media-based economy.*

'Formats are the cost effective key. It is the format that will even increasingly offer a reliable map to the highways and byways of the new production landscape'

Michel Rodrigue, CEO of Distraction Formats<sup>1</sup>

'We're looking at how we can be in business with our partners on shows like The Mole and Popstars in a bigger way, sharing information and shows and maybe creating some kind of international cabal'

Stone Stanley, producer of the US versions of The Mole and Popstars.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Rodrigue, paper given at Special Event at 2000 Montreux Rose D'Or Festival Tuesday 9th May 2000. See <http://www.tvformats.com/devising/d03.htm>. Accessed 12.6.2001.

<sup>2</sup> John Hazelton, 'Re-made in the USA', Television Business International (October 2000), p. 52.

## Introduction

The relationship between trans-border film and television flows and cultural sovereignty has drawn wide-ranging scrutiny from national governments since the completion of Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1994 that led to the negotiation of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).<sup>3</sup> A multilateral agreement aimed at promoting competitive neutrality between nations and market liberalization, the GATS sought to enshrine film and television services as subject to the same trade disciplines as other 'services' such as telecommunications, transport, banking, tourism, and Internet-based service offerings. A sticking point in the reluctance of many national governments to sign on to the GATS is the dominance of the US-based film and television industries. U.S. government trade representatives, with the support of agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and industry advocacy groups such as the Motion Pictures Association (MPA), have meanwhile endeavoured to convince the world that film and television content is the business of entertainment, or just 'show' business. Unsurprisingly, a number of governments have chosen to exempt audiovisual services from the GATS agreement, arguing that film and television policy has a dual role of expressing national identity and ensuring domestic industry expansion. This cultural dimension is echoed by the secretariat of the World Trade Organization who have noted, 'Audiovisual services typically reflect the social and cultural characteristics of nations and their peoples, and are consequently regarded as being of great social and political importance.'<sup>4</sup>

As China prepares to sign on to the WTO, many within the Chinese film and TV industries are anticipating a 'cultural war'.<sup>5</sup> This, however, is not an isolated refrain from the Middle Kingdom. The unease about U.S. content industries dominating the free trade world raises the spectre of cultural imperialism, in particular the idea that 'western' programming, with its embedded notions of consumer society, is detrimental to the value systems of developing countries in East Asia where traditions are based on ideals of consensus and group harmony. After all, television is a mass medium and as such is a medium of mass persuasion. The influence of Western programming has been the core of a debate that has surfaced in many guises for decades and scholars have researched with varying degrees of rigor the effects of 'foreign' programs on non-Western cultures.

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive account of the GATS architecture see Pierre Sauvé and Robert M. Stern, GATS 2000: New Directions in Services Trade Liberalization (Harvard University: Brookings Institution Press, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> See 'Audiovisual Services: background notes by the secretariat', *World Trade Organization Council for Trade in Services*, 15 June, 1998. For information about GATS see WTO web-site. <http://www.wto.org/> GATS clauses concerning Domestic Regulation (Article VI), Subsidies (Article XV), Market Access (Article XVI), and National Treatment (Article XVII) render domestic policy goals contestable through the WTO architecture. For a discussion see Marc Raboy, 'Communication policy and globalization as a social project', in Andrew Calabrese and Jean-Claude Burgelman eds. Communication, Citizenship and Social Policy: Rethinking the Limits of the Welfare State, (Lanham, Ma: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 293-310.

<sup>5</sup> Zhu Linyong, 'Film-makers get ready for war'. *China Daily*, May 31 2000. See <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndydb/2000/05/d9-1film.531.html>. Accessed 12.6.2001. Also Meng Jian 'Entering WTO:

Chance and Challenge Faced TV &Movie Industry of China', paper presented at the Boston Conference on TV Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, October 28, 2000, Tufts University

The role that the media plays in the construction of cultural identity is crucial. At least this is a widely held perception reflected in regular moral panics and calls for government regulation of the media. This same materialist logic also informed the deliberations of the UNESCO appointed McBride Commission, a group of non-aligned states that met in 1976 to address the problem of 'the free flow of information'<sup>6</sup>. This study drew upon reports such as those by Nordenstreng and Varis, which demonstrated that a few Western Countries (U.S., U.K. France, and Germany) controlled the international flow of television programs.<sup>7</sup> One of the key ideas of the McBride Commission was 'cultural colonialism'. Culture was seen as a product of the media; that is culture was treated as a social phenomenon whose first cause was media content.<sup>8</sup>

