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## **Cultural Technology Transfer: Redefining Content In The Chinese Television Industry**

Michael Keane

**Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre (CIRAC)**

**Queensland University of Technology,**

GPO Box 2434

Brisbane, Australia 4000.

[m.keane@qut.edu.au](mailto:m.keane@qut.edu.au)

### ABSTRACT

*This paper looks at programming strategies adopted by Chinese television producers, drawing on an ongoing large-scale study of Asia-Pacific television format trade currently being conducted by the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy. The paper argues that the concept of cultural technology transfer is a useful way of theorizing the positive benefits of program replication in China. On the other hand, the negative effect is that dynamics of program development and innovation are retarded by excessive reliance on the cloning of formats.*

My first visit to the Middle Kingdom was in 1989, the Year of the Snake, an auspicious time in the Chinese lunar calendar, although not so fortunate for thousands of protestors in Beijing's Tiananmen Square during the spring of late May and early June. The Western media were there in numbers and chose to see the protests through the lens of a popular democratic groundswell – the kind of civil society movement that was sweeping Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. In the cold light of hindsight, the burning issues were adjudged to be mass dissatisfaction with official corruption and rampant inflation. As Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin have noted, other grievances and demands also fueled the student-led dissent - from calls for greater press independence to better university conditions. The 'democracy movement' was an expedient device employed by the protestors to hook CNN and a global audience.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the Chinese media moved into propaganda overdrive mode. The print media provided editorial 'rectification' and television offered a mixed diet of news and eyewitness accounts. After the Chinese government's denunciations of the Tiananmen Square 'incident' had played out, Chinese television returned to business as usual. As a person used to the often seamless programming flows of Western networks, Chinese television at the time seemed to me to offer a chaotic schedule that juxtaposed news documentaries, travelogues of ancient Middle Kingdom wonders, randomly interrupted

by footage of the People's Liberation Army in action, scaling buildings and breaking bricks on their heads (just in case of another mass disturbance or invasion by the renegade state of Taiwan). This pattern was interspersed with variety shows that featured comic dialogues, Beijing opera, and traditional song.

Returning regularly over the past twelve years I have been amazed by the development of Chinese programming. The Chinese television industry is currently in a state of unprecedented flux. With the largest television audience in the world, serviced by the most number of television stations, the industry is having to adjust to the logic of supply and demand within an environment of market fragmentation. Television schedules are now more systematically attuned to audience demands. Prime time is dedicated to high-rating programs, and most significantly, there are plenty of channels, although the content across channels lacks real diversity. Like the Chinese economy in general the television industry is evidence of what the Chinese call 'duplicate construction' (*chongfu jianshe*), that is, everyone rushes in and produces the same kinds of products and targets the same markets within a particular locality.<sup>2</sup> The small scale of many stations means that you have a lot of under-capitalised television stations that swap programs on a barter basis.

The result has been an uncompetitive television industry with the emphasis more on maintaining supply than confronting demand: in other words, an atypical television market where filling schedules has been seen to be of greater importance than filling station coffers. Stations exchange programs based on the idea of reciprocity. If station X accept station Y's programs, then Y will usually take X's program. This same market logic applies to program packages exchanged between cable stations. Although this strategy does circulate content, it doesn't really generate any substantial capital that might be used for program development. However, the situation is changing. 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.

The manner in which programming is circulated leads me to suggest that Chinese television programming departments act as content facilitators rather than as innovators. It is not differentiated quality programming that is sought after, but any readily available content that can fill the schedules and satisfy the expectations of officials and audiences. In a transition from 'engineers of the soul' towards content facilitators, Chinese television producers have learnt how to balance interests. The history of program development in China over the past two decades can be understood in the context of a nation moving out of a planned cultural economy monitored by vigilant officials into a profit-oriented system in which content facilitators (including television station managers) increasingly look to foreign models to gather audiences.

