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TELEVISION DRAMA IN CHINA: REMAKING THE MARKET

Abstract

This paper discusses the evolution of television serial drama in China. It argues that Chinese television drama production has progressed through three periods: industrial (1958 – 1989), market (1990 – 2002), and most recently interpersonal (2003 onwards). These three stages of development are in turn associated with standardised production according to state directed formulas, outbreaks of producer autonomy, and celebration of modern lifestyles and consumer culture. The paper provides an overview of the development of drama production during these three periods, and notes a shift from ‘socialist reality’ towards contemporary popular reality.

Introduction

Chinese media is at the dawn of a new era. Digital channels, multi-platform programming, new formats, niche channels, and SMS interactivity are challenging the former model of mass broadcasting and information control. Despite an increase in new television formats and genres over the past few years, drama retains pre-eminence in Chinese viewing schedules. In 2002 four hundred and eighty-nine serials delivered more than nine thousand hours of viewing. Research estimates that the ‘Chinese viewer’ watches an average of fifty-two minutes of television drama per day - a diet constituting thirty per cent of overall television consumption (China Television Drama Report, 2002-2003). The status of television drama is reflected in advertising: in 2002 ninety per cent of all revenue from television advertising came from television drama (China Television Drama Report, 2002-2003).

Such statistics bear out the socialising influence of television drama. More importantly, they show the synergy that exists between drama production and the viability of China’s large but fragmented television industry. It is incongruous therefore that the television drama industry attracts scant international scrutiny, in contrast with extensive academic focus on China’s struggling film industry. Fortunately, this is not the case within Chinese media and journalism research centres, where television drama is taken very seriously. In one of the few studies to be translated into English the Chinese media scholar Yin Hong (2002) identifies three stages of development, which he calls the *experimental* period (1958 - 1978), the *transitional* period (1978 - 1987), and the *commercial* period (1987 to the present day). Yin’s focus on the development of a commercialized market

over these periods highlights the refinement of genres as television dramas respond to demands for more engaging content, and as viewers exercise the discretionary authority of the remote control.

This paper modifies this evolutionary framework. The experimental and the transitional periods (1958 - 1987) are subsumed within an *industrial* era of production. The discussion of this period – and the ensuing *market* (commercial) era – identifies several important productions. By the end of the 1990s the market for television drama had matured and new genres emerged to first mimic, and then modify international influences. These dramas illustrate an *interpersonal* model of production. Such ‘pink dramas’ (*fenhong dianshiju*) signify cosmopolitanism and social mobility on the part of consumers and adoption of niche production strategies by television stations.

In short, the first period connotes mass production and social engineering; the second, increasing autonomy for producers and more choice for viewers; while the third demonstrates greater awareness of differentiated market segments – notably female consumption of drama.¹

The Chinese media environment

From the moment that the first television drama was broadcast in 1958 until the late 1990s, the Chinese production environment has favoured an over-supply of cheap formulaic productions delivered by an abundance of television stations, each with their television drama production unit. In contrast to privately owned and operated media systems in mixed economies, China’s state-owned broadcasters are not consolidated into large competitive networks. Rather, television broadcasters are organised on four administrative levels headed by the national broadcasters China Central Television (CCTV) and China Educational Television (CETV) in Beijing. CCTV broadcasts thirteen channels while CETV operates two channels that are a mandatory feed for all cable operators. The second level is made up of provincial broadcasters, which broadcast their main entertainment channels by satellite. The third level is made up of city stations, often in competition with provincial stations and CCTV for audience share. The final administrative level comprises hundreds of county stations, many of which are actually relay stations (see Redl and Simons, 2002). Since 2000 many of China’s smaller media enterprises have been integrated into larger conglomerates in an attempt to induce greater competition and reduce duplication (Keane, 2004; Bai, 2004).

The story of China’s television industry expansion is one of rapid growth during the 1980s. During the period from 1984 to 1990 the number of terrestrial stations increased from ninety-three to five hundred and nine (Huang, 1994). By 1995 there were more than two thousand seven hundred television channels, including educational channels and cable stations. More than ninety-five per cent of homes in large urban centres now have at least one television (Tu, 1997).