As time went by the center-periphery paradigm and the media imperialism thesis came into dispute. New centers have emerged in what were once viewed as peripheries. Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham's study of global television markets argued that trade in cultural products is now more accurately described as constituting a number of regions each with their own internal dynamics and global ties.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, the jury has yet to deliver its final verdict. Foreign programming has been demonised by government for its attacks on cultural sovereignty and it has been sought after by cable TV networks for its capacity to 'fill' schedules. But it has received ambivalent responses from actual viewers. More rigorous studies of the reception of foreign programming to date have come to the conclusion that the potential to erode civilisations does not accord with its limited reception. In short, local programming is the preferred televisual choice.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, there is more evidence to suggest that programs flows and cultural influences are local rather than global. In other words, while the Western program may be the 'carrier' of non-appropriate cultural viruses, the real action is within East Asian regional cultures, where exchange is based on 'culturally proximity'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sean McBride, & Colleen Roach, 'The new international information order', in F. Lechner & J. Boli eds. The Globalization Reader (London: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 286-292.

<sup>7</sup> Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Tapio Varis, Television traffic--a one-way street?: A survey and analysis of the international flow of television program material, (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey C. Ady, 'Transcending the dialectic of culture', in R. Vincent, K. Nordenstreng & M. Traber eds, Towards Equity in Global Communication: Macbride Update (New Jersey: Hampskill Press, 1999), p. 217.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of regional television markets see John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka, and Stuart Cunningham eds, New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision (New York : Oxford University Press, 1996)

<sup>10</sup> A study of prime time television programming in Indonesia has found that 27 of the top 30 rating programs are local programs. S. K. Ishadi, 'Globalization and localization: rethinking their impact on TV content and culture: the Indonesian case study', paper presented to the 10<sup>th</sup> JAMCO International Symposium Positioning Asian TV in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 26 February 2001, Legend Hotel, Kuala Lumpur. Similar evidence about the dominance of local content can be found in China. Television is overwhelming a domestic medium and despite anecdotal evidence about popularity of Western programming in China, there is no body of research to collaborate its widespread reception.

<sup>11</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, 'Time and the neighbor: Japanese media consumption of "Asia" in the 1990s', paper at the Intra-Asia Cultural Traffic Workshop, University of Western Sydney, Feb. 24-26, 2000.

What has been missing from the research literature, however, is attention to the television format. Essentially a vehicle for localisation, the format can be regarded differently from finished programming. Sometimes referred to as ‘the pie and the crust’ model – whereby the format is the crust and the various localisations are the pie – the TV format is a means by which foreign content migrates across national boundaries and within television trading networks.<sup>12</sup> With its capacity to circumvent domestic content quota standards and censorship regimes, the television format might well be a Trojan Horse, enabling a vehicle for ‘peaceful evolution’.

### **The adolescence of the Chinese industry and the urge to imitate**

The uptake of the format as a template for content development is directly related to the relative adolescence of the Chinese television industry and producers’ attempts to come to terms with supply-demand economics. The cloning of formats is also related to the vast scale of the Chinese television landscape, a fact that makes effective administration difficult. There are more television stations in China than any other country in the world, approximately 980 terrestrial stations and over 1300 cable stations. There are also over 30 provincial satellite channels.<sup>13</sup> These are organised on four administrative levels - national (CCTV), provincial, city, and county (mainly relay stations). The sheer number of broadcasters concentrated in a crowded and chaotic market leads to an extremely supply driven and imperfect market scenario with the bulk of broadcasters recycling poor quality, low production-value television dramas and cheap game shows that deliver moderate audiences. This is in effect a legacy of decades of state control over media industries by which cultural bureaucrats exercised surveillance over form and content. It is also a legacy of a system that has tied production units to their respective parent broadcaster, obliging the unit to produce for that station’s viewers. The effect has been a stagnant and carnivorous production environment, devoid of any real innovation. Like the Chinese reform economy in general the television industry provides evidence of ‘duplicate construction’ (*chongfujianshe*). In other words, everyone rushes in and produces the same kinds of products and targets the same markets within a particular locality.<sup>14</sup> This structural isomorphism along with the fact of ‘miniaturisation’ (the small scale of many stations) means that you have a lot of under-capitalised television stations that have no real option than to barter similar programs.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Michael Keane, ‘The Chinese pie and the imported crust: an examination of new television diets in the People’s Republic of China’, *Hybridity*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Special Issue Asian Popular Cultures (in print 2001)