The standard model to explain China's evolving media landscape is that of a transition from plan to market in which commercial aspirations are balanced by official culture. The central feature of the 'plan to market' model is that it sets up an opposition between the state as the engineer of culture and the market as the driver of efficiency. However, in focusing on this opposition the model neglects processes by which creative

ideas and practices are diffused across national systems. A phrase that has arisen in critical debate in China better captures the sense of compromise: television producers need to please the ‘three olds’ (*san lao*). This refers to *lao ganbu* (old cadres or officials), *lao baixing* (the audience/people), and *laoban* (the market/ investors)<sup>3</sup>. This triad of interests contribute to the gate-keeping process by which ideas find expression on the small screen. The vigilance of officials is mediated by the demands of bringing about a more competitive television industry. Official gate-keepers include Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department directors within television stations. That is not to say, however, that this prevents the airing of programs that might be problematic. In many cases these officials will promote entertainment programming from Hong Kong and Taiwan over didactic documentary to placate the business interests of the station and the demands of its perceived audience. In order to understand the nature of the compromise we need to briefly examine the background of television in China.

### **History and development**

Although television was first broadcast in China on 1 May 1958, it was not until the 1980s that the medium really came of age. Its arrival in the Middle Kingdom had coincided with stringent Communist Party control of the arts. During its initial years television development was hampered by a lack of technical infrastructure and the fact that ownership of television receivers was extremely limited. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76), a time when Maoist red guard propaganda was rampant and class deviation could be a capital offence, television broadcasts were limited to overt propaganda, mostly recreations of Madame Mao’s favorite revolutionary operas. It was only after the chaos of that turbulent decade that Chinese television programming began to evolve. This was fueled by the development of a domestic production industry that allowed ordinary families to aspire to own a television set.

During the period from 1984 to 1990 the number of terrestrial stations increased from 93 to 509.<sup>4</sup> By 1995, there were reportedly 2740 television channels including educational channels and cable stations. Television programs were being beamed off 96,530 ground relay stations to China's remote regions. China's rollout of cable exceeded 1,340,000 kilometers.<sup>5</sup>

Until recently the Chinese television industry fell under the regulatory control of the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (MRFT), under the supervision of the State Council, the principal organ of legislative government. Policy-making was invariably directed at maintaining a viable domestic industry, overseeing management, and monitoring content. In 1998 at the First Session of the Ninth People’s Congress, the MRFT was downgraded to the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and the responsibility for the overall coordination of the information sector was passed over to a new super ministry, the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), an amalgamation of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) and Electronics Industry (MEI). Whereas the MII is responsible for development strategies, particularly in relation to policies, laws and regulations impacting upon the ‘information economy’ the SARFT retains the capacity to license and censor content on broadcasting networks and to manage the country’s existing broadcast infrastructure.

In contrast to privately owned and operated media systems in mixed economies, China's broadcasters are not consolidated into competitive networks, but rather operate according to geographically determined logistics premised on the ideal of assuring information and propaganda reaches all segments of society. Television broadcasters are organized on four administrative levels headed by the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) in China's capital, Beijing. The second level finds thirty-seven provincial broadcasters, the third level has 218 city stations, while the final administrative level comprises county stations, many of which are actually relay stations.<sup>6</sup> However, the number is rapidly diminishing as the geographical determinism is undermined by new delivery platforms such as satellite and cable. Technological changes in delivery platforms have changed the focus from mass audiences to fragmented audiences with Shanghai Cable Television moving to implement near video-on-demand (NVOD) services and Guangdong Cable Television providing digital services through cable modem. As the paper is published new developments are being enacted which will impact upon the strategic business plans of China's broadcasting sector. Enforced rationalization has occurred under a new broadcasting law formulated by the Ministry of Information Industry (MII) and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT).<sup>7</sup>

The need to accommodate 'the three olds' (officials, audience, and market) gives Chinese television a schizophrenic appearance. Monolithic enterprises such as the national network CCTV, now operating nine channels, function as public broadcasters in theory but are commercially oriented in practice, although the CCTV diet of news, documentary, and 'mainstream melody' television drama is hardly adventurous programming. The term 'mainstream melody' refers to narratives that encapsulate changes in society since the Deng Xiaoping led reforms gave people the green light to pursue personal wealth. It effectively displaces socialist realism as the normative benchmark for narrative forms.<sup>8</sup> Both CCTV and Beijing Television (BTV) now use 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>9</sup> These stations maximize 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 maneuver to draw investment by the 'back door'.

