Media commercialization, entertainment, and the party-state: The political economy of contemporary Chinese television entertainment culture

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Introduction
An entertainment storm has descended upon China and, in all likelihood, is here to stay. At the center of the storm is television. Watching Chinese television today, one could hardly imagine that just a little over ten years ago, it was so drab that a melodramatic soap opera – Kewang, or Yearnings – could virtually empty streets when it was on and could even cause a riot due to a power outage that interrupted its viewing (Rofel 1994). Today, so many glamorous distractions are brought into the living room by television every day that such phenomenal reception of a single show is unconceivable. Television drama series churned out a mountain of stories on a daily basis, whether they are set in an imperial palace where an emperor's crafty ministers or concubines or sons and daughters never rest from attempts to undermine their enemies, or in the wilderness where good and evil masters of martial skills are set to overpowering each other, or in a modern city plagued with conspiracies between depraved government officials and criminal cliques but of course eventually cleansed of them by the good forces. Competing against television dramas for prime time are Chinese versions of “Survivor,” “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” and the “Jerry Springer Show,” “Oprah,” the “Dating Game,” etc. With the heat of entertainment on, television stations give considerable screen time to entertainment reporting and promos of their own shows. As another kind of symptom, the boundary between entertainment and traditionally non-entertainment programs is blurred. Weather forecast, for example, is almost always presented by a visually appealing female. Although a high-profile weather forecast program on a provincial channel – “Star Weather” (xing qixiang) – was chastised because of the female presenter's erotic gestures and voices as well as suggestive elements like a shot of queen-sized bed, the so-called “beauty weather forecast” has decidedly taken root in China. News shows are no exception, which has already been observed by many scholars in North America with an interest in Chinese media. A dramatic storyline and a human interest angle are considered essential in news reporting. Even Newscast, a legacy from the 1970s that has been impervious to any kind of market-induced content change, was, in March 2003, ordered to limit reports on meetings within three minutes and to increase the amount of societal news. As a result, according to a count, societal news items more than doubled and stories like a leopard sneaking into a village and taking a nap after eating five sheep find their way into Newcast (Sun 2003). Last but not least, between these entertaining shows are the most highly developed entertainment – commercials. When James Lull wrote his book on Chinese television around 1990, the Chinese complained about nothing to watch on television but cheap soaps from Japan, the U.S., Brazil and Mexico; ten years later, they are simply bombarded with entertainment. In 1999, 18 out of the 30 some provincial satellite channels alone (not counting many over-the-air channels and cable channels) simultaneously aired the same television drama series based on a bestseller of martial masters – Tianlong Babu (Lu 2002). To drive the point home, according to a study, an average urban resident in China can receive about 30 channels in total (Zhang 2002) (not all provincial satellite channels had nationwide landing).

To be sure, entertainment is not a novel thing in China – China's first television drama was broadcast live in 1958 and the first half of the 1980s witnessed the “golden age” of one-time-off drama. In terms of other types of entertainment, Chinese television has never been short of, except in the Cultural Revolution, artistic performances, music programs, spoken dramas, operas, or the so-called evening parties that were essentially an ensemble of dancing, singing, acrobatics, comic dialogues, etc, meted out to television viewers for special celebratory occasions. But in every respect, entertainment prior to the 1990s is decidedly different from that today. First of all, the term of “entertainment,” or yule, was not much in use; instead, wen yyi, or literally “literature and art” was used to refer to all those activities just mentioned. In fact, the term of television drama, which was inherited from the Mao's period, reflected the tendency to regard it as “drama,” a kind of high art. Then if wen yyi was largely for the purpose of uplifting the public's aesthetic sensibilities or unifying the nation under the Chinese Communist Party's rule, then the entertainment storm that we are concerned about in this paper brings television down to the earth, to the audience, or the
The central theme of China's media restructuring is to strengthen the media industry by nurturing a handful of state media providing a sense of real urgency. Economic action, will eventually be restructured. The developments described above have probably reinforced the trend by concentrating, commercializing and privatizing media hegemony and social stability. Out of such concerns, the state is determined to build up a strong media industry by nurturing a handful of industrial Gagships in the shortest possible time. In fact, in light of concentration, commercialization and privatization, the state recognized that the media not only were the Party's mouthpiece, but also had commodity values. Yet despite all these developments, the basic structure of Chinese media was left largely intact, at least until the late 1990s. Due to the Party's 1983 decision, China has had a media structure that follows the administrative pattern of the polity and therefore is characterized by compartmentalization. Aside from the few national media members which are directly under the administration of the party and state, the rest are either owned or administered by provincial or local governments. In other words, the overwhelming majority of media outlets are locally based. Business expansion, either by carving up a market under the administration of the party and state, the rest are either owned or administered by provincial or local governments. In other words, the overwhelming majority of media outlets are locally based. Business expansion, either by carving up a market or by absorbing investment from outside the state media sector, cannot be carried out without meeting considerable if not insurmountable challenges, be they legal or political, in such a media system (Chan 2004). By the late 1990s, it occurred to state bureaucrats, captains of the media industry and advisors from the academia that further business growth of the media would require a restructuring of the system.

Commercialization as a result of media restructuring since the late 1990s

Commercialization is a keyword in understanding China's media system since the 1980s. Starting with the comeback of advertisements in the late 1970s, it has been going on throughout the post-Mao era. The year of 1992 has been generally recognized as ushering in a higher degree of media commercialization, as it was in this year that Deng Xiaoping made his speech about “taking bolder steps” in economic reform and the goal of building a socialist market economy was sanctioned by the Party's top decision-makers. The 1992 effect was immediately felt, in 1993 and onwards, in the soaring of advertising revenue for several consecutive years, the proliferation of market-oriented institutional as well as journalistic improvisations, the sharp increase of media outlets, the craze of media to increase revenue by diversifying into other businesses, and above all, the changed ethos of the Chinese media. It was recognized that the media not only were the Party's mouthpiece, but also had commodity values. Yet despite all these developments, the basic structure of Chinese media was left largely intact, at least until the late 1990s. Due to the Party's 1983 decision, China has had a media structure that follows the administrative pattern of the polity and therefore is characterized by compartmentalization. Aside from the few national media members which are directly under the administration of the party and state, the rest are either owned or administered by provincial or local governments. In other words, the overwhelming majority of media outlets are locally based. Business expansion, either by carving up a market outside the local or by absorbing investment from outside the state media sector, cannot be carried out without meeting considerable if not insurmountable challenges, be they legal or political, in such a media system (Chan 2004). By the late 1990s, it occurred to state bureaucrats, captains of the media industry and advisors from the academia that further business growth of the media would require a restructuring of the system.