<sup>13</sup> It is sometimes difficult to accurately quantify the number of television stations in China, especially as many cable broadcasters and county level terrestrial stations are being rationalized under new policies issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). For a discussion of the current state of play see Anke Redl and Rowan Simons, ‘Two channels, one system’, in Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane and Yin Hong, eds, *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis* (London: Curzon, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Lance P. Gore ‘A meltdown with Chinese characteristics’, in R. Robinson, M. Beeson, K. Jayasuriya, H. Kim eds. *Politics and Markets in the Wake of the Asian Crisis*, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 130-150.

<sup>15</sup> A more widespread strategy for program distribution is bartering for advertising. That is, a program will be sold in return for advertising space which is in turn sold to various stakeholders and

The emergence of a competitive culture within television management and the more recent consolidation of larger players have led to a shift from supply towards demand. This has been augmented by the increased interactivity of television viewing in China, not just in the narrow sense of the remote control, the VCR, but also the rapid expansion of cable television networks during the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Whereas smaller stations maintain a steady supply of content through bartering, many of the larger provincial and metropolitan broadcasters are learning that the fundamentals of supply and demand are intricately related to pricing mechanisms that in turn depend on the regulation of scarcity. That is, when a program is widely circulated or plagiarized, the market value of the original generally diminishes. In the rush to exploit successful content these market truths are often disregarded.

In addition, the idea of consumer sovereignty has become a recurring feature of media debates in China over the past decade. One of the first contributions to the debate on consumer choice was an article published in Modern Communication, the academic journal of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute, entitled 'Who is the God of Television?: Identifying television's cultural stratification'.<sup>17</sup> The basis of the critique was that, prior to the gradual commercialisation of China's media under Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the ruling elite – the 'leading cadres' (lingdao ganbu) who made up 2% of the total population - had assumed a mandate to decide what was appropriate content for the other 98%. State ownership, combined with a view of the audience as grateful and passive recipients of information, meant that producers were not accountable to the audience.

With the economic reforms resulting in an increase in social stratification, the mass audience began to fragment into many sub-cultures (ya wenhua) or potential publics, differentiated by income as well as geographical factors (urban or rural), educational levels (university or high school), and political status. Citing television, the author claims that the cultural agenda has passed into the hands of entrepreneurs and market forces. While the administrative stratum, the 'leading cadres', still control the political agenda, the urban middle-class, especially those working in finance and insurance, real estate, post and telecom, broadcasting, television and film industries, now constitute the sector which has the highest income and consumption levels.<sup>18</sup> This social stratum also spends the most money on recreational and cultural commodities. The argument here is familiar and leads into models of market

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investors in the production. This has been the dominant strategy for television drama distribution in China since the early 1990s success of Chronicles of the City (Jingdu ji shi) and Beijingers in New York (Beijingren zai niuyue). For further discussion of this strategy see Michael Keane, 'The market and the state' in Richard King and Tim Craig, Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia (Victoria: University of British Columbia Press, 2001)

<sup>16</sup> See Mark Harrison, 'Satellite and cable platforms: development and content' in Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane and Yin Hong eds. Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis (London: Curzon, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> He Xiaobing 'Who is the god of television: television's cultural stratification' (Shei shi dianshi de shangdi? Dianshi de jieceng wenhua dingwei), Beijing Broadcasting Institute Journal (now Modern Communication), (February 1994), pp. 9-17. At the time of the publication the author and the editor of the journal were hauled over the coals by the Ministry of Culture for the assertion that the leadership dictated the tastes of Chinese viewers.