In contrast to the conservatism of CCTV, there are quasi-commercial enterprises such as Hunan Satellite Television, a broadcaster operating within the organizational umbrella of the Hunan TV & Broadcast Intermediary Ltd. (TVBI) that offer a range of entertainment programming carefully targeted at particular demographics. Hunan Satellite Television's popular youth shows such as *The Citadel of Happiness* (*Kuaile da benying*) and *Romantic Meeting* (*Meigui zhiyue*) have established audience loyalty. *The Citadel of Happiness* is a teen show hosted by Li Xiang and He Ling. Modeled on Taiwanese youth entertainment television formats, it features interviews with pop groups and celebrities. *Romantic Meeting* is a dating show that is based on the cable success of the Taiwanese television show *Special Man and Woman* (*Feichang nannu*).<sup>10</sup> Both programs target China's generation x, the 'next' generation, the youth who have grown up

post-Cultural Revolution in one-child families.<sup>11</sup> In 2000 TVBI received approval to issue shares to individual and institutional investors. 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.<sup>12</sup>

### **Genres of programming**

The most ubiquitous form of programming in China is television drama. However, the supremacy of television drama in television schedules is being challenged by new program innovations, mostly copied from neighboring television landscapes in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. In the past programs have been generically classified into three groups: news (news broadcasts, current affairs), arts and entertainment (variety shows, dramas, game shows, and music), and education (talk show, children's shows, university programs). Demand for new content due to an increase in the number of cable providers in the past decade has in turn put pressure on stations to experiment with new genres and seek out new program formats. This has not been an easy transition as the Chinese television industry has not exactly been a creative milieu.

The shift from a restricted archive of officially sanctioned content towards a marketplace in which content flows within television industry trade routes requires a new theoretical model of cultural exchange. Yuri Lotman, writing about Russian literature, identified five 'stages' to characterize the process whereby foreign texts are received and host cultures subsequently restructured.<sup>13</sup> According to Lotman, the first stage is where the foreign texts hold an aura, and are valued as somehow true and beautiful.<sup>14</sup> By way of contrast, the texts (or programs) of the host culture are devalued as being inferior or coarse. Lotman's heuristic model can also be applied to China's opening to the global community. As Chinese people gradually tuned into an increasing amount of imported television programming during the mid-1980s, the 'foreign', with its superior production aesthetics soon assumed the mantle of the true and the beautiful. Unfortunately there are no ethnographic surveys from the mid-1980s to corroborate the popularity of foreign programs but anecdotal evidence and a few scholarly reports reveal a fetishization of foreign programs in particular by young educated Chinese. Foreign programs that were spoken of as new and aesthetically pleasing during the late 1970s and early 1980s included the US-produced *The Man from Atlantis*, and the BBC produced dramas *Anna Karenina*, *David Copperfield*, and *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>15</sup>

The second stage is where the 'imported' texts and the 'home' culture restructure each other. In this stage 'translations, imitations and adaptations multiply.'<sup>16</sup> We find ample evidence in television drama. Following the enthusiastic reception of foreign drama from Japan and Hong Kong, China Central Television (CCTV) produced the first domestic serial drama (*lianxu ju*). *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* (*Diying shiba nian*), appeared on Chinese television screens in February 1981 and ran nine episodes.<sup>17</sup> A story about a Chinese commando force, *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* was a blatant attempt to copy the Western action-thriller genre that had begun to appear on Chinese television screens. However, it received a mixed by domestic critics, even being labeled 'capitalist spiritual pollution', in part due to unfamiliarity with the genre, and in part due to its aping of the Western models. The lukewarm reception may also have been