Three major developments in the latter half of the 1990s are frequently cited to explain the top policymakers’ determination to restructure the media. Firstly, by the mid-1990s, because media outlets had grown too many to be effectively controlled and few of them achieved scale of economy in the eyes of the Propaganda Department and state bureaucrats, the latter, perhaps impressed by consolidation initiatives taken in other industries since the early 1990s (Hu, 2003), desired to consolidate the media industry by restricting the issuance of licenses and eliminating a number of existing ones (Zhao, 2001; Guo, 2003). Secondly, competition among media members intensified towards the end of the 1990s. By October 1999, all provincial stations had launched at least one satellite channel each so that the total number of satellite channels, including 11 CCTV channels and 3 education channels, reached 49 (Ju and Wang 2002). The number of satellite channels, cable television stations and over-the-air stations reached a peak and they competed ferociously for a diminished advertising cake in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. A figure that sent shivers down the spine of media managers is that slump of growth rate of advertising in 1998. As opposed to annual advertising growth of 80% or even 90% in the early 1990s, it dropped to below 20% after 1998 (Zhou, Wang et al. 2002, to 10% by the end of the 1990s and to under 10% in 2002 (quoted by Yu below). In 1998, CCTV’s advertising revenue decreased for the first time since the 1990s (Zhou, Wang et al. 2002). In the first half of 2000, the growth rate of television advertising dropped to -10% (Huang 2002). It was concluded that China's media industry had reached a bottleneck that could only be overcome by media “industrialization”. Just as Yu Guoming remarked, “such slow-down shows that China’s media industry needs to break away with its old logic and must undergo restructuring” (Shen and Xu 2003). Thirdly, China’s entry into WTO seems to present a daunting scenario to Chinese media of9cials, in which the Gedging Chinese media industry is placed at considerable if not insurmountable challenges, be they legal or political, in such a media system (Chan 2004). By the late 1990s, it occurred to state bureaucrats, captains of the media industry and advisors from the academia that further business growth of the media would require a restructuring of the system.
conglomerates. The broadcast restructuring started with consolidation that aimed to reduce the number of broadcast outlets. There were two spurts of growth of broadcast outlets since the 1980s. The first one started from 1983, when the central government decided to develop the broadcast network by encouraging local governments to build television and radio stations. As an aside, that was how the so-called four-tiered system came about, four tiers referring to the central, the provincial, the metropolitan or regional, and the county government. The number of over-the-air television stations rose from 52 in 1983 to 586 in 1992. The second one came after 1992 along with the high tide of media commercialization just mentioned. The number of broadcast outlets reached a peak in 1997 of nearly 4000 television stations of various kinds, including about 1000 over-the-air stations, 1700 cable stations and more than 1000 education stations (Wang 2002). Placed in the four-tiered system, it means that a city resident, for example, is likely to be served by CCTV, several provincial terrestrial and cable stations, several metropolitan terrestrial and cable stations and, in addition, education stations operated by the Ministry of Education and its local branches.

Starting from 1996, in which year the “Circular regarding the administration of press, publishing, radio and television industries” (or, the No. 37 document) was released by the Party’s Central Committee and the State Council, the central government launched a multi-year campaign to consolidate the broadcast industry. By the end of 1998, county-level broadcast consolidation resulted in the elimination of 2400 of 4147 broadcast outlets and the re-licensing of 2216 (Yearbook 1999, p.53). In 1999, the well-known No. 82 document released by the State Council formally ended the four-tiered broadcast system hoping to substitute a two-tiered system (i.e. national and provincial tiers) for it. The document was followed in 2000 by a series of meetings and high-ranking officials’ speeches on the urgency of establishing media conglomerates. In actual operation, consolidation, aside from downtight elimination, means that terrestrial, cable stations and, in many cases, education stations of the same administrative tier become one; radio stations, television stations and film studios of the same administrative tier become one; cable network assets spun off from former cable stations are centralized into separate companies; and eventually, within each province, integration of media outlets of various administrative levels will be achieved. The effect of the consolidation measures was powerful and immediate. By the end of 2002, there were 357 television stations including CCTV, 33 provincial stations, 27 provincial capital city stations, and 296 regional city stations (Shanghai Television Festival Committee and CCTV-Sofres Media 2004). There were still more than 1200 county-tier broadcast stations, but they are no longer allowed to program and operate channel and mainly serve as network (transmission) stations. Thus, in China, media acquisition in the West was accomplished entirely by administrative means.

One of the consequences of media consolidation is that national and provincial television stations, leading radio stations and film studio in such consolidation, grew in size, and they provided the basis for broadcast conglomerates. The first provincial broadcast conglomerate was established in December 2000, and was followed by the formation of seven more conglomerates in 2001, including the national broadcast conglomerate that has CCTV at its core. The naming of these conglomerates follows the same pattern: the name of the province (or “China” for the national conglomerate) + “radio, film and television” (with occasional variations as in “Shanghai Media and Entertainment Group”) + “Group.” The newly created groups have business interests in terrestrial, cable and satellite television, radio, film studios, cable networking, newspapers, production and distribution of cultural products, advertising, real estate and so on.

Once conglomerates were formed, the next step of media restructuring is clearly aimed at helping these conglomerates grow not only “bigger” but “stronger” – the dual commandment from the Center. In other words, these conglomerates are to become competitive players, or at least players that have some leverage power in the global market. To achieve this, reducing barriers to marketization is placed on the agenda. Coming from the old media system, these barriers include geographical-administrative barriers, cross-media-administrative barriers, barriers to media capitalization, barriers that prevent television programming from being contracted out to indies, etc. Briefly, these barriers, in the eyes of captains of the media industry and their sympathetic policymakers, prevent broadcast conglomerates from becoming fully functional market entities and therefore becoming truly strong media giants. A heavy-weight “proposal” was released in 2001, commonly known as the No. 17 document, which set forth general principles for media development. These principles, though not backed with concrete measures, encourage cross-regional and cross-media expansion and restrictions over media capitalization seem to have relaxed. The No. 17 document was followed by a series of “implementation measures” drafted for different media – press, cinema and television. In the three years after the release of the No. 17 document, media restructuring has proceeded according to the tune already set, and it picked up great speed in 2003 and 2004 as a result of the warm signals sent out from the sixteenth Party Congress and the relentless efforts made by the state to push media restructuring forward. The goal of nurturing media conglomerates into competitive market players has tremendous implications for both these conglomerates and the media industry as a whole. In the rest of this section, I discuss these implications. As for individual media conglomerates, they are in an excellent position to become powerful businesses. They still have two “masters” to serve – the Party and the audience/advertisers, yet they please the Party best when they perform well in the market. Concomitantly, as media conglomerates are poised for market competition, policies concerning the media industry as a whole are changing, especially those with regard to media capitalization and entry restriction. The policy changes are made partly in observance of WTO rules and are perhaps even more importantly attributed to the recognition that shortage of capital could severely impair market expansion of media conglomerates. Thus, contrary to worries harbored by many
Chinese media scholars that China’s media conglomerates are still the result of administrative fiatst and therefore lack in competitiveness, China’s media restructuring did not stop with media conglomeration; a series of measures to strengthen the market position of these media groups inevitably led to the more opening up of the media industry. All boil down to media commercialization that has never been witnessed in China.

First of all, broadcast conglomerates are on the way to be severed from their virtual owners – local governments. As a contradiction to the previous policy which regards television stations as the property of the government, the No. 17 document relegates the role of the SARFT and its local branches to that of the regulator while media conglomerates come under the direct supervision of the Party’s Propaganda Department. In other words, Chinese media have, in a strict sense, become the Party’s assets rather than local government’s assets. Broadcast administrations of various levels are turned into regulators instead of owner of media outlets in their jurisprudence. Two consequences would follow if the Party’s policy is effectively carried out (according to some observers, this policy is inconsistent with the current government structure. Therefore the implementation of the policy has met with strong local resistance): (1) Chinese media are now even more closely integrated into the Party’s propaganda system; (2) theoretically they are freed to seek market expansion and integration (Wei, Yongzheng, 2002; Hu, 2003, p.31). For example, although national expansion for provincial broadcast conglomerates goes no further than launching national satellite channels, administrative barriers within the province are likely to diminish. Southern Broadcast Group was established with the ambition of merging all broadcast outlets within the Province of Guangdong, from the provincial down to the metropolitan and county level. This does not seem to be the only media group harboring this ambition. Hunan Radio and Television Group, for example, also includes pan-provincial integration as their goal (Ju and Wang 2002).