<sup>18</sup> China Economic News, No. 36, 22 September 1997, p. 5.

research. It is not just the size of the audience - if that were the case the peasant stratum would control the shape of culture - but the needs and access capabilities of the audience that requires response. While this means that the public gets the content they vote for with their remote control, it doesn't necessarily mean that the quality of programming has improved. The problem lies with the increasing duplication of formats.

In an environment of immature media industries confronting change from state subsidy to deregulated self-reliance, from mass delivery of content to customized service industry models, any content that captures audience segments without necessitating huge outlays of investment is manna from heaven. The exploitation of ready-made formats is a cheap option for television stations operating in undercapitalised markets unable to compete with high-budget offerings of foreign providers. Copying formats saves R & D and obviates the risks associated with new program development. With television producers in China now moving from genre imitation to format appropriation in order to maximize audiences with a minimum of program development cost, the immediate future of Chinese television looks both uninteresting and unenterprising. A number of questions need to be asked. Can Chinese television stations gear up for new media environments by simply copying formats? What is 'good television' in China? Is it programming that is innovative and challenging, or simply that which delivers audiences to advertisers?

### **Televising happiness**

In order to be successful in a new media environment television stations have come to recognise a fundamental truth about the medium of television. The evolution of audience tastes is underscored by increasing demographic differentiation – particularly in relation to youth – with concomitant expectations that the function of television is to entertain rather than sermonize. This may sound like heresy to old school propagandists who view television as another tool in the arsenal of mass education. However, one only has to look at the changing pantheon of participants on television variety shows to get a sense of the secularisation of celebrity. Whereas participants on the small screen during the 1980s and 1990s were predominantly designated role models such as leaders, heroic characters and progressive models such as soldiers, teachers, professors, workers, and approved celebrity entertainers, the trend is for an opening up of the medium to the person in the street, or as one commentator has described it as shift from 'gold collar consumption' (*jinling xiaofei*) to 'mass consumption'.<sup>19</sup>

The fine line between good television, expedient programming and financial success is best illustrated by Hunan Satellite Television, a broadcaster operating within the organisational umbrella of the Hunan TV & Broadcast Intermediary Ltd. (TVBI). TVBI - incidentally emerging from the home province of China's great communicator, Mao Zedong - has recently expanded into financing a province wide broadband cable network, and has developed new financial information programming. This expansion complements the success of Hunan Satellite Television's popular youth shows such as The Citadel of Happiness (*Kuaile da benying*) and Romantic Meeting (*Meigui zhiyue*). These niche entertainment programs have established audience loyalty that can be counted in hard income. In 2000 the company received

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<sup>19</sup> Yang Bin Feeling the pulse of the contestant (*Bamai jiabin*) (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe, 2000), p. 16.

approval to issue shares to individual and institutional investors. The profit-making ethic exemplified by Hunan TV and Broadcasting Intermediary Ltd. is also evident in large urban centres. Both China Central Television (CCTV) and Beijing Television (BTV) exploit private production companies to outsource programming. In 1997 CCTV also floated part of the capital of its Wuxi Production Base in the Shanghai Stock Exchange, a move followed by Shanghai Oriental Pearl Television.<sup>20</sup> All these emerging commercial networks maximise profits through conventional means such as exploiting the value of content for advertising, as well as through horizontal integration into services such as real estate and tourism. Indeed, the spate of new alliances between television companies and foreign financed non-broadcasting companies – Internet portals, advertising, tourism, and real estate companies – is a strategic manoeuvre to draw investment by the ‘back door’.

Having a foot in the stock market door, however, does not necessarily translate into programming success. Chinese television stations are still on a steep learning curve when it comes to audience maximisation and achieving economies of scale. Sophisticated strategies such as branding, niche broadcasting, syndication, and complementary scheduling schedules are yet to become accepted practice. Television symposiums organized by the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV in conjunction with foreign media information portals such as China Media Monitor Intelligence allow the transfer of ideas about survival in the harsh world of broadcasting.<sup>21</sup> However, while stations have been quick to seize upon the technology of ratings services to quantify their audiences, understandings of how to subsequently capture and retain audience segments remains immature.