due to its rather blatant propagandizing at a time when many people were still getting over the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. More successful genre adaptations followed in the 1990s, including the 1990 serial *Aspirations (Kewang)*, sometimes referred to China's first soap opera, and the acclaimed 1991 series *Stories From an Editorial Office (Bianji bu de gushi)*, dubbed China's first sit-com. The events portrayed in *Stories From an Editorial Office* revolve around circulation problems at the office of the magazine *Renjian zhinan (Guide for Living)*. Attracting new readers becomes the focus for the entrepreneurial members of the office. The golden road to financial success is adjudged to be changing the direction of the magazine to embrace a more tabloid format. The adventures of the staff in pulling off this transformation provide the humor. While the serial *Aspirations* paved the way for a number of successful melodramatic serials, it was a while before the episodic sit-com was revisited.<sup>18</sup>

The third stage is where the higher content of the imported text is re-inscribed in the local, reinvigorating the meaning of the imported texts by its association with the purer local version. This could be somewhat cynically entitled the 'with Chinese characteristics' syndrome.<sup>19</sup> It has become somewhat of a standard refrain that when a foreign text, philosophy, or policy is adopted by China, it is branded as being a case of "x" with "Chinese characteristics", the implication being that the work has been improved in the process of adaptation. For instance, in 1982 Shandong Television produced a 'kung-fu' serial (*Wu Song*) based on the adventures of a character from the popular classic *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shui hu chuan)*. The scriptwriters' desire to recreate the hero as an honorable person, in line with Communist dictates about how 'heroes' should behave had the effect not only of bastardizing the original classic but also alienating many viewers who rejected the blatant politicization of the narrative.<sup>20</sup> Similar processes of political purification occurs in the 1986 remake of the Qing Dynasty love story *Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong lou meng)* which became a lesson in the decadence of feudal nobility, and the sanctioned version of life of China's last emperor (*Modai huangdi*), an attempt to set the record straight after the international success of the 'foreign movie', also entitled *The Last Emperor*.

The fourth stage is where the imported texts are entirely dissolved in the receiving culture. Lotman notes: 'the culture itself changes to a state of activity and begins rapidly to produce new texts; these texts are based on cultural codes which in the distant past were stimulated by invasions from outside, but which now have been wholly transformed through the many asymmetrical transformations into a new and original structural model.'<sup>21</sup> The fifth stage is where the receiving culture becomes a sending culture. The foreign text being absorbed, cleansed, and Sinicised, the host culture then becomes an originator of the product. It is not hard to think of the myriad examples of texts that are 'owned' by the home culture but are in reality derivative, as the ensuing discussion of formats will reveal. The presentation style of news programs such as the national news bulletin and the current affairs program *Talking Point (Jiaodian fangtan)* on China Central Television owe as much to 'global' news formats as to Chinese journalistic traditions.

Before moving on to discuss formats, it is worth mentioning the thematic isomorphism that pervades China's television drama. In 1993 a famous television drama was produced called *Beijingers in New York (Beijing ren zai Niuyue)*. It created a sensation, depicting the lives of a Chinese couple resident in New York. The series played

off a fascination with overseas fever (*chuguo re*) and the exploits of expatriates, most of whom had gone to the West as students and achieved some measure of financial gain. Although *Beijingers* portrayed a ‘rags to riches’ story, it ended in riches turning to rags, the protagonist losing his money and his dignity. However, the ensuing ratings success for the producers spawned a sudden increase of dramas about Chinese people in strange environments, and foreigners (*waiguo ren*) in China.<sup>22</sup> For instance, *Shanghai Natives in Tokyo* (*Shanghai ren zai Dongjing*), *Russian Girls in Harbin* (*Eluosi guniang zai Haerbin*), *Chinese Girls in Western Business* (*Yanghangli de Zhongguo xiaojie*), and *The New World* (*Xin dalu*) to name but a few. In this genre issues of moral conflict and cultural identity provide the raw material for narratives of place and belonging. Inevitably the success of one product leads so a glut of imitators, as has been demonstrated by the production line of ‘Royal Court dramas’ in recent years.<sup>23</sup> These ‘costume dramas’ are stories of dynastic struggle from the pages of Chinese history. The over-abundance has even led the Ministry of Culture to move to persuade television production houses from saturating the market and threatening China’s export of these dramas to other countries.

