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From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: *Shenghuo* TV, Media Ecology and Stability Maintenance

Wanning SUN

Abstract: The most common framework through which we understand media communication and political/social stability in China is that of hegemony and control. This characterization may have served us well in documenting how the mandate for stability often results in censorship, regulation and restriction, but it has two major faults: First, the focus on crackdowns, bans and censorship usually tells us something about what the party-state does not like, but does not convey much about what it does like. Second, it often obscures the routine ways the party-state and the market work together to shore up ideological domination and maintain stability. In this analysis of the policies, economics and content of a broad range of television programmes, I suggest that we look at the media and communication as an ideological-ecological system in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between China's media practices and its ongoing objectives.

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Introduction

The most common framework within which we understand media communication and political and social stability in China is that of hegemony and control (e.g. Brady 2008; Hassid 2008; Tong 2010). This framework tends to take as given not only the desire and intention of the central propaganda authorities to control, but also the need on the part of the grassroots to contest and resist. This framework is often deployed to demonstrate the complex, ambiguous and often changing dynamics between the party-state and the market, and between the state and society, as well as the impact of such dynamics on China's social and political stability. This analytic matrix may have served us well in documenting how the mandate for stability often results in censorship, regulation and restriction. However, this framework comes with two problems. First, while a focus on censorship examines tensions between the party-state and the market, which flare up from time to time and threaten stability, it often obscures the everyday ways the two work together to bolster ideological domination and maintain stability. Second, the focus on crackdowns, bans and censorship usually informs us about certain things the party-state does not like, but it rarely reveals what it does like. Consequently, we are still somewhat unclear as to what constitutes the central propaganda authorities' normative expectations for the media. In other words, the question remains as to what the ideal "state of being" is that the party-state hopes to achieve through control.

But knowing the answer to this question is crucial to our understanding of how media contributes to stability maintenance. And since the government sees stability maintenance as pivotal to the realization of President Xi Jinping's "China Dream", understanding the party's expectations provides key clues to how China's media and communication system contributes to the rhetoric and vision of the China Dream at both the collective and individual levels. Intending this as a thought piece that aims to provoke further conversations rather than as an empirically based research paper, I evoke the metaphor of ecosystem in order to shed light on a few blind spots in the study of Chinese party-state's censorship practices. My main point is that by looking at China's media and communication as an ideological-ecological system, we can begin to explore the complex relationship and interaction between various media forms, genres and practices in the Chinese media and communication sector.

My use of the term “ecology” is deliberately undisciplined, aiming more to exploit the metaphoric value of the term than to profess a serious intention to join an established body of work on “media ecologies” (Clark 2009; Lum 2006; Strate 2006). Nevertheless, two insights from this “media ecology” approach are relevant here; the first is that media portrayals help sustain a relatively stable notion of human culture. This stability suggests the media works towards maintaining a state of equilibrium, keeping balance through a beneficent mix of media forms and practices. The second perspective is that media consists of a dynamic system in which any part is a variable, multiply connected, and therefore any media form or practice deserves to be viewed as part of a pattern rather than as a single, discrete object (Fuller 2007: 4). While taking these insights into consideration, my engagement of the metaphor also unfolds at a more specific level. To me, media genres and media formats are analogous to flora and fauna species, whose controlled diversity and complementarity need to be ensured in order that balance and equilibrium are maintained. My central argument is that in understanding the relationship between media practices and political stability, asking why some media genres and practices are allowed to thrive is as important as asking why others are culled or allowed to go “extinct”.

Focusing on the Chinese television sector, I pursue this argument in two parts. In the first part, I analyse the nature of the government’s anxiety regarding news and entertainment – the two “problematic” media genres that have lately come under tighter scrutiny. This is followed by a discussion of some “unproblematic” media forms. These programmes, including everyday advice and consumer information on a wide range of “life matters”, contribute significantly to the balance of ideological ecology, and it may even be possible that they have done more for stability maintenance and the party-state’s political legitimacy than have news and entertainment. Throughout the paper, I suggest that we should not only consider how control and censorship is exercised for the sake of achieving and maintaining stability but also look beyond news and entertainment for clues to how stability is achieved and maintained.

Entertainment a Win-Win Solution?

The political mantra of the reform period has been stability and unity, famously encapsulated in Deng Xiaoping's motto: "Stability trumps all" (稳定压倒一切, *wending yadao yiqe*). The connection between social and political stability and the regulation of media content is most obvious in numerous speeches made by the top leadership of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD). In a meeting organized by the CPD in January 2009, Li Changchun, a senior member of the Politburo, made it clear that

those in the cultural sector of propaganda and thought work must try hard to improve media's capacity to lead and guide public opinion, to strengthen and reinforce "main melodies" (主旋律, *zhu xuanli*) – that is, healthy and uplifting mainstream patterns of thought – and to work continuously in maintaining unity, stability and harmony (*China News* 2009).