Secondly, due to the most recent opening up of the media sector to outside capital investment, media conglomerates find themselves in a congenial, capital friendly environment. The 16th Party Congress sent out a warm signal to private capital. That capital responded actively to the signal is demonstrated in a seminar on media market and capitalization held in CCTV’s Media building (reminding us of the 1999 seminar which was later overshadowed by the government’s retreat from corroboration) and then in the Chinese Media Capital Investment Summit held in May 2003 (Fang 2003). This opening up entails the following content: (1) private companies, once properly licensed, are allowed to make programs for television; (2) television stations are encouraged to spin off programming or channel management by setting up companies, which can then enter into business arrangements with private companies; (3) transnational media giants are allowed to set up joint-ventures with television stations to co-produce certain types of programs – at present, this seems to be the closest media TNCs can come to the core media business in China; (4) “at appropriate times,” media conglomerates will be allowed to enter the stock market. In the meantime, government subsidy to media continues to dwindle; furthermore, in 2003, the government ended the favorable revenue tax policy regarding broadcast outlets, which aimed to further push the broadcast members to the market (Sun 2003). In a word, the participation of outside capital is gradually institutionalized. It is true that none of the recently legalized practices is entirely new to Chinese media, since media and capital, driven by their respective interests, have been for quite a while in a relationship of “co-habitation”, using the term coined by Yu Guoming; and the evidence in this regard is too plenty to be listed here. Nevertheless, the official legitimization is bound to result in the proliferation, in number and in form, of media-capital linkages, which has already happened in 2003 and 2004. Moreover, in the past, due to the quasi-legitimate status of capital investment in media, capital was inevitably in a subordinate position in relation to the state-protected media – for instance, when the SARFT spots an undesirable financing arrangement between a private company and a media member and decides to put an end to it, it is always the private company that suffers pertaining losses. Now that private capital has gained the entry ticket, the balance of power between it and the media is bound to change; its increased participation imposes the logic of capital and reinforces the bottom line for media conglomerates, which is to maximize profit.

Emboldened by all these signals from above of commercializing Chinese media, some of these new broadcast conglomerates have already exhibited unprecedented level of business ambition. Shanghai Media Group (SMG) provides a revealing case study. SMG was established in 2001. In the recent two years, SMG, under its thirty-some-year-old president, has demonstrated its ambition through various aggressive initiatives aimed at competing with CCTV and becoming a national broadcaster. Li Ruigang, the Groups’ president, is not a Party’s official embedded in the political structure. According to his resume made public, he got his master’s degree in journalism in Fudan University in 1994 and became an employee of Shanghai Television afterwards; in the year of 2001-2002, he studied in Columbia University as a visiting scholar, majoring in international media administration; immediately after he came back, he became the assistant to the president of SMEG and several months later was promoted to head SMG. All this is not to foreground Li as a media baron, but to draw attention to the significance of appointing a young media professional as the head of the second largest media group in China. And he proves to be a business CEO. As he told a reporter from a major financial newspaper, the goals he envisions for the news media is to (1) making programs for the market rather than merely for the sake of having something to broadcast and (2) transforming SMG from a local broadcast group into a content provider and distributor in the national market and the world’s Chinese language market (Wang 2004). Li’s ambition was embodied in SMG’s business expansions in 2003 and 2004: it launched Dragon TV as its satellite channel (in fact its Chinese name is “Satellite”); by replacing the name of “Shanghai Satellite”, it foregrounds its ambition of going beyond the provincial boundary; (2) it teamed up with CNBC in an agreement to exchange business news; (3) it launched China Business Network in
To illustrate the significance of the late 1990s to the history of television entertainment in China, it helps to briefly review the rise of entertainment in the turn-of-the-century China. Important questions, it is important, as a first step towards tentative answers, to give a closer look at the political economy of the entertainment. Orwellian one or a Huxleyean one, or a mixture of both? Although they will not be addressed in this paper, yet because these are visually saturated America occurring in China? How can we therefore characterize China's media and political environment, an entertainment – Chinese television's response to commercialization. Media commercialization in China does not just happen to traditional media members; new media players have emerged during the process and taken upon an increasingly salient role in propelling the process forward. These new media players are private media firms. The first generation of private companies in the media sector in the early 1990s were those primarily engaged in peripheral media businesses such as advertising or media strategizing. As it approached the mid-1990s, companies that make a living by producing television dramas started to appear. The majority of television drama production companies today were established from 1997 to 2000 (Zhao and Ma 2003). It was also in this latter period that companies specializing in making entertainment programs other than television dramas came into existence. Aside from these production-oriented media firms, some big domestic businesses, including both state and private businesses, are apparently taking an interest in the media sector, but they seem to have even more ambitious business plans than the previous group. Although they take program production as one of their core businesses, they are not contented with being just content providers. They have holdings in various kinds of media businesses ranging from movie and television program production, distribution, theater chains, to newspaper and magazine publishing. In a rare but significant case, China Poly Group Corp., a giant armaments trader and real estate dealer with powerful government background, even operated a television channel – Travel Channel (who was formerly the satellite channel of the Province of Hainan) – through purchasing a private media firm which had previously entered into an agreement with Hainan Television concerning Travel Channel.

It is reasonable to point out that both the smaller production-oriented media firms and big businesses with extensive media holdings have completely market-oriented notions of programming and do not share the goal of uplifting the public that is proclaimed, pretentiously or not, by state media members. Take supply-oriented firms for example. Many of them are capitalized by businesses outside the media sector such as real estate and for each investment, they have a very clear goal of profit rate, which is normally set at a minimum of 30% for a television drama. This figure is one I often heard when I did interviews with private television drama producers in Beijing, and it is confirmed by journalistic literature (Xu 2003). These firms are run differently from companies affiliated with state-owned television stations. Business operations are highly streamlined so that program investment decisions are made in the shortest possible period of time whereas in television stations or their subsidiary studios, the review process often involves multiple departments, which can take months and more. A Chinese media scholar once observed of these private media firms: they "buy and sell domestic or foreign television dramas that are particularly entertaining, make daily-run funny shows, establish nationwide distribution networks with television stations... set up highly specialized teams in advertising and communication strategizing, develop derivative television and movie products and so on. They show the media the way to industrialization that has been proven true in real estate and thus help the media unto the road of industrialization." (Leng 2002) They contributed to the change of ethos of Chinese media and, at least partly due to their intense competition, state studios often seem to have no choice but to deepen their market-oriented reform, which sometimes means "borrowing" innovations originated with the private firms, as we shall discuss below. In these respects, private media firms are integral to the deepening process of media commercialization.