Moreover, in China one person’s success often becomes another’s gravy train. Television concepts and ideas are swiftly copied, modified, and exploited by neighbouring stations desperate to put together successful offerings to keep their station leaders happy. The example of Hunan Satellite Television’s The Citadel of Happiness is a good example of successful format adaptation combined with self-reliant management strategies. The show consists primarily of apolitical entertainment content, based around social issues, youth lifestyle, and popular music. According to management at Hunan Satellite Television this variety-game show was of domestic origin and was conceived in 1996 in response to viewer dissatisfaction with the pedagogic content of existing variety formats such as CCTV’s Zhengda Variety (Zhengda zongyi) and Arts Kaleidoscope (Zongyi daguan).<sup>22</sup> The Hunan program was piloted and subsequently refined. Confident that they had a winning format, Hunan Satellite Television then spent a great deal of money promoting the show, bringing in celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The show became so successful that advertising rates exceeded expectations. Within a short space of time the program’s own format had been cloned into more than 100 local variants within China itself, none attaining the heights of the original - a fact attributed to its youthful hosts Li Xiang and He Ling, and its constant evolution in order to distance itself from its imitators. Furthermore, whereas many cable stations exchange program packages based on the concept of reciprocity, this does not apply to The Citadel of Happiness.

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<sup>20</sup> See Redl and Simons, ‘Two channels, one system’.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.cmmintelligence.com> Accessed 12.6.2001.

<sup>22</sup> Zhengda zongyi (literally ‘the upright arts magazine’) is a format co-produced and sponsored by the overseas China Zhengda consortium based in Thailand that specializes in livestock and agricultural fertilizers.

Despite its Hunanese origins and the criticisms of it emanating from Beijing, the show is purchased by many cable providers in China.

Not surprisingly, Hunan's new breed of television executives soon attracted the displeasure of CCTV stalwarts who claimed that the program was a rip-off of Taiwanese formats. Producer Wang Bingwen was called to defend the integrity of The Citadel of Happiness. Wang refuted claims that the program was appropriated from Taiwan, and cited a long pedigree of similar variety formats in the U.S. and Japan. In order to negate the criticisms of the programs lack of educational (sixiang) content, he drew attention to program themes like the 105th annual celebration of Mao Zedong's birth, environmental protection, and sensitive issues of unemployment (xia gang).<sup>23</sup>

### **The globalization of formats**

The issue of global trade in formats remains under-researched.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned above consideration attention has been paid to the 'problem' of foreign programming without due attention to questions of localisation. A similar lack of awareness exists in China. During fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai during 2000, I encountered reluctance among producers to discuss questions of program origin, as well as a sense of ignorance among media critics about the dynamics of format appropriation as an industry development strategy. This is despite a number of high profile local versions of internationally branded programs. These include Shanghai Television's Sesame Street (Zhima jie) and Beijing Yahuan's Joy Luck Street (Xingfu jie), the latter a localisation of the English soap Coronation Street. There have also been a Chinese version of the Dave Letterman tonight show format, a licensed version of Entertainment Tonight on Shanghai Television, and a hybrid of the 'This is Your Life' format called Friends (Pengyou), in which people encounter acquaintances and friends from their past. There are also game show formats like CCTV's Dictionary of Joy (Kaixin cidian) that exploit the success of shows like Who wants to be a Millionaire, although the prizes are extremely modest, given the government's reluctance to foster a culture of individualism on the small screen. Even dating shows, the most formatted of all, offer successful participants the chance to 'exchange gifts' rather than receive luxurious holidays, although many do offer an all expenses paid photography session should the match-ups make the ultimate commitment. Other formats have been shamelessly copied from Taiwan and Hong Kong television, while others circumnavigate different trade routes only to be formatted and road-tested in the Chinese cultural milieu for packaging to Middle Kingdom viewers. Currently STAR TV in Taiwan is piloting a version of the Popstars format in which young hopefuls audition for the chance to form a pop group. There are also many programs whose structure and style can be attributed to foreign influences, such as news shows like Oriental Horizon (Dongfang shikong), recently made-over to reflect a more personable style, and sit-coms such as CCTV2's Chinese Restaurant (Zhongguo canguan).