The traditional role of narrative

The Chinese television drama is a serial format structurally analogous to the Brazilian telenovela. Licenses for TV drama production are allocated when scripts are presented to the content regulator, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). Short-form (less than fifteen episodes) is the dominant model; in some instances, particularly historical epics, long-form licenses are granted for up to sixty episodes (Yin 2002).² Ratings consistently confirm that viewers have allegiance to the episodic tradition; that is, where there is social context, character development, and narrative closure. Serialized dramas resonate with Chinese pedagogy, propaganda practices, and literary tradition. The penchant to view serialized narrative on television – and now on DVD – echoes the widespread popularity of stories such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*honglou meng*), *The Outlaws of the Marsh* (*shuihu zhuan*), and *Journey to the West* (*xiyouji*). These well-loved Chinese classics from the dynastic period (pre-1911) were revived and made into television drama by the mid-1980s (Keane, 2002; Yin, 2002).

Three broad groupings organise the content of Chinese television drama: historical/political, social (or reform) issues, and contemporary popular culture. Within this tripartite division a number of genres contend for audiences. Historical subject-matter includes kungfu (*wuda pian*), reworked legends (*chuanqi*), bio-pics of great leaders, statesmen, and patriots, and tales of power and passion from the dynastical past – usually called Royal Court ‘costume’ dramas (*guzhuang*). Lives of great generals are the staple of historical genres – as are literary classics, which form part of collective memory. In recent years a sub-genre known as historical parodies (*xishuo lishi*) has grabbed a share of the market and allowed scriptwriters to reinvent and play with history, often in ways that satirize contemporary politics. *Xishuo lishi* dramas such as *Xishuo Qianlong* and *Princess Huangzhu* (*Huangzhu gege*) have provided comic relief. By incorporating sub-textual allusions and parody, writers comment not only on the past but also the present. In this sense, these serials are an antidote to the constant celebrations of the achievements of Mao Zedong and his fellow revolutionary travellers (Yin, 2002).

The second main category, reform dramas, is collectively associated with the term ‘mainstream melody’ (*zhuxuanlü*). This expression came into usage in 1987 and displaced the term socialist realism in describing works that reflected normative behaviour and values.³ During the early 1980s mainstream melody dramas were didactic narratives as the blueprint for reform and opening was conflated with the realities of a progressively materialistic society. Later in the same decade the focus turned to problems of unequal income distribution, corruption, inflation and social unrest. By the mid 1990s, the mainstream melody formula had reverted from revelations of social injustice towards the more secular concerns of living in an increasingly competitive and less egalitarian society.

The third category, contemporary popular culture, moves closest to the global idea of the soap opera in embracing modern life, romantic themes, and city life. Influenced by popular cultural forms from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and recently South Korea, the contemporary popular drama provides ample scope for narratives about intricate relationships in contemporary society, including the ever-present theme of personal networks (*guanxi*). Contemporary popular themes embrace the Confucian stress on marriage and family networks, and

more recently family breakdowns and romantic liaisons.

Prior to the mid-1990s drama production units received an annual subsidy from the government. The Bureau of Radio, Film and Television (now the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) estimated that in 1995 it allocated 10,000 RMB (USD\$1200) for every episode of television drama. Considerably more funding was made available to China Central Television's own drama production unit. According to one report, the China Central Television Drama Unit received 3 million RMB to make 100 episodes of television drama in 1993 (Cai, 1993). Today television drama draws almost all of its production finance from advertising revenue.

The industrial era: the early years

The formative years of television drama illustrate an industrial model of production. This description combines Yin Hong's two early periods (the experimental and transitional periods). It accounts for television drama production from its commencement on the small screen in 1958 through to its rapid development stage, the mid-1980s. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s educating the Chinese public was the rationale for *all* television production and propagandists joined with teachers to enlist as 'engineers of the souls' (*linghun de gongchengshe*). The production of television drama was fully subsidised, subject to quotas, and integrated within nation-building campaigns.