Entertainment – Chinese television's response to commercialization

This paper started with an impressionistic description of the late 1990s television phenomenon – entertainment, and then it went on to discuss how structural reforms in Chinese media have nurtured media businesses that are the major driving force behind the tidal wave of commercialization. In this section, I will show how the phenomenon of entertainment is at least in part given rise to by the higher degree of media commercialization that is now seen in China. It would seem redundant to make this argument in the Western context; even in the non-Western context, it has been incisively pointed out that the current trend of globalization, driven by transnational corporations, is making commercial media model universal and consequently leads to trivialization of media matters (Herman and McChesney, 2000). Nevertheless, I think it worth the effort to examine the Chinese case. It would serve the purpose if I could add to the potency of media critics’ skepticism of the democratizing power of a free market based model. But the even larger significance lies in the paradoxical question: If television is the Communist Party's property and mouthpiece, or at least the Party's "Publicity Inc.", then what does the trivialization of Chinese television mean to the discursive monopoly desired by the Party? What is entertainment doing to the Chinese people? Is what Neil Postman observed in the television saturated America occurring in China? How can we therefore characterize China's media and political environment, an Orwellian one or a Huxleyean one, or a mixture of both? Although they will not be addressed in this paper, yet because these are important questions, it is important, as a first step towards tentative answers, to give a closer look at the political economy of the rise of entertainment in the turn-of-the-century China.
period before 1998. The entertainment value of television started to dawn upon some media workers around 1990, what with the immense popularity of imported soap operas in the 1980s, what with the phenomenal national craze for China’s first soap opera – Yearnings – in 1991, and what with the inauguration of two entertainment programs by CCTV respectively in 1990 and 1991 – Zongyi Panorama (Zongyi means “variety”) and Zhengda Zongyi. Following CCTV, local television stations hurried to air their own “zongyi” programs. It is worth noting that these entertainment programs are better be seen as continuity of the 1980s entertainment in that they are basically presentations of an amalgamation of artistic performances by specialists for the audience, presided over by two smiley but inhibited anchorman and anchorwomen. But the novelty accompanying the discovery of television entertainment was soon to be overwhelmed by a much stronger tide of interest in news innovations started in 1993 with CCTV’s experimentation with its first news magazine – “Oriental Horizon” – and fuelled by the launching of the extremely influential in-depth news show – “Focus” – in 1994. Clones of these shows proliferated. In contrast, zongyi programs experienced a marked decline in the mid-1990s. Observes have it that around 1996, television was undergoing a transformation “from entertainment to documentary” (Zhang 2002), which was soon to be proved too optimistic (or pessimistic). Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the undercurrent of entertainment had always been there throughout the initial years of television commercialization, taking the form of television drama. Each year, there would be a few television drama hits.

By contrast, in the late 1990s, the supply of entertainment programs became steady and voluminous. Entertainment programs take up an increasing share of the total hours of programming in the 1990s, from about 26% in 1992, to 39% in 1996 and 44% in 2000, whereas the share of news programs has been decreasing from 28% in 1992, to 15% in 1996 and 6.9% in 2000 (Zhang 2002). Thanks to the increasing proportion of entertainment and the proliferation of television channels (consider, for example, the near doubling of television channels in the year of 2000-2001 from about 1200 to more 2100 channels), the absolute number of entertainment hours increased dramatically (Yearbook, 2002). If we break down the increase of entertainment programs, we can see that such increase is mainly accounted for by television dramas and new genres of entertainment shows. Although television drama production reached a plateau since the late 1990s of 8,000 to 9,000 hours a year, hours of television drama broadcast must have undergone a dramatic increase, what with the increase of television channels and what with the increase of television dramas on individual channels. For example, the total hours of first-run television drama broadcast on CCTV increased by about 600 hours from 1996 to 1999 even though the total television drama outputs in these two years were about the same (Lu 2002). As for entertainment shows, after the decline of zongyi programs, they came back with a changed face, led by the game show “Citadel of Happiness” (kuaiile dabenying) launched by Hunan Television in 1997 and then a dating game show called “Date with Rose” (meigui zhiyue) (copying a similar match-making show made in Taiwan) by the same television station in 1998. The popularity of these two shows, which were placed on Hunan Satellite Channel, soon gave rise to a nationwide craze of cloning. One source has it that at least 33 provincial television stations followed suit in putting their own entertainment shows of these types on air, and any number of smaller television stations did so too (Ju and Wang 2002). According to another account, almost all local television stations have their own versions of “Date with Rose” and all provincial stations provide their versions of “Citadel of Happiness.” Even CCTV had to fight against its losing monopoly over zongyi programs by creating similar shows such as Lucky 52 and Happy Dictionary. Other television formats or shows continued to find their way from Europe, Japan and the US unto Chinese television – talk shows, reality shows, etc. These new genres of entertainment shows are markedly different from their 1980s or early 1990s predecessors in that they are game-centered and feature the joint participation of audience members and celebrities. If we also take into consideration the proliferation of entertainment news and entertainment-oriented information programs (fashion, sports, weather, fitness, animal), as well as the changed overall feel of television caused by an awareness of channel identity and branding, it is clear that entertainment is taking over the Chinese television.