### **Formats and cultural technology transfer**

Interactive television, Internet-related television programs, new media, new technologies and convergence all offer great scope for devisors. The new age that is dawning in television is a new age for the devisor

*John Gough, International format consultant*<sup>24</sup>

As attempts to recreate and replicate the success of ‘foreign’ genres has demonstrated, the viability of television industries in the People’s Republic of China is directly linked to a content deficit that has resulted in the cannibalization of ideas, or what is euphemistically known in the Chinese industry as ‘cloning’ (*kelong*). The appropriation of foreign formats is directly related to the relative adolescence of the Chinese television industry and producers’ attempts to come to terms with supply-demand economics. The extent of cloning of foreign television formats and genres is also related to the vast scale of the Chinese television landscape, a fact that makes effective administration difficult.

While Chinese producers have borrowed ideas from foreign television systems over the past two decades, the exploitation of television formats is a recent phenomenon. 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. 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 un-enterprising.

Knowing which formats work, however, does not necessarily translate into market success. In China program one person’s success often becomes another’s gravy train. Television concepts and ideas are swiftly copied, modified, and exploited by neighboring

stations desperate to put together successful programs to keep their station leaders happy. The format is therefore a recipe, a package, or more particularly combination of technologies that enables change in media systems. In this sense technology may be defined as ‘simply knowledge about techniques, to which some significant degree of reliability or dependability is attached by those possessing it.’<sup>25</sup> The term ‘cultural technology’ on the other hand is conventionally derived from the work of the Canadian communication scholar Marshall McLuhan to refer to advances in communication – a continuum from Sumerian ideographs through alphabets to printing, photography, television, Internet and so on. However, the term cultural technology has a more direct connotation to events in the PRC if it linked to the idea of knowledge and information, as in the first definition. If we assume that propaganda is the manipulation of information for political purposes (it was devised as such), its deployment is based upon a belief in its methodology, its reliability, and its dependability – even though this is often assumed. Likewise, advertising is often described as propaganda, even more so when political parties engage the services of advertising companies. The techniques used in political canvassing draw upon behavioral psychology, professional expertise that is said to have some degree of reliability; in this case in effecting a change in the mentality of voting populations. It is not surprising then that political propaganda in China is studying the techniques used in the advertising industries.

Having made this connection between power and persuasion, I want to suggest that all forms of the entertainment media are a cultural technology in that they aim to attract your attention, to keep your attention, and in the case of commercial television, to sell your attention to advertisers. In this sense, programming decisions are based upon codified knowledge, arts festivals are commissioned on marketing knowledge, and even the more avant-garde forms of art identify an audience. As the government cash cow gets thinner and thinner it means that commercialization becomes more specialized. Flagship companies employ marketing experts, television networks niche broadcast, new ways of producing, directing, editing, and distribution are sought after to remain competitive.

Cultural technology transfer is accordingly the transmission of such knowledge. Generally speaking the term technology transfer connotes transfer of materials, designs, scientific papers, databases etc. In the cultural sphere it means applying new methods, whether these come from overseas or are originated in China. The idea of cultural technology transfer presents an interesting shift from text-based explanations, and allows us to take into account the dynamics of flows whereby measurable economic benefit accrues to the appropriator often at the expense of the originator of content. At the same time ideas, policies and organizational practices are introduced into the receiving system. The idea of cultural technology transfer thus has two edges. In a material sense a cultural commodity is formed; in the other sense the success of commodity – its consumption, or in the case of a television program, its ratings – leads to further appropriation of the technology. An example of how the commodity form emerges is provided by the introduction of acrylic paints to the Papunya aboriginal community in Australia by a young white schoolteacher, Geoff Bardon in the early 1970s. This technology allowed the sacred art of the Western Desert people to be commercially produced and modified. In this way a cultural maintenance practice was subsumed into the supply-demand mechanisms of Western art markets.<sup>26</sup> The actual display and consumption of this artwork on a global scale served to change perceptions of aboriginal culture. The shift from the

community binding use value of culture to the commodity form is also characteristic of the evolving media market in China. The products of mass media, whether propaganda or general pedagogic content were prior to the 1980s not commodity forms. The success of foreign entertainment programs during the early 1980s, such as the Hong Kong martial arts series *Huo Yianjia* and the US series *The Man From Atlantis*, were a catalyst for understanding how innovations in mass culture could lead to economic glory for directors of television stations.