During the Maoist era – and even during the 1980s – writers, playwrights, and scriptwriters were responsible for providing guidance laced with political theory. The practice of making narrative fiction followed a prescribed course. A television drama unit was institutionally linked to a television station – although this alliance did not imply that all scriptwriters were interested in making content that gratified audiences. Obviously for many Chinese television drama producers, living and working in such an industrialised cultural work unit required both a sense of altruism and acceptance of the national project. While Yin Hong argues the pre-1978 period was an 'experimental' one, it was only experimental in the sense that television was a new medium and most productions were 'televised stage dramas'. In short, television drama was a kind of propaganda product designed to educate people through the dissemination of positive role models.

In these early years television drama production did not require specialist expertise. This situation changed following the establishment of China's first television drama production unit in 1982. Nevertheless, standardization continued to be the norm during the 1980s as television stations – mandated to produce a quota of dramas per year – competed to produce stories that appeased their patrons, the Chinese Communist Party. During this decade the media faithfully served as 'the tongue and throat' of the Party. For Yin Hong this was a 'transitional period', one of rapid development. In 1978 a total of thirty-two television stations produced a meagre eight TV dramas. By 1987 there were three hundred and sixty-six stations producing one thousand five hundred dramas (Yin, 2002; c.f. Huang, 1994).

The market era: outbreaks of autonomy

The market era provided some relief from overt propaganda. The years following the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 saw a breakaway away from socialist orthodoxy –and from direct regulation of content and quotas⁴. Although pedagogy remained the core function of television, drama took the lead in establishing a connection with the aspirations of audiences. In line with this democratisation drama production units increasingly sought out their own financial resources.

In the *market era* the standardised supply-driven model of production became untenable as viewers became more demanding; innovative forms emerged and investors entered in the marketplace. Producers steered a middle course between the commercial imperative of audience expectation and the public duty of characterising good socialists, even to the extent of producing both popular and standard propaganda forms. In other words, producers used their resources selectively, creating popular drama for mass consumption and manufacturing pedagogic texts to appease Communist Party officials (c.f. Zhong 2004).

The dramas of the early 1990s championed an emergent form of literary expression that was soon labelled ‘urban culture’ (*shimin wenhua*). This period saw the influence of international soap opera formats and the evolution of an investment market. Typified by the work of iconoclast writers such as Wang Shuo and Su Tong, *shimin wenhua* distilled the vernacular of modern street life into novels, short stories, movies and television dramas, challenging the authority of standard Chinese socialist realist texts that were preoccupied with disseminating a stream of heroic and stoic characters (see Barmé, 1992; Wang, 1996). Parodies of role models further undermined the emphasis on pedagogy as the sole criterion of value (Sun, 1996).

Aside from the Beijing Television Arts Centre’s 1990 serial *Expectations (kewang)*, sometimes cited as the first soap opera⁵, the most innovative production of the time was *Stories from an Editorial Office (bianjibu de gushi)*. Described as China’s first comedy situation-comedy, *Stories from an Editorial Office* was produced in 1991 by the Beijing Television Arts Centre, and directed by Zhao Baogang and Jin Yan (Rao, 1994; Huot 2000; Keane 2002). *Stories* not only used product placement as a means to offset production costs, but scripted a black comedy about a magazine editorial team coming to terms with the commercial market. The ‘stories’ satirised tabloid journalism and the sudden pursuit of advertising through various forms of ‘contra deals’. The most frequently used means of acquiring production revenue in television drama production was, and still is, the barter of advertising space. This practice entails the production company receiving program time from the broadcaster to ‘fill’ with advertising. A common practice in under-capitalised media economies, this financing model reduces the emphasis on trading in licensing rights (i.e. copyrights). A producer will often ‘cut a deal’ with the broadcaster, whereby the latter will make available anywhere between thirty seconds to three minutes of advertising time that the drama production company can use to solicit commercial sponsorship. Such promises of support from ‘society’ (*shehui*), as well as investment on the basis of product placement, often

constitute production capital. In many instances the television production company finishes up acting as a *de-facto* advertising agency, selling time and even producing the commercial that is broadcast during the viewing schedule.