The rise of entertainment can be attributed to a variety of factors, such as the intensification of competition amongst television stations towards late 1990s, the added ferocity of competition for advertising dollars coming from mass-appeal metropolitan newspapers, magazines and new media, etc. But ultimately, these factors, if they are the immediate causes of television stations taking measures to be more entertaining, boil down to the higher degree of media commercialization discussed in the previous section. We can start to understand the link between the coming to dominance of entertainment and commercialization by examining the case of Hunan Television, the television group that took the whole media industry by surprise with its successful experimentation with the two entertainment shows in terms of audience ratings and powerful demonstration effect upon other broadcast members. Hunan Television is an inland provincial television station that was in relative obscurity due to the bland economy of the province. But starting from 1993, a series of market-oriented reforms were carried out, which gave rise to Hunan Economic Station in 1995, a television station that relied on advertising instead of government subsidy from the very beginning and therefore was sensitive to market signals. Soon it distinguished itself from and outdid Hunan Television due to its lively audience-oriented entertainment programming. When deciding to launch its satellite channel in 1997, according to Ouyang Changlin, Head of Hunan Economic Station, Hunan Television placed its bet on entertainment, which was to become the major theme of Hunan Satellite Channel (Zhang 2002). In no time did Hunan Satellite Channel become the leading provincial satellite channel. According to a survey conducted in 1999, it was the most popular provincial satellite channel amongst the national audience and even surpassed several CCTV channels measured by audience satisfaction index (Zhang 2002). It is no coincidence that Hunan Television, the entertainment-based media outlet, is one of the leading television stations in market-oriented reform.
To demonstrate that it is not a mere fad for Hunan Television to hit upon entertainment as a business strategy in an increasingly commercial environment, I will examine what general effects commercial imperatives are having upon programming decisions of numerous other television stations or broadcast groups. As we have seen before, Hunan Television’s “Citadel of Happiness” and “Date with Rose” have been extensively cloned across China. But such entertainment shows do not yet provide the bulk of entertainment; television drama does, and it most tellingly reveals the extent of commercialization. Television drama is the primary source of revenue for television stations, as they bring in 70% of total advertising revenue for a television station, prime-time dramas bring in more than half of the total, and the advertising dollars earned by prime-time television dramas amount to about 10 times the purchase price (Wang 2003; Zhao and Ma 2003; Zhou, Wang et al. 2003). The heavy dependence of television stations upon television drama is made all the more remarkable when we consider that television programming strategy; formulating such a strategy was not accidental, but arose from the imperative to capture a larger share of audience. With the market imperative growing stronger with the on-going media restructuring, it is reasonable to expect that entertainment will continue to dominate its programming. Aiming to enhance the quality of its programs, it turned non-news programming departments into quasi-stockholding companies, with the Station owning 51% of stocks, major production and marketing personnel owning 29% and outside capital investment accounting for the remaining 20%. Such arrangement not only means a more effective incentive mechanism, but also the subjection of television programming to the market imperative to a greater extent (Xiao 2000; Zhou, Wang et al. 2003). This arrangement must be an edge-ball since it is only towards the end of 2003 that the SARFT finally gave the permission of turning programming departments into stockholding companies. Hunan Television is also regarded by industry observers and scholars as creating the first “media stock” on the stock market. Although several media-related stocks were already existent in the early and mid-1990s, they were mostly companies engaged in peripheral media businesses such as tourism or real estates; but Hunan Television is the first to put its programming capacities on the capital market by way of its subsidiary – Dianguang Chuannmei (Hunan TV & Broadcast Intermediary Co.), which was established in 1998 and got listed in Shenzhen Stock Exchange in 1999. This step was so bold that the SARFT suspended approving any more such practice not long after by way of the No. 82 document in 1999 (Ju and Wang 2002). Then a year later, Hunan Radio and Television Group was established, the first provincial broadcast conglomerate in China. It aggressively branches out into various media and non-media businesses, as described above. In the meantime, it continues along the path of entertainment. In 2003, Hunan Satellite tried to consolidate its status as the leader of entertainment by positioning itself as the “first entertainment channel in China” targeting the Chinese youth with entertainment (Liu and Jiang 2003). In line with this positioning, its management embarked on a major surgery of the channel and cancelled six programs (five daily and one weekly) in May 2004. Among them was a news magazine show named “Findings in the Countryside,” which was cancelled because it does not accord well with the focus on entertainment and information, despite the fact that this program enjoyed popularity among rural audience and many news stories therein won national journalism awards and awards from the Ministry of Agriculture. To sum up, it is reasonable to regard Hunan Television’s rapid rise to a major television station boasting a leading satellite channel as resulting from its entertainment-centered programming strategy; formulating such a strategy was not accidental, but arose from the imperative to capture a larger share of audience. As a result, television drama became virtually the must-have for almost all television stations. Even CCTV, which has always taken great pride in its authoritative and dignified self-image and which was known to be the least entertaining channel of all according to a survey conducted by CCTV-Sofres in 1999 (Zhang 2002), found it no longer possible to ignore television dramas. In 2003, CCTV increased the airtime of its prime-time television drama on its flagship channel – CCTV-1 – from one hour to two and increased the total number of daily aired episodes of television drama from two to eight (Liu, Zhou et al. 2004). Broadcast conglomeration did not alleviate the deluge of homogenized television drama programming suffered by television stations; a broadcast group does experiment with channel thematization, which means the differentiation of channels into news, music, youth and children, lifestyle, finance, sports and so on. Ironically, the themes of such channels are soon blurred since 90% of them still have television dramas as a major chunk of programming. Even channels specializing in finance or even sports are no exception in this case (Zhou, Wang et al. 2003). Moreover, movie and drama channels are the most salient thematized channels in China. About 40% of television stations have movie and drama channels and 60% have lifestyle channels (Zhao and Ma 2003). Another source has it that by the end of 2002, 88% of provincial television stations and 70% of provincial capital city television stations have movie and drama channels. Most regional cities have just one or two channels; still, 27% of all regional city stations, that is, 79, have drama channels (Shanghai Television Festival Committee and CCTV-Sofres Media 2004). In all in, it becomes impossible to imagine what the television screen would be like absent television dramas. In 2001, 56,462 hours of television dramas were aired, as opposed to 18,668 hours of news or news-related programs, 14,278 hours of movies, 10,629 hours of sports, 7,955 hours of cartoons, 7,302 hours of entertainment shows and 1,546 hours of science and education programs (Zhao and Ma 2003). In 2002, the average time a Chinese spent in front of television was 179 minutes, about 30% of which, or 52 minutes were spent watching television dramas (Shanghai Television Festival Committee and CCTV-Sofres Media 2004). Not only has the volume of television dramas been dramatically increased, but scheduling and promos have also become an integral part of business strategies for television stations, thereby going a step further towards creating a congenial entertaining
shows, perhaps with the exception of television drama, from private companies or co-produce with them. According to the premature ended deal. As for large television stations such as CCTV and Shanghai TV, they seldom condescended to purchase programming of a channel to an outside company, such practice was neither an established nor a legal one and often led to a capital. Though in the past, there were some infrequent incidences of television stations contracting out some or all quality programs with less money than what they can get from in-house production. Business alliances between television organs, but most of them are privately owned media firms have carved out a significant share of non-news television programs some of them might be subsidiaries of large state businesses, some of them might be enterprises affiliated with government organs. Having discussed the impact of the market logic adopted by television stations upon media content, I propose that the triumph of commercial entertainment in China results not from one but from a combination of factors, a key one of which is the institutionalization of Chinese entertainment based on the commercial model. Such institutionalizing process could not have been possible without the ongoing media restructuring that opens up China’s media industry to outside capital. In the rest of this section, I discuss what private production companies and media TNCs can do to change the face of Chinese entertainment.

Still, the numbers above do no more than revealing the iceberg tip of the love affair between television stations and their dramas. Not only do television stations increase television drama screening, but they also increasingly adopt the market’s logic when choosing which television drama to air. Before the mid-1990s, television stations made their own television dramas partly to fill the air time and partly to appease the Propaganda Department; another source of television drama supply was the inter-provincial network in which dramas were exchanged through barter amongst provincial television stations. But in the late 1990s, when private production companies and private/societal capital came to dominate television drama production, television stations now purchase most of their dramas from outside. Today, 80% of capital investment in television dramas is made outside television stations. Only 1.2% of television stations do not procure television dramas from outside and 88% procure dramas through purchase (Zhao and Ma 2003). Increasingly, advertising people get involved in making purchase decisions. In 2003, CCTV decided that its Department of Advertising shall form a consultation group together with its General Programming Office and Television Drama Department to enhance the marketability of the television dramas to be shown on CCTV channels. When television stations purchase dramas, unless personal connections are present, they normally consider the prospective audience ratings that can be gleaned by the purchase, and they base their judgment about such prospect on the storyline, drama stars and director of the drama. Even in-house productions, which never had much problem being put on the air, are now subject to such market logic. In 2003, the television drama production center of CCTV put forth a measure, as a result of which audience ratings of CCTV’s in-house television dramas will be linked up to salaries of producers and other staff members involved. Another example is that CCTV’s in-house production center now has to succumb to the ratings allure of “youth idol” television dramas originated in Japan and Korea, i.e. dramas about youth and love featuring young actors and actresses whose primary quality is their visual appeal. In 2003, CCTV declared that it would make its own “youth idol” dramas. Briefly, television dramas today are decidedly more glamorous and seductive than a few years ago. By the end of the 1990s, drama genres came into being, the most salient of which are imperial court and costume dramas, martial masters dramas, urban family dramas, youth and idol dramas, cop dramas, etc. Even Party-commissioned television dramas have become entertaining, emphasizing conflicts and personal dramas. It has become commonplace for the Party and SARFT officials to stress the compatibility of socialistic discourse and entertainment. All in all, as perhaps the most salient component of Chinese television entertainment, television drama contributes to this larger trend with its sheer volume, its impact on scheduling, its highly commercialized content, and above all, the overall ethos of television; all these changes that occurred to Chinese television dramas in the 1990s can be at least in part accounted for by the commercial logic endorsed by television stations.

Having discussed the impact of the market logic adopted by television stations upon media content, I propose that the triumph of commercial entertainment in China results not from one but from a combination of factors, a key one of which is the institutionalization of Chinese entertainment based on the commercial model. Such institutionalizing process could not have been possible without the on-going media restructuring that opens up China’s media industry to outside capital. In the rest of this section, I discuss what private production companies and media TNCs can do to change the face of Chinese entertainment.