Echoing this mandate, propaganda chief Liu Yunshan was more specific about propaganda strategies:

We must simultaneously watch out for potential risks and adversities [and] demonstrate confidence and determination. And we must keep a delicate balance between promoting positive messages, on the one hand, and neutralizing negative public morale [疏导公众情绪, *shudao gongzhong qingxu*], on the other (*China News* 2009).

At the same time, the government is also acutely aware that this "delicate balance" can only be achieved through controlled diversity. This commitment to diversity is evidenced in the report delivered by Hu Jintao to the 18th Party Congress, when he said, "We must ensure that that our social and cultural life is 'diverse and plentiful' (丰富多彩, *fengfu duocai*), and that our cultural products become more abundant and diverse" (Hu 2012). In other words, the function of the media can no longer be to singularly serve the party; instead, media must be multifunctional and aim to

- communicate news and current affairs,
- uphold moral guidance,
- engage in scientific education,
- provide suitable recreation, and
- offer information and services useful in viewers' everyday lives.

Diversity is also logical given that the identity of the television viewer has multiplied. Whereas in the Maoist era, the viewer was little more than a member of the “masses” (群众, *qunzhong*), the viewer nowadays is simultaneously a sovereign subject of the Chinese nation, a consumer, a citizen and a member of the public. Similarly, to fulfil these multiple roles of the media and ensure that there is something for everyone, television genres also need to be diverse, including news and current affairs, entertainment, consumer information and advice, public service and community notices, as well as advertising, and so on.

As is the case elsewhere, news is considered by the government to be the most important media genre. But news, especially news in the government-run media, has a very serious credibility problem (Shirk 2011). Furthermore, more than other media genres, news shoulders the greater share of responsibility of producing and maintaining the “main melody” – the dominant ideological and political values of the regime. From the point of view of the government, news, if managed “properly”, functions to maintain stability and shore up political legitimacy. However, if handled inappropriately, it runs the risk of causing or triggering widespread panic, chaos and social unrest. For fear of causing social instability, or in the name of maintaining stability, Chinese state media tends to deny or suppress sensitive information on a wide range of issues, including epidemic diseases, scandals involving food poisoning and accidents involving high numbers of casualties. The media’s initial cover-up of the 2003 SARS epidemic for fear of causing widespread confusion and panic among the people was a most telling example of the party-state’s instinctive desire to avoid chaos (Yu 2007, 2009; Shirk 2011). But it soon became apparent that such a tactic of risk management could only backfire, and would serve only to highlight the state’s inaction as well as the disastrous consequences of its inaction on the Chinese people’s sense of safety. In 2008, Chinese media’s initial cover-up of the Sanlu milk formula poisoning scandal, one of many incidents of this nature, resulted in the illness of thousands of infants, causing outrage from major international media outlets including the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, who published intensive coverage on the incident featuring headlines such as “Censorship Isn’t Good for China’s Health” (Kine 2008). More than any other media genre, news has to walk a tightrope between control and transparency.

Besides the politically sensitive nature of news, news is also much more expensive than other types of programming to produce, and generally does not attract high ratings. Given the decentralization of provincial and local television industries in fiscal and administrative terms, it is understandable that local and provincial television does not want to make news production a core business, especially since other mediums such as the Internet and social media outlets are bringing about diverse sources of information, which makes production of television news an onerous task. Due to these factors, most provincial stations have reduced the production of local and provincial news. They generally relay only the half-hour compulsory news bulletin from CCTV each day on at least one of each province's stations. These changes have resulted in a gradual shift in the scale, amount and format of news in the Chinese media. At local and provincial levels, the percentage of news and current affairs in the total quantity of media content is much smaller. In contrast, entertainment, which is pivotal to the economic survival of media enterprises and attracts much higher ratings than news, is instead becoming more and more popular.

The Political Risk of Entertainment

However, while this strategy had reaped enormous economic benefits for the media industry, at the same time it had clearly tipped the balance desired by the central government. In October 2011, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) – since 2013 the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SPPRFT) – issued a set of directives that set out to “clean up the screen” and shake up Chinese television in a number of profound ways (Bai 2015: 69). Among the changes stipulated in SARFT's “Further Recommendations on the Regulation of Provincial Satellite Television Programmes” are an increase of the quantity of news, a reduction of the quantity of entertainment and an improvement of the quality of the remaining entertainment programmes. According to the recommendations, as of 1 January 2012, all provincial satellite stations must show at least two hours of locally produced news from 6 a.m. to midnight each day; there must be at least two news programmes from 6 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. each day, and each of these two news programmes must not be shorter than half an hour in duration. The

recommendations call for an increase in the percentage of content in the areas of economics, culture, science and education, and in children's programming and documentaries, in addition to news. It also orders the reduction, even culling, of seven types of entertainment programmes, including the genres of dating, talent shows, quiz shows, talk shows and reality TV. It also stipulates that provincial satellite TV broadcast no more than two shows each day, limited to a total of 90 minutes (*Renmin Ribao* 2011).