In 1992 the Beijing Audiovisual Cultural Publishing Centre created a precedent in the marketing of drama by selling the exclusive rights to *I Love You Absolutely* (*ai ni mei shangliang*) to China Central Television (CCTV) for 3.5 million RMB (USD\$424,000) (Zhang 1993: 10). Unfortunately, due to the primetime competition from the serial *Walls of the Capital* (*huangcheng gen*), broadcast on the rival network Beijing Television Station, CCTV's investment fell short of its target (He 1995). CCTV was scarred from this deal and reverted to trading broadcast rights for advertising time.

Nevertheless, alternative financing developments signalled a step forward for the commercialisation of television drama production in China. New forms of investment in popular drama were also a stimulus for innovation, although too much innovation often led to dramas failing to secure sales. In a few instances, risk-taking led to success. Following its losses with *I Love You Absolutely* the national broadcaster CCTV looked to popular culture for production opportunities. The Central Television Drama Production Unit was a partner with the Beijing Television Arts Centre (BTAC) in the 1993 serial *Beijingers in New York* (*Beijing ren zai Niuyue*), a story about the contrasts between Chinese and American society, starring the respected film actor Jiang Wen as the main protagonist (Barmé, 1999; Keane, 2001; Can, 1994).

Thanks to the influence of the CCTV partner, the production team, which included the film director Feng Xiaogang, managed to secure the first ever television production loan from the Bank of China. A deal was then brokered with BTAC whereby its production costs could be offset by reserving five minutes of advertising space, and which the BTAC producers could trade on the market (He, 1995). According to reports, the BTAC profited from this arrangement while CCTV recorded a loss (Zhang, 1993: 4). The show was a big hit in north China, particularly in Beijing, and also drew interested in diasporic communities, where viewers were eager to validate their experiences (Keane, 2001; Liu, 1999).

The interpersonal world

Complicating the economics of production during the 1990s was a requirement that production units be associated with television stations. The television station purchased its production unit's dramas and the sale price was negotiated between the station and the production unit depending on the degree of cooperation and sharing of facilities. If the exclusive rights had been sold – for instance to the associated station – the drama could be negotiated as part of a barter package between networks.

However, the high period of creative energy typified by the iconoclastic urban dramas of the early 1990s was

short-lived. In the aftermath of the success there was an almost inevitable spate of imitations, followed by critical and official denunciation of the coarseness of television culture. For instance, in *Beijingers in New York*, the protagonist, a Chinese intellectual in America, loses his wife to an American business competitor and then takes up with a Taiwanese de-facto. In 1993 this licentiousness was adjudged to be foreign – a direct result of living in America. Nevertheless, the success of the serial had created concerns about public morality. The government moved to rein in artistic freedoms.

An innovation hiatus ensued and contemporary drama took the safe option of avoiding anything that might be construed as morally decadent. Producers who wanted to explore controversial subject matter took the risk that their work would not be purchased by mainstream channels.⁶ As a result the dominant form of television drama during the remainder of the decade was historical recreations. According to Yin Hong every significant event since the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s was turned into a television drama. The inundation of political re-enactments did, however, produce the historical parody (*xishuo lishi*). Nonetheless, the historical drama, whether bio-pic or parody, had limited appeal to younger audiences (see Zhong 2003).⁷ These dramas failed to connect with a post-1978 one-child demographic weaned on popular culture from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the U.S.

During the past few years there has been a trend towards dramas that target female viewers. The high-ranking HBO serial, *Sex and the City*, about the intermittent and casual sexual relationships of a group of four women in New York, is arguably about as far removed from the kind of programming desired by content regulators in the People's Republic of China. While *Sex and the City* is not broadcast, it is widely available on pirated DVDs. Filling the absence of *Sex and the City* on Chinese television schedules are locally produced dramas such as *Pink Ladies* (*fenhong nülang*) and *Feels Like I'm Falling in Love* (*haoxiang haoxiang tan lianai*). Adapted from the cartoon serial *Hot Ladies* (*Se nülang*) by Taiwanese artist Zhu Deyong – a self-proclaimed 'master of love' - *Pink Ladies* was first screened on Shanghai cable television in May 2003 (Jones 2004). Despite the acknowledged provenance with the comic version, the similarities with *Sex and the City* are more than passing. There are four unmarried women. They represent what Zhu refers to as his four basis caricatures: pretty woman (Social Lover), feminist (Fake Girl), traditional (Marriage Crazy), and happy-go-lucky (Simple girl) (Zheng 2003). The first 40 episodes of *Pink Ladies* were screened on Shanghai's TV drama channel with the narrative taking place in Shanghai.