In just a few years, private or independent (independent in the sense that such firms are not controlled by television stations; some of them might be subsidiaries of large state businesses, some of them might be enterprises affiliated with government organs, but most of them are privately owned) media firms have carved out a significant share of non-news television programs market. Programs made by these firms are increasingly popular with television stations as the latter realize that they get better quality programs with less money than what they can get from in-house production. Business alliances between television stations and private firms are obviously on the rise, especially after 2002 when China’s media policy became increasingly friendly to capital. Though in the past, there were some infrequent incidences of television stations contracting out some or all programming of a channel to an outside company, such practice was neither an established nor a legal one and often led to a prematurely ended deal. As for large television stations such as CCTV and Shanghai TV, they seldom condescended to purchase shows, perhaps with the exception of television drama, from private companies or co-produce with them. According to the
A 9nal point to be made in this section concerns the inGuence of media TNCs upon media content. To deliver the promise made upon WTO entry, the Chinese government recently lifted the ceiling of import quota of foreign movies from 20 to 10. In broadcast media, it just allowed state television stations to set up joint-ventures for the purpose of co-programming. Viacom has just entered into a joint-venture agreement with SMG to make animated cartoons. It also stroke a deal with CCTV to provide its two Nickelodeon shows – Cat Dog and Wild Thornberrys shows – for 90 minutes a day on CCTV's newly launched children's channel and to co-produce Nickelodeon's Kids Choice Awards for Chinese viewers. Viacom's ultimate goal is “to have a 24-hour MTV channel in Beijing, Shanghai and throughout China” (Collier 2004). In addition to program importation and co-production, it is predictable to 9nd more and more commercial entertainment, as we have briefly seen in our discussion of television drama. They are quick to learn from the West as well as Taiwan and Japan. According to Wang Changtian, he has been closely following major US and Taiwan production companies in terms of their media strategies, and their programs in terms of program packaging and creative elements (Li and Wang 2002). Television dramas, entertainment shows and information service programs made by these companies appear very different from those made by state studios, in that they are eager to appeal to audience with content and style innovations. The contrast might well be comparable to the difference between the content provided by metropolitan newspapers and Party organs, as observed by Chinese media scholars. Take television drama for example. Except in cases where the private firm has an advance contract with state television station concerning a drama with no obvious audience appeal, private firms tend to concentrate their television drama production in several market-proven genres such as martial arts and costume drama and cop drama. To further illustrate this point, I take sports show as another example. Traditional sports program normally means broadcasting a sports game with expert commentary and analysis. But sport shows made by private companies forego this tradition and boldly borrow from U.S. sport shows by incorporating elements of entertainment. For example, they would focus on life stories of athlete stars, beef up reporting of some sport event with little dramas inside and outside the sport ring, use a more crispy language style, experiment with shows packaging, etc (Chen 2003). Take for example “Sports World” (Tiyujie), a show that has been regularly aired by more than 60 major cities in China by 2003. It includes a billboard of athletic events to report unexpected occurrences such as a state athlete getting injured overseas. Most tellingly, it calls its series of reporting of League-A games “League A Theater.” Adding music as a leitmotif to pictures is also said to be one of the “China’sfirsts”, which technique was later reportedly adopted by CCTV in one of its short programs on the 2002 World Cup in which a violin ditty was heard (Zhang 2003). No matter whether the report is accurate or not that CCTV picked up certain techniques from “Sports World,” it is beyond doubt that CCTV felt strong pressure to reform its sport reporting. From April 2003, CCTV-5 (the sports channel) took a series of measures to enhance the appeal of its sport shows. All of them are audience-oriented such as more timely reporting, more information and more variety of sports included, and many of them incorporate elements of entertainment such as game shows, interactive television, life stories of sport figures and so on. Briefly, programs made by private companies show a determination to be entertaining. When “Sports World” was inaugurated in 2001, according to Li Delai, the editor-in-chief of Enlight Media Communication, “we proposed to make sports a type of entertainment, to let the Gag of outside the sport ring, use a more crispy language style, experiment with shows packaging, etc (Chen 2003). Take for example “Sports World” (Tiyujie), a show that has been regularly aired by more than 60 major cities in China by 2003. It includes a billboard of athletic events to report unexpected occurrences such as a state athlete getting injured overseas. Most tellingly, it calls its series of reporting of League-A games “League A Theater.” Adding music as a leitmotif to pictures is also said to be one of the “China’sfirsts”, which technique was later reportedly adopted by CCTV in one of its short programs on the 2002 World Cup in which a violin ditty was heard (Zhang 2003). No matter whether the report is accurate or not that CCTV picked up certain techniques from “Sports World,” it is beyond doubt that CCTV felt strong pressure to reform its sport reporting. From April 2003, CCTV-5 (the sports channel) took a series of measures to enhance the appeal of its sport shows. All of them are audience-oriented such as more timely reporting, more information and more variety of sports included, and many of them incorporate elements of entertainment such as game shows, interactive television, life stories of sport figures and so on. Briefly, programs made by private companies show a determination to be entertaining. When “Sports World” was inaugurated in 2001, according to Li Delai, the editor-in-chief of Enlight Media Communication, “we proposed to make sports a type of entertainment, to let the Gag of entertainment flow in the sky above the sports world”(Zhang 2003). With more and more involvement of these private companies in television programming either by direct supply or by co-production, is predictable to find more and more glamorous entertainment on television.

A final point to be made in this section concerns the influence of media TNCs upon media content. To deliver the promise made upon WTO entry, the Chinese government recently lifted the ceiling of import quota of foreign movies from 20 to 10. In broadcast media, it just allowed state television stations to set up joint-ventures for the purpose of co-programming. Viacom has just in 2004 entered into a joint-venture agreement with SMG to make animated cartoons. It also stroke a deal with CCTV to provide its two Nickelodeon shows – Cat Dog and Wild Thornberrys shows – for 90 minutes a day on CCTV's newly launched children's channel and to co-produce Nickelodeon’s Kids Choice Awards for Chinese viewers. Viacom’s ultimate goal is “to have a 24-hour MTV channel in Beijing, Shanghai and throughout China” (Collier 2004). In addition to program importation and co-production,
Western media fare is brought in through satellite channels. Foreign satellite channels that have been allowed restricted landing have reached more than 30 and most of them are entertainment providers. For media TNCs, it is clear that entertainment is the best venue through which to enter the Chinese media market. Although these foreign channels only have very limited coverage and co-programming has just been legalized, they go a long way towards transplanting Western-type entertainment into China.

In the foregoing discussion, I briefly touched upon how China’s entertainment shows borrowed directly from Taiwan, Japan and the U.S. CCTV’s “Happy Dictionary” (kaixin cidian), according to its producer, borrows heavily from “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” and “Twenty-one” (Zheng and Sun 2002). Phoenix TV, a satellite channel controlled by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corps, provides another perfect illustration of this point. Launched in 1996, Phoenix set out to provide a blend of entertainment and news. Its news was all about bloody stories, celebrities and sex, the three of which was playfully summed up by observers into “xing (bloody), xing (stars), xing (sex)”. Phoenix’s lively news presentation poses a real challenge to CCTV; such challenge was made most poignant by Phoenix’s sensational and non-stop reporting of the 9-11 and CCTV’s slow and clumsy handling of the event. As a result, the latter was prompted to launch its 24-hour news channel and to reform its news reporting and presentation in 2003. CCTV’s reporting of the war against Iraq bore strong evidence of Phoenix’s impact upon this state television. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, even Newscast had to rejuvenate itself by incorporating tabloid stories.