The question of the difference between formats and programs genre can be

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<sup>23</sup> Wang, Bingwen, 'A report on the TV program The Citadel of Happiness' (Guanyu 'Kuaile da benying' de qingkuang huibao', Hunan Television Correspondence 1999.

<sup>24</sup> The only book length study of television formats is that by Albert Moran, Copycat TV: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998).



best illuminated by a few examples. It is sometimes suggested that China's first sit-com was I Love My Family (Wo ai wo jia), directed by Ying Da, also the producer of Chinese Restaurant, and the abovementioned Dave Letterman clone. While the mantle of the 'first Chinese sit-com' resides with the 1991 series Stories From an Editorial Office, (Bianji bu de gushi) directed by Zhao Baogang and Jin Yan, and co-written by a team including Wang Shuo, Li Xiaoming and Feng Xiaogang,<sup>25</sup> the Ying Da variations are interesting in that they directly appropriate elements of successful programs from the U.S. Ying Da has attributed his knowledge in programming to his time in the U.S. where he observed the popularity of the sit-com format. He is reported as saying, 'If we want to learn we have to start at the beginning – and that is American TV'.<sup>26</sup> However, this emulation of the Hollywood model is not a format in the strictest sense. It is more accurate to see this as creative appropriation and localization of the sit-com genre.

On the other hand, a format entails a more direct transplantation of production and narrative elements within a foreign media landscape. This is where the 'pie and the crust' metaphor has heuristic potential. It's a deliberate process of working with tried and trusted formulas and applying local 'fillings'. A typical format 'deal' thus involves a process of regulated exchange between two television systems. For instance, Endemol, the Dutch parent company responsible for the now all too familiar Big Brother reality television format, have entered into a licensing agreement with Shanghai Television and Sino Universal Media to co-produce a weekly interactive fashion/lifestyle program for STV Channel 8. The development and production of this program has been funded by the trans-national advertising giant Procter and Gamble, which markets more than 15 brands in China including Rejoice, Head and Shoulders, VS Sassoon, Pantene, Ascend, Oil of Ulay and skincare products.<sup>27</sup>

Another current licensing example is Joy Luck Street, a television series co-production based on the long-running English melodrama Coronation Street. In this case Granada Media, the English copyright owner, provided production capital through a joint venture with the Hongkong-based Yahuan Audio and Video Production Co. Ltd. and the Beijing Broadcasting Institute. According to one cast member, Granada have invested one million RMB a year for three years, hoping that the series, screened on 90 cable channels in a special syndicated time slot called '6.30 Theatre' will capture the hearts and minds of Chinese housewives<sup>28</sup>. The strategy here is to develop a loyal following much in the same way as Coronation Street has exploited the structures of feeling of working-class life in England.

In order to achieve their objective of capturing this vital market segment, four members of the directorial team visited Granada headquarters in the U.K. in 1999 and received extensive instruction about the Coronation Street format. Attempts to replicate the English model initially failed to resonate with audiences. Reasons for the lukewarm response were put down to Granada's reliance on a Hong Kong director, Yuan Yingmin, and ongoing problems with getting the script right. Yuan, who reportedly didn't 'understand' Mainland Chinese sensibilities, was replaced after the

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<sup>25</sup> Keane, 'The market and the state: television drama in China'.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Terry McCarthy and Jaime A. Floracru, 'Uncanned laughter' Time, Nov. 15, 1999. See <http://cmn.com/ASIANOW/time/magazine/99/1115/tv.china.html>. Accessed 12.6.2001.

<sup>27</sup> 'Endermol entertainment heads for China' Endamol Press Release 16.11.2000. See <http://web.endemol.com/> Accessed 12.6.2001.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Han Xiaolei, 5 November, 2000

first twenty-four episodes by a native director, Liu Shuliang, from the Film and Television School of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute.