The licensing, co-production, and adaptation of television formats in China presents an exemplary illustration of how cultural exchange is mediated within distorted market systems. Television formats are seen as a means of replicating successful programming outcomes in different markets. The format is thus a ‘cultural technology’ that can be used to add value to the recipient industry. Whereas knowledge of audience taste and predisposition garnered by market research is used to originate programs, a package of associated technologies is traded (under license) or appropriated without permission. As van Manen has pointed out, format transfer (in the formal sense at least) can include the provision of computer software for program credits, animation sequences, designer blueprints for such things as program sets and studio filming, film footage for insertion in the new program version of the format, and scripts for individual episodes.<sup>27</sup> Other technologies may also constitute a part of the transfer package. These include ratings information derived from audience surveys, programming details, and polls associated with the broadcast of the earlier program version of the format. Within the Chinese industry these are collectively referred to as ‘the Bible’ (*tianshu*). Another technology that is frequently added to the value of the format itself is a consultancy service, wherein a production executive associated with the earlier program will act as adviser to a new production of the format.<sup>28</sup>

This idea of cultural technology entails looking at program flows from the lens of pragmatic internationalization rather than through the legacy of ‘effects’ models. The recipient broadcaster is in effect making a decision about the utility of the format package: the cost of replication is measured against the technical capacity to accommodate the format and provide local content. The cultural technology transfer model is therefore a way of bridging the gap between modernization theory that supposes that modern ‘Western’ technology (and ways of organization) contribute to the inevitable transition from tradition to modernity, and media imperialism, which has tended to see foreign programming only as a threat to social values. In effect, the equation is not so straightforward. Like technology transfer itself the cultural technology transfer of format licensing and appropriation depends on the environment in which it is transplanted. Sometimes it takes, sometimes it doesn’t.

Cultural technology transfer therefore provides an alternative to the theoretical territory mined over by cultural studies where the emphasis has been largely on the association between textual representations and power. This is not to say that the technology transfer model dismisses power relations. On the contrary, the point is that cultural traffic routinely encompasses both textual and non-textual forms of exchange: ideas about government as well as industrial processes and protocols, which by moving from one locale to another result in intellectual, social and institutional re-configurations. The cultural technology transfer model therefore provides a timely critique of cultural imperialism - the doppelganger of Marxist political economy - which contends that

values encoded in foreign texts will be to the detriment of the recipient culture. For cultural imperialism it is all a case of one-way traffic, of super-information highways financed by powerful interests. Alternatively, the notion that something tangible is transferred suggests that adaptation and appropriation can be materially empowering for the recipient cultural formation.

An example of technology transfer in relation to television formats is Shanghai Television's *Sesame Street* (*Zhima jie*) - under license to Children's Television Workshop (CTW). *Sesame Street* is broadcast to 140 countries, and has undergone a number of format adaptations 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 work-shopping 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.

According to one enthusiastic report the sinicisation of *Sesame Street* was in the same order of technology transfer as the Sangtana motor vehicle, which borrowed German technology, workmanship and standards and applied Chinese materials and labor.<sup>29</sup> The report further opines that Shanghai Television's reputation, and Chinese pedagogic practice in general, benefited from the collaboration. Chinese children's television had until the advent of *Sesame Street* been devised by adults.

We used adult program formats and applied these mechanically to children's content with the result that adults felt it was all infantile and children felt it was dreary. The reason for this is obvious: those who create children's shows are adults and they are used to using adult thought processes to observe and regulate the world of children.