### The role of the party-state

In this paper, I have been trying to show how the market-oriented structural reform of China’s media industry, a higher degree of media commercialization and the triumph of entertainment are logically connected with one another. Entertainment is changing China’s media landscape to an unprecedented extent and is bound to have profound political implications. It is my hope to draw attention to this under-researched aspect of the Chinese media, especially in contrast with the scholarly attention received by press reform and press freedom. My research so far suggests that China, a nation with a supposedly entirely different culture and political system, is not an exception in following the well-treaded path elsewhere in the world of media commercialization giving rise to more of entertainment and less of everything else. It supports the argument that media globalization globalizes the U.S. commercial media model along with all its problems. In the meantime, however, I hope to go a step further by examining the uniqueness of the Chinese case without necessarily framing my work in terms of "glocalization." In this section, I ask the question, how does the Party fit into the picture?

In her examination of the popular culture in the post-1992 China, Jing Wang, a scholar on contemporary Chinese popular culture, argues that “not only has the postsocialist state not fallen out of the picture, but it has rejuvenated its capacity, via the market, to affect the agenda of popular culture”; and she goes on to observe that “the state’s rediscovery of culture as a site where new ruling technologies can be deployed and converted simultaneously into economic capital constitutes one of its most innovative strategies of statecraft since the founding of the People’s Republic” (Wang 2001). Yuezhi Zhao, a leading media scholar in North America, also makes a forceful argument concerning the role of the state that the party-state, forming a bloc of power with domestic capital, transnational capital and urban middle-class, has maintained a powerful presence in the market-oriented press reform since the 1980s and even more so in the press conglomeration since the mid-1990s (Zhao 2000). In this section, I will make a parallel argument that the party-state is a major force to be reckoned with behind the triumph of entertainment. Its presence is manifested in various ways. I will first discuss the official endorsement of running “culture,” media being part of it, as business at the discursive level. Then I review a series of major documents and decisions which ultimately lead to the transformation of China’s media system. When discussing the media restructuring, I have actually mentioned in passing the significance or content of some of these documents; so at this point, I will provide a brief recapitulation. Finally, while opening up the media system to unprecedented business opportunities, content regulation by the party-state is becoming even more stringent; control over entertainment is no exception.

Given the ambiguity of the term “socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics,” it is natural that certain terminologies about such an economy remain ambiguous; whether they can enter official discourse and how they are defined are more often than not a sensitive issue. For example, such ambiguity is reflected in part in the difficulty to define the Chinese media. Is it a non-profit public-interest institution? Is it a fixture in the Party’s propaganda machine? Is it part of the government administration? Or, given so much commercial imperatives upon it, is it a profit-oriented business (Xu 2000)? Ever since the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, media members have been living with these multiple identities along with all the amenities and inconveniences these identities bring. Officially, these media entities are considered as “government undertakings run as businesses.” Such a definition once worked great for the media, as it granted freedom for them to be run to make money. But in the changed political economy of the late 1990s as we have been in the first section, continuing to be regarded as “government undertakings” implies barriers to market expansion. Obviously the Chinese media need a new definition. In the meantime, breakthroughs are being made in the definition of “culture.” At the ends of the definitional range are “culture as pure government undertakings for the benefit of the public” as in Mao’s China and “culture as industry” at the turn of the century. The collapsing together of “culture” and “industry” started in the 1980s, going through various forms such as “cultural market” and “cultural economy,” and was accomplished in the late 1990s. (“Cultural market” was officially adopted for the first time in 1988, in a circular jointly released by the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Industry and Commerce, and “cultural economy” in 1991, in a report of the Ministry of Culture on “Proposals for some economic policies regarding government cultural undertakings”.) As the 1990s went on, the government seemed to come to an increasing awareness of the importance of cultural economy to the national economy.
as a whole. In 1994, for example, the two-day weekend system was instituted at least partly to promote spending on leisure. In
the late 1990s, "cultural industry" gained currency with state managers, starting with the establishment of the Department of
Cultural Industry within the Ministry of Culture in 1998. Afterwards, the term started to appear in official documents released by
decision-makers in the State Council and the Party’s Central Committee. Around the same time, a series of national-level
seminars and conferences were sponsored or held by the government and major think-tanks on the development of cultural
industry. In 2001, China Securities Regulatory Commission published a new industry classification, revoking the category
of "high-tech industry" and adding the categories of "communications and cultural industry" and "information communication
service". This resolves the ambiguity surrounding the question whether businesses under the category of communications and
culture can be listed. The late 1990s state effort to endorse "cultural industry" reached a peak in the 2002 Party Congress, at
which Jiang Zemin made the first official differentiation between cultural shiye, i.e. state-funded non-profit cultural undertakings,
and cultural industry. This differentiation effectively ends the debate and ambivalence in policy and industrial circles whether the
media should be regarded as "industry" or "government undertakings." By allowing the media to internally differentiate into
ditorial, non-business section and business section, it emboldens the media to pursue profits in a more unabashed and effective
manner. It is a tricky question as to what the "genealogy" of "cultural industry" can tell us about the party-state’s role in the development
of this industry. It is highly likely that the evolution of this term merely shows a belated and perhaps forced recognition on the
part of policy-makers of certain reform-induced improvised practices that have been going on for quite a long time. Meanwhile,
however, it would be hard to deny the discursive power the Party continues to possess. The Party’s attitude, whether implicit or
explicit, whether one of endorsement or of reservation or of ambiguity, still means a lot under its rule. This explains why the year
of 1992, in which Deng Xiaoping exhorted the Chinese to take a bolder step in developing market economy, marked a watershed
in the Chinese political economy. In the same vein, this also explains the ripple effect of the 2002 Party Congress upon media
policy-makers and the media industry.

Such effect is seen in a series of bold speeches, policies and practices. Li Changchun, the reform-minded politburo official
overseeing the party-state’s propaganda work, said in 2003, “All thoughts and beliefs that impedes cultural development shall
decisively overcome, all practices and rules that hinders cultural development shall be decisively changed, and all systemic
flaws that thwarts cultural development shall be decisively done with (Lu 2004).” In February 2003, Head of China Central
Television announced new reform measures that, except for the News Channel, all channels shall be commercialized. The
nationwide structural reform of the cultural sector was launched nationwide in mid-2003 starting with 35 pilot cultural
institutions and 9 pilot provinces. In July, the Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Culture, the SARFT and the SPAA jointly
issued the “Proposal for Pilot Projects of Reforming the Cultural Sector,” which explicitly divided cultural work units into public
interest cultural undertakings and commercial cultural enterprises. In the same month, a new round of state-orchestrated press
consolidation started with the result of closing down more than 1,400 newspapers and magazines and transferring control of the
press from government bureaucracies to media groups. In February 2004, the SARFT issued the “Proposal for Promoting the
Development of Radio, Film and Television Industries,” which provides a capital-friendly framework for the media industry in the
coming years. In April 2004, the Center decided to commercialize the country’s all publishing houses but one (People’s Publishing
House) by turning them from government undertakings into businesses (Xin 2004). Briefly, the 16th Party Congress, with its pro-
capital stance and more specifically its endorsement of cultural industry, helped usher in a new tide of media restructuring and
commercialization.