Within a few months of the breakout of *Pink Ladies* another variant was in the pipeline, this time with a Beijing flavour. *Feels Like I'm Falling in Love* – like *Sex and the City* and *Pink Ladies* – focused on topics like love at the first sight, marriage, and life as a single woman. Broadcast in China in October 2004, and featuring the well-known pop singer Na Ying and actress Jiang Wenli, this 40-episode TV serial concerns the romantic adventures of four Beijing women. Similar to the plot of the American version of *Sex and the City*, the four heroines are all in their 30s, single, independent and earning high salaries. In *Feels Like I'm Falling in Love*, the four women, Tan Ailin, Li Minglang, Mao Na and Tao Chun are very close friends. All are over 30, single,

independent and earning high salaries as bookshop proprietor, television serial producer, designer, and computer engineer respectively. Although exercising power within their public personas, they lack confidence in romantic relationships.

Na Ying, a pop star in real life, has for some time been a target of gossip columns by virtue of her very public relationship with partner Gao Feng, a prominent Chinese footballer. For most Chinese, this added spice to the already feisty character of Li Minglang. Na plays a woman who developed a special hatred to men after two failed relationships. She eventually encounters a cab driver younger than she is and falls in love again.⁸ A media professional, Li Minglang is a strong independent type who doesn't cook or look after her men according to traditional dictates. Mao Na, the fashion designer, meets her share of high rollers and openly seeks out their flattery. Secretly, however, she desires commitment, which is not given. Tao Chun is the traditional romantic who wants marriage with all its trappings. Towards the end of the story she achieves this goal, but finds that expectations of marital bliss are unfulfilled.

So-called 'pink dramas' reveal the fascination with romance and divorce in China.

Although far removed from the provocative style of *Desperate Housewives* (USA) and the more literary chic of *Sex and the City*, these and other television dramas such as *Chinese-style Divorce* (*Zhongguoshi lihun*) [also starring Jiang Wenli] and *Romantic Things* (*Langman de shi*) indicate that popular tastes have again broken through the restrictions of conservative state censors.⁹ Until the pink dramas emerged, the most provocative account of broken relationships and extra-martial sex had been *Beijingers in New York*. By 2003, a decade later, infidelity was back, with style.

Emerging trends

The expectations of Chinese audiences towards television entertainment have evolved along with the broadening of viewing choices, changes in lifestyle, and reception of foreign forms of culture. As noted in the discussion of the three periods, by the early 1990s audiences were asserting their tastes. The outbreak of popular consumption captured the mood of the times, the ethic of 'to get rich is glorious' and the formalisation of China's socialist market economy in 1992.¹⁰ However, democratization of taste was conditional on the diversification of programming, and this occurred unevenly as the market moved reluctantly at times towards a market model. As the examples from the early 1990s illustrate, liberalisation is sometimes subject to knee-jerk reactions of state censors. Many dramas never made it the small screen. These problems persist, although the recent outbreak of pink dramas and literature associated with broken relationships signals greater receptivity from viewers to issues of sexuality and personal freedom. During the 1980s and 1990s state censors had ruled these themes to be too 'foreign' and too 'unhealthy'.

During the next few years market maturity will necessitate a rethink of strategies. New media conglomerates are attempting to develop economies of scale and link in with independents. The role of independent production

is expanding as producers attempt to break out of the low value domestic barter market and move into the licensing and sales of programs in Asian markets. Export competitiveness builds on strengths in domestic production, and is valued – not solely for economic dividends – but because international success contributes to a sense of national identity. Such acquired confidence in turn offsets the impact of sophisticated imports, which according to media imperialism destabilises local industries and erodes cultural identity.