The celebratory aspects of positive technology transfer and the liberation of children from adult visions of what childhood ought to be has ramifications for the relations between the institution of venerable teachers and that of mass media bean counters. What direction should children's television go from here? Will there be more Chinese copies of the *Sesame Street* pedagogy or an official backlash against the democratisation of children's education?

A further example of how the introduction of a television format can provide recipient industries with cultural technology transfers is the case of *Joy Luck Street* (*Xingfu jie*), a television series co-production based on the long-running English melodrama *Coronation Street*. In this case Granada Media, the English copyright owner of *Coronation Street*, provided production capital through a venture with the Hongkong based Yahuan Audio and Video production Co. Ltd. and the Beijing Broadcasting Institute. According to one

of the Chinese production team 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>30</sup> In order to make this production in China the Chinese team had to restructure many of their work practices to incorporate continuous script writing and shooting, working in rotating teams.

The Chinese *Joy Luck Street* experience has been far from a seamless transfer of the original *Coronation Street* format into the Chinese environment. A number of difficulties were encountered in 'transferring' the nuances of the English working-class milieu into the Beijing streetscape. The original Hong Kong director had to be replaced after 18 episodes and the narrative of dysfunctional families had to be reworked to accommodate mainland Chinese values. By the time the series had achieved 50 episodes the series had acquired a distinctive local feel. In Lotman's typology of cultural transfer it had become identified as a local product.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The nature of the Chinese television industry is gradually changing. Rationalization and network alliance momentum within the Chinese television market and the impending accession to the World Trade Organization are both reasons to suggest that a more regulated ethic of competition will emerge in the years to come. Program development is an issue in relation to the larger provincial and city stations that have an interest in broadcasting high-rating material. 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.

Television format appropriation thus presents a paradox in terms of theorizing power relations. A move from one locale to another suggests a conveyance of ideas – ideas that may be progressive or regressive, liberating or enslaving, depending on one's conception of the pedagogic value of popular culture. A virtuous cycle of sending and receiving formats becomes the means of the viability of a Chinese television industry bereft of imagination. Chinese television production units become the border-crossing station: the material site where cultural technology is transferred, as well as the symbolic site where meanings and ideas are traded.

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<sup>1</sup> Barmé G. and Jaivin, L. eds. *New Ghosts Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, New York, Random House. See introduction p. xvii. For an interesting discussion of the relationship of the Tiananmen Square protests to the Western media's desire to claim it as a democracy movement see Wark, M. (1994) *Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 98-127.

<sup>2</sup> Gore, L. (2000) 'A meltdown with Chinese characteristics', in Robison, R., Beeson, M., Jayasuriya, K., and Kim, H. eds *Politics and Markets in the Wake of the Asian Crisis*, London: Routledge, p.136.

<sup>3</sup> See Donald, S.H. and Keane, M. (2001) 'Media in China: new convergences and new approaches' in Donald, S. H., Keane, M., & Yin Hong eds. *Media in China: Content, Consumption and Crisis*, London: Curzon.