A more successful format is Shanghai Television's Sesame Street (Zhima jie), under licence to Children's Television Workshop (CTW). Sesame Street is broadcast to 140 countries, and has undergone a number of modifications in different languages. In 1996 the Sesame Street idiom of 'fun education' was exported to the Middle Kingdom to undergo re-fashioning for the Chinese child, finally appearing on the small screen on Shanghai TV Channel 14 on February 14, 1998. The actual re-formatting of the CTW 'model' was a complicated procedure, requiring extensive workshopping both on a technical and political level. The Chinese contributed a team of eighteen child education specialists, headed by the renowned physicist and head of Fudan University, Professor Xie Xide. New characters such as Xiao Meizi (Little Berry) and Huhu Zhu (Puff Pig) were added to accommodate local idioms. Part of the technology transfer meant sending the Shanghai Television producers to New York to work with their American counterparts. This exchange was funded by the U.S. giant General Electric, which no doubt had its own commercial agenda. The outcome of the pre-production workshop and training was a reference volume outlining in detail the miniature of production. The program is now syndicated throughout China - as are Sesame Street products and the CTW web-site.

While the above examples constitute licensed format deals, the great majority of formats involve blatant copying. Not surprisingly, most of the activity here is in the game show genre. Game shows are the prototype of reality television formats. Contestants queue up for the chance to appear on national television, grab their fifteen minutes of celebrity, and hopefully take home some product supplied by the advertiser - at the very least supplies of beauty product. The Chinese dating show provides a case study of rampant format appropriation combined with selective advertising directed at youth demographics. In fact, it was the Taiwanese program Special Man and Woman (Feichang nannü) that started the rush to exploit the apprehension about marriage in a nation where relationships are the core of social capital.<sup>29</sup> First broadcast in China in July 1997, this program was distributed by Phoenix Television (Hong Kong) to Chinese cable stations as 'Yajia' Special Man and Woman. Yajia is a brand of cosmetics. Less than a year had passed when Hunan Satellite Television's popular dating show, 'Xizhilang' Romantic Meeting (Meigui zhi yue) turned up.<sup>30</sup> The sponsor 'Xizhilang' is a Japanese food company that produces among other things, jelly. What is distinctive in Romantic Meeting is a carefully orchestrated group format culminating in a match-off that often brings together several couples. Audience participation also features with family members, friends and workmates barracking and influencing the judging. This program is a prime example of format migration. The collectivist match-off format had originated in Japan in December 1975 on NET (now ANB) on a program called Propose Dai-Sakusen.<sup>31</sup> Despite the question of origin, the success of the group date format soon

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed study of dating programs see Michael Keane, 'Send in the clones: Television formats and content creation in the PRC', in Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane and Yin Hong, Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis, (London: Curzon, 2001). For a study of Joy Luck Street, see Keane, 'The Chinese pie and the imported crust'.

<sup>30</sup> Luo, Min, "Under Cupid's alter (Zou xia shentan de qiupide), Unpublished Masters thesis, Beijing Normal University Research Institute, 2000. The word *meigui* literally means 'rose'.

<sup>31</sup> The dating program concept was developed by Fuji Television a year earlier - a one-on-one scenario called Punch de Date. Incidentally dai-sakusen literally means 'big operation'. It comes from the

spawned a rash of clones including Shanghai Television's Saturday Meeting (Xiangyue xingqiliu), Hebei Television's The Square of Kindred Spirits (Xinxin guangchang), Beijing Television's Tonight We Become Acquainted (Jinwan women xiangshi), Beijing Cable TV's Everlasting Romance (Langman jiujiu), Shandong TV's Golden Meeting (Jinri you yue), Shanxi TV's Good Man, Good Woman (Haonan haonü), Nanjing TV's Who Does Your Heart Beat For? (Wei shei xindong?), Nanjing Cable TV's Conjugal Bliss (Huahao yueyuan), Hainan TV's Talking marriage (Nannü danghun), and Chongqing Satellite Television's Heavenly Fate (Yuanfen tiankong).<sup>32</sup>

As well being ubiquitous on Chinese television networks, these dating/matchmaker shows range from tragically amateurish and under-produced to slick productions featuring special guests, music, and segments filmed outside the studio. Contestants likewise are not confined to good-looking twenty-somethings. Older contestants whose values are more conservative provide balance and often a more serious demeanour. In terms of comparisons, Hunan Satellite Television's version of television dating adopted many of the formal characteristics of the Taiwanese original while differing in some aesthetic factors. According to one critique of the two shows, Romantic Meeting is more down-market and frivolous than Special Man and Woman with the mainland contestants engaging in more banter and blatant self-promotion than the Taiwanese counterparts. This he attributes to the fact that Taiwanese people subscribe to a more ethical code of self-presentation based upon Confucian principles.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