Media restructuring does not merely arise from conceptualization at the discursive level. Even more importantly, it has been
actively pushed forward by the Party as a top-down enterprise. In a previous section, we have seen how well-planned and
managed the whole process has been in retrospect. Since the late 1990s, the Chinese media has been bombarded with circulars
on structural reform released by the Party’s Propaganda Department, the State Council and state administrations of media;
high-ranking officials’ high-profile speeches on media reform have proliferated; massive restructuring initiatives have taken place
due to the pressure from above. Yuezhi Zhao has elaborated on the Party’s presence in the process of press conglomeration (Zhao
2000). The most recent state-initiated measure concerning press reform was implemented in 2003, ordering an elimination
of a large number of bureaucratic papers. Significantly, it immediately preceded its approval of the launch of New Jing Daily, a
jointly run newspaper by two major press conglomerates, showing the Party’s determination to strengthen the Chinese party-
organ press. In broadcast, the goal of establishing media conglomerates at the provincial level was put forth in the 1999 circular
released by the State Council commonly known as No. 82 document; in 2000, Xu Guangchun, head of SARFT, made a speech
urging that “terrestrial stations and cable stations must merge. Cable networks do not operate channels and they function
primarily as transmission networks" (Luo 2004). In 2001, media conglomeration/consolidation picked up speed, because the
SARFT issued a deadline for all broadcast outlets in August 2000: by June 30, 2001, cable television stations must cease to exist and
be
merged into terrestrial stations. In the meantime, the State Council, the Propaganda Department, the SPPA and the SARFT
jointly released a circular known as the No. 17 document. The document sets forth major principles of media restructuring –
building up cross-medium, cross-regional media conglomerates, allowing outside capital to enter the media industry and
for understanding the media turn to entertainment in China. This also leads the paper to a discussion of media commercialization.

Although going from the structure to content requires more than one step, media restructuring provides a much needed context and that it is largely through these domestic groups that private and foreign capital make their inroads into the Chinese media.

into the media sector will have a huge impact on the Chinese media, domestic media conglomerates remain the major players and to a lesser extent on private capital and independent media firms and to a still less extent on media TNCs. I made capital owned media conglomerates, private capital and transnational capital. In this paper, I have focused on media conglomerates, therefore, know very well the imperative to carefully steer in the market created by the state. To them, the market is not necessarily liberating. Xia Jun, who works for a major private media firm, remarked that “We came to embrace the market with a simple and sincere enthusiasm, because [we thought] it could create space and provide creativity for us. But while you are really in the market, you will find that it is so stubborn. It operates only according to its own logic; if visible hand or invisible hand wishes to accomplish something in it, the only way is to discover its law and follow its will. While the market is beckoning to us, it is also controlling us with its stringent law” (Li and Wang, 2002, pp.228-9). The law of the market entails, among other things, avoidance of political hazards. At the same time, explicit government censorship remains strong. I will very briefly review a most recent event in the hope of illustrating the extent to which the state affects entertainment programming. In March 2004, an order released by the SARFT took television drama makers by surprise, which demanded that all dramas that have crime stories as the basic storyline shall be taken off prime time television. It is worth noting that such dramas normally deal with crimes revealing depravity of government officials. It is one of the most popular drama genres in the past few years. For Shanghai Television, for example, crime drama leads all television dramas in terms of airing hours, average audience ratings and average advertising revenue earned, according to a report (Fu, Xie et al. 2004). This ban has immediately been felt upon television drama production. A director reputed for directing crime dramas told a reporter that before the order was issued, he received an average of two or three phone calls inviting him to make crime dramas; but ever since the taking effect of the new policy, he only received two phone calls – one for directing a “main melody” (that is, expressly in line with the state policy) drama and the other for a drama about rural lives (2004). The cause for the atrophy of crime dramas might be primarily economic. The advertising dollars earned by a prime-time drama are three times what can be earned by an after 11:00 pm drama. It shows that the order worked exactly because it borrows power from the market. Soon it turned out that the ban on crime dramas is only part of the so-called “screen cleansing project.” A similar punishment is meted out to television dramas that “flirt with popular literary works or movies of the “red” revolutionary period. These literary works are referred to as “red classics.” By “flirting with ‘red classics’,” it means borrowing the name and fame of these classics but making big changes or additions to the original so as to appeal to the contemporary audience. The remaining components of the “screen cleansing project” target at presentation of sex and adolescent love, superstition and quasi-science, conspicuous consumption, smoking, gambling and drug use, anchorman/woman’s unconventional dressing and hair style, anchorman/woman’s adoption of Hong Kong and Taiwan accents, violation of privacy of minors, reporting of adolescent crimes, and television programming in relation to internet games.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the phenomenon of entertainment since the late 1990s China from three perspectives. Firstly, it relates to the structural changes of the Chinese media which, although started well before the period we are concerned about, picked up great speed since the late 1990s and led to a media landscape that is now occupied by three kinds of major players – state-owned media conglomerates, private capital and transnational capital. In this paper, I have focused on media conglomerates and to a lesser extent on private capital and independent media firms and to a still less extent on media TNCs. I made capital into the media sector will have a huge impact on the Chinese media, domestic media conglomerates remain the major players and that it is largely through these domestic groups that private and foreign capital make their inroads into the Chinese media. Although going from the structure to content requires more than one step, media restructuring provides a much needed context for understanding the media turn to entertainment in China. This also leads the paper to a discussion of media commercialization.
as a major motif. Although media commercialization is not a new thing in China, due to media restructuring, it is granted a more stable institutional base on which commercialization can be carried out on a more fundamental level than previously. Such institutional base entails partly the formation of media conglomerates, which are increasingly more of business and less of government institution, and partly the legalization of outside capital participation in the media sector. By way of media commercialization, I linked up the discussion of media restructuring and the craze of entertainment in the second part of the paper. Although it would be reductive to infer much about media content from the structure, such a general phenomenon as the rise of television entertainment can be reliably attributed to major structural changes. In this section, I started with the “success” story of a previously little known television station which won virtually overnight fame/notoriety nationwide with its entertainment programs and whose satellite channel became thereafter a leading national channel in terms of audience rating and of course advertising rate. From there, I went on to examine how the ferocious competition amongst television stations or media groups eventually led to a deluge of highly commercialized television dramas, and how the presence of private media firms and media TNCs helped the Chinese entertainment industry get mature. In the final section, I briefly discussed the role of the party-state in the rise of entertainment in China, though such brevity by no means does justice to the complexity of the state’s involvement. For one thing, creating highly commercialized media conglomerates could not have been accomplished with grand state policies alone. It requires huge amount of commitment and coordination from provincial governments. The reason that Hunan Television can get its subsidiary listed in the stock market without endorsement from the state is exactly the proactive efforts on the part of Hunan Broadcast Bureau and Hunan government. In a word, the significant involvement of local broadcast administrations and governments deserves much greater attention than granted in this paper. Besides, it should also be stressed that state intervention does not merely take the form of explicit policies and regulations, but also that of inaction or ambiguity. I should have also foreground the significance of the “silence”, that is, the lack of clearly defined state policies or measures or the lack of will or effective mechanism to enforce such policies or measures if there are any.

In spite of these regrettable omissions, I hope to have sketched out an outline for future research and writing. I proposed that contemporary Chinese entertainment culture is formed by way of interactions between increasingly commercialized Chinese media, the state’s relentless push to create profitable media giants, and the state’s strong desire to maintain its discursive relevance. Therefore to understand such culture and its political implications, it should be fruitful to start with examining these major formative forces.

References