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- <sup>4</sup> Huang Yu (1994), 'Peaceful evolution: the case of television reform in post-Mao China', *Media, Culture & Society*, 16: 2, 217-241.
- <sup>5</sup> Tu Chuangbo (1997), 'Woguo guangbo dianshiwang de fazhan jiqi falu zhengce' (The development and legal policies of China's broadcasting network), *Dianshi Yanjiu (Television Research)*, 6, p. 4.
- <sup>6</sup> The difference between programming across the four levels can be attributed to capitalization and serving local interests. Provincial broadcaster lead channels are carried by satellite feed in order to service remote locations although their commercial markets are the affluent eastern coastal regions. The same applies to CCTV which operates nine channels which are transmitted nationwide but provides a fairly politically correct and unadventurous schedule. For a discussion of the political economy of programming see Zhao, Yuezhi (1998) *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- <sup>7</sup> The State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) has been attempting for some time to reduce the number of television stations by closing terrestrial and cable stations at the city district and country levels. Plans are also afoot to rein in and regulate the activities of many cable providers.
- <sup>8</sup> Keane, M. (1999) 'Television and civilization: the unity of opposites?', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2: 22
- <sup>9</sup> See Redl and Simons, 'Two channels, one system', in Donald, S. H., Keane, M., & Yin Hong eds. *Media in China: Content, Consumption and Crisis*, London: Curzon.
- <sup>10</sup> For a discussion of these programs see Keane, M. 'Send in the clones: television formats and content creation in the People's Republic of China' in Donald, S. H., Keane, M., & Yin Hong eds. *Media in China: Content, Consumption and Crisis*, London: Curzon.
- <sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion of this generation see Zhao, Bin (1997) 'Consumerism, Confucianism, Communism: Making Sense of China Today', *New Left Review*, 1 / 222 pp 43-59
- <sup>12</sup> Redl and Simons.
- <sup>13</sup> Lotman, Yuri M (1990). *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Trans. Ann Shukman. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; see also O'Regan, Tom (1999), "Cultural Exchange", in *A Companion to Film Theory*. Ed. T. Miller & R. Stam. Oxford: Blackwell.
- <sup>14</sup> Lotman p. 146.
- <sup>15</sup> Hong, Junhao (1998) *The Internationalization of Television in China: The Evolution of Ideology, Society, and Media Since the Reform*, Westport: Praeger, p. 69. See also Wang Yunman (1990), 'Gangtai he dalu tongshu lianxuji bijiao' (A comparison between Mainland dramas and those from Hong Kong and Taiwan), *Yishujia (Artists)*, no. 6, 1990, pp. 86-87.
- <sup>16</sup> Lotman p.146.
- <sup>17</sup> Zhong, Yibin & Huang, Wangnan eds.(1994). *Zhongguo dianshi yishu fazhan shi (The History of the Development of Chinese Television Arts)*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang publishing, p. 26. Also Keane, 'Television Drama in China: Engineering Souls for the Market' in Craig, T., and King, R., eds. *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*, Victoria: University of British Columbia Press; also Yin Hong 'Meaning, production and consumption: the history of television drama in China' in *Media in China: Content, Consumption and Crisis*.
- <sup>18</sup> A good example of a 'Western' style sit-com format is the 2000 series *Beijing Restaurant (Beijing canguan)* produced by Ying Da, who also produced the successful *I Love My Family (Wo ai wo jia)*.
- <sup>19</sup> See my discussion of this in Keane, M. (2001) 'The Chinese pie and the imported crust: a study of television diets in the PRC', *Hybridity*, (in press).
- <sup>20</sup> Zhong and Huang 1994
- <sup>21</sup> Lotman, p. 147.
- <sup>22</sup> For an extended discussion of the production and reception see Keane, M. (2001) 'By the way, FUCK YOU': Feng Xiaogang's disturbing television dramas', *Continuum*, 15:1, 57-66.
- <sup>23</sup> See Yin Hong.
- <sup>24</sup> <http://www.tvformats.com/devising/d01.htm>. Accessed 2.8.01
- <sup>25</sup> Paul, D. A. (1997) 'Rethinking technology transfers: incentives, institutions and knowledge-based industrial development in Charles Feinstein, Christopher Howe eds. *Chinese technology transfer in the 1990's: current experience, historical problems, and international perspectives*, Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar Press, p. 14
- <sup>26</sup> Frow, John (1997) *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*: Oxford: Clarendon. Frow, J. p. 136-7

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<sup>27</sup> Van Manen, J. (1994), *Televisie Formats: En-iden nar Nederlands Recht*, Amsterdam: Otto Cranwinckle Uitgever, p. 15-23.

<sup>28</sup> Moran, Albert (1998). *Copycat TV: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity*. Luton: University of Luton Press.

Moran, A. (1998), p. 14

<sup>29</sup> China Cue Online, <http://www.chinacue.com.cn/cue/topic/zmj.htm>, accessed 11 May 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with *Joy Luck Street* actor, Han Xiaolei on Nov 5, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> See Keane, 'The Chinese pie and the imported crust' for a full discussion of the making of *Joy Luck Street*.