According to SARFT's official spokesperson, these recommendations are intended to address a worrisome tendency towards "excessive entertainization" (娱乐过度化, *yule guodu hua*). It is clear that "excessiveness" refers to both the quantity and quality of entertainment programmes – there is too much entertainment, and these entertainment programmes are too vulgar. A recent survey commissioned by SARFT of entertainment programmes on provincial satellite television finds that there are currently 126 entertainment programmes on 34 provincial satellite television stations, featuring mainly themes of dating and friendship, talent contests, melodramas, games and quizzes, variety shows and talk shows featuring celebrity hosts. In addition, the "vulgar taste" of entertainment programmes and "widespread uniformity of entertainment formats" on Chinese television also leads to a waste of resources and a stifling of content innovation (*Renmin Ribao* 2011).

In addition, according to a new ruling by SARFT, the television sector is now banned from engaging in three kinds of practices: publishing a ranking of television programme ratings, eliminating programmes purely on the basis of poor ratings and judging the quality of a programme based on its ratings (*Renmin Ribao* 2011). This decision has incurred the ire of media industries. Some complain that if SARFT wants to dictate how provincial television stations should conduct their business – meaning, expecting them to operate like a public service institution – SARFT should be prepared to foot the bill (Bandurski 2011). The industry's annoyance seems justifiable. After all, it was the party-state which decided to withdraw most of its funding and told media to embrace commercialization and competition and to seek alternative sources of income through market measures. Furthermore, media industries were repeatedly told that as long as they toe the party line in producing politically sensitive news, they

would be left alone to do whatever they wanted with other genres such as entertainment.

We can view SARFT's reactions to entertainment programmes on Chinese television as a form of moral panic, whereby the party-state steps in to assume the role of arbitrating and defining vulgarity, bad taste and unacceptable moral values. But the source of this panic is, however, not so much an innate, aggrieved moral sensibility; rather it is a new realization that instead of an ideologically safer zone that evades or camouflages social conflicts, entertainment programmes can potentially highlight and amplify them. And accentuation of social conflicts is bad for stability maintenance and must be avoided at all costs. It is precisely because of the fear of giving visibility to social conflicts that dating shows such as *Only If You Are the One* on provincial television are judged to be "vulgar" and "trashy". As the highest-rated show on Jiangsu Satellite Television, the show captured the imagination of the national audience with the myriad blunt and often cruel remarks made by its contestants. Ma Nuo, now dubbed the "BMW girl", became a household name in China for her declaration on television: "I'd rather sit in a rich man's BMW crying than sit on the back of someone's bike smiling". Zhu Zhengfang, dubbed the "big house girl", famously said in one of the episodes: "Only my boyfriend can touch my hand; anyone else who wants to touch it has to pay 200,000 yuan" (Chen 2011: 57). The popularity of the show both alarmed and enraged the Chinese authorities. Initially criticizing it for blatantly promoting materialistic and individualistic values, and aggravating the tension between the rich and the poor, SARFT requested that the show either lift its moral standard or risk suspension. Succumbing to pressure, the show went through a few cosmetic changes, adding rural migrant workers, communist party-school academics and economically and socially marginalized identities to the lists of participants.

Nevertheless, despite these interventions, SARFT's recommendations iterate its commitment to maintaining diversity.

We are not objecting to the plentiful and stratified entertainment programmes which have mushroomed to cater to the diverse tastes and demands of audiences. We expect this to happen in a fast-changing society which is experiencing economic transition. But we do object to the tendency of some entertainment programmes to go down the slippery slope of vulgarity and trashiness (*Renmin Ribao* 2011).

In other words, diversity is desirable, and balance between serious news and entertainment needs to be maintained, but the government must dictate the terms and conditions by which such diversity and balance is maintained. These terms and conditions dictate that, first, the supremacy of “main melodies” must be upheld and, second, there must be a hierarchical ordering of television genres and formats as seen fit by the government and its delegated authorities.

What SARFT’s recommendations do not make clear – but which one can directly deduce from them – is that the government wants to reclaim the ideological battlefield of news. Reclaiming this space is deemed important for two reasons: First, the increasingly widespread use of the Internet and the proliferation of social media platforms means that urban residents, especially educated ones, are getting their news online, and often from alternative sources. At the same time, the majority of