Until a few years ago television fairs in Sichuan, Shanghai and Beijing were the primary means for trading television dramas. Most dramas were exchanged between broadcasters, not for cash but for other dramas. The emergence of independents, however, is bringing forward new business models, including the production of promotional footage that can be made available to prospective buyers or distributed on websites such as the Beijing Television Entertainment Exchange Network (*Beijing dianshi yule jiemu jiaoyi wang*). Another positive move has been the Asian launch in February 2005 of the China International TV Corp. (CITVC) – a subsidiary of China Central Television (CCTV). Branded as The Great Wall satellite platform, this initiative delivers a suite of mandarin language channels to Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, as well as to U.S cable networks. The platform brings together seven of China's leading provincial television stations along with Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television, Asia Television (ATV) and the US Huaxia Television station under the broad leadership of CCTV (Xinhua 2005).

Larger networks such as CCTV and Shanghai TV are increasing the value of their cable and pay-TV channels, not only by buying more diverse offerings, but by investing in co-productions, made for television movies, and new dramas. In 2004 CCTV established a new initiative for the production of television drama: four producers, Yu Shengli, Lian Zhenhua, Zhang Lujie, and Wu Zhaolong were assigned a 'studio' (*gongzuoshi*) under the umbrella of the Television Cultural Development Company (Ning 2004). This enterprise is designed to incubate and produce new and interesting quality television drama, with an emphasis on independence from existing marketplace practices such as bartering content for advertising space, the constraints of trading exclusive rights to CCTV, or having to include product placements for a range of sponsors.

There is no doubt the development of competition and greater export quality is an important theme within segments of the industry. The results, however, will depend as much on the reshaping on industry practices as on the evolving tastes of viewers. Pay-TV platforms that offer a buffet of specialised niche channels – a feature of contemporary multi-channel environments – represent a new business model for large provincial and city stations within China. This emerging 'post-broadcasting' landscape is having an impact upon the producer-viewer relationship with the latter demanding more specialised fare. Nevertheless, despite a cornucopia of programming options and formats emerging from the reshaping of the market in China, television drama production is likely to remain the wellspring of economic viability.

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Notes

¹ The discussion does not claim to be a comprehensive account of the evolution of the television drama market. The topic is vast and can not be condensed into a short article.

² The longest 'epic' drama in China was China Central Television's 84 episode production of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (sanguo yanyi)* in 1997.

³ This was first formulated at the 1987 National Conference for Cinematic Production, and promptly taken up by propaganda and cultural departments, the literary establishment and television artists (Zhang Jiabing, 1994: 2).

⁴ The demonstrations against official corruption and inflation culminated in the protests in Tiananmen Square in May-June 1989. This is sometimes referred to as a democracy movement.

⁵ See Zha Jianying (1995) for this discussion. The title has been variously translated as *Aspirations*, *Yearnings*, *Expectations*, and *Longings*. Wang Shuo was a principle writer in this serial about the contrasting fortunes of two families in the decade after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). For other related discussion see Wang (1999); Huot (2000); and Rofel (1994).

⁶ Feng Xiaogang's best dramas during the mid-1990s, including *Chicken Feathers* (*yidi jimao*) [1997] and *Dark Side of the Moon* (*yueliang beimian*) [1998] encountered the displeasure of censors. However, the first of these was broadcast in many smaller stations throughout China, while the latter was circulated on the movie black market.

⁷ In fact there were many successful historical dramas during this period. Examples include *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*sanguo yanyi* 1995); *Prime Minister Liu Luoguo* (*zaixiang Liu Luoguo* 1996); *Yongzheng Dynasty* (*yongzheng wangchao* 1998); *The Eloquent Ji Shaolan* (*tongzui tieya Ji Shaolan*).

⁸ See *Beijing Youth Daily* (*Beijing qingnian bao*) 20 August 2003. Also available at <http://ent.sina.com.cn> 2003.8.20.

⁹ See accounts of shattered relationships such as *Tonight I Have Something to Do and I'm not Coming Home* (*jinwan you shi bu huijia*) (Wang and Hu, 2004)

¹⁰ This is a much publicised slogan promoted by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.