The question of whether format cloning is progressive or regressive turns on the understanding of original authorship. This has largely been an irrelevant concept in the Chinese media landscape. In China, the idea of copyright is not well understood. The widespread non-compliance to copyright law can to some extent be attributed to historical events and cultural differences. Confucianism emphasised learning by copying. Moreover, the idea of egalitarianism and communal property has been the dominant ethic for most of the period of the Communist state. Implementation of copyright and other forms of intellectual property rights goes against one of the most fundamental beliefs in a Communist state.

However, copyright is a means of regulating supply according to value: that is, if a program has value, it is in the interest of the producer to restrict its broadcast so that it obtains a higher value. The obverse is that if the producer (copyright owner) is unable to control the distribution of copies, the price of the work will inevitably collapse. Without the kind of pricing mechanisms that constitute a supply demand economy, that is, a competitive market, it's hard to see the idea of ownership and moral rights taking hold.

Unfortunately, the issue of copyright is largely irrelevant when it comes to format protection. Formats are not subject to copyright, as they are not regarded as

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Japanese title of Mission Impossible, which was very popular at that time. The Japanese title of Mission Impossible was Spy Dai-Sakusen.

<sup>32</sup> Yang, Feeling the pulse of the contestant, p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Ye, Zhe, 'Cong 'jiaoyou' kan wenhua (Looking at culture from a relationships perspective)' Southern Television Academic Journal (Nanfang dianshi xuekan) (February 2000), pp. 4-5.

'creative ideas'. This fact makes exploitation of formats even more tempting within the Chinese television industry. The only real antidote to format replication is if audiences vote with the remote and resist the increasing tendency to clone programs. Alternatively it would be helpful if critics were more aware of the excessive pilfering of other producers' R&D.

While I've painted a pessimistic scenario for the development of creative content in China it is worth emphasizing that the isomorphic/ miniaturized nature of the Chinese television industry is gradually changing. The rationalisation and network alliance momentum within the Chinese television market and the impending accession to the WTO are both reasons why innovation will become an issue in China in the years to come. In fact, copyright is an issue for the larger provincial and city stations that have an interest in broadcasting high-rating material. The emergence of independent production houses in the past few years has meant that producers offer their product to the highest bidder, and negotiate copyright, whether this is a percentage of royalties, or the right to sell a designated amount of advertising space. For prospective new entrants into the Chinese market, however, the current epidemic of format duplication signals the anarchy of the Chinese television market. It is not enough to identify the kind of content that works, the task is making sure you brand your content and distribute it before it is cloned.

Of course, it's easy to make criticisms of a media system in which principles of economic value and regulated scarcity are vaguely understood. Entertainment program formats have now spread virus-like throughout the Chinese television industry. As I have mentioned, there are many reasons for this: these programs are relatively cheap to produce, they have demonstrated audience success, and they can incorporate pedagogic characteristics where necessary to appease cultural police. Nevertheless, a critical conservative backlash has proclaimed these programs to be no more than exploitative mass cultural artefacts, eroding the traditional values of Chinese civilisation. In the meantime television executives are on the lookout for the next killer format. This may well be the new Chinese television show Shangri-la, which began broadcasting in July 2001.<sup>34</sup> Unashamedly borrowed from successful overseas 'survivor' formats, this wilderness excursion is produced by the Beijing Weihai Culture and Media Company. It incorporates a 30-day trek across the fringes of the Himalayas by three teams of six people with ten day's supply of matches and food. Shangri-la is currently being broadcast by 110 television stations. In addition to the broadcast, the participants' progress is covered live on the Internet and in national newspapers. Recalling the historical tradition of the Long March and the liberation of Tibet, Shangri-la might just be the new dawn of television viewing for Chinese audiences.

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<sup>34</sup> Clara Li, 'Select few to test mettle on 30-day TV trek', South China Morning Post, Tuesday June 19, 2001. See <http://china.scmp.com/today/ZZZNKAWIWNC.html> Accessed 21 June, 2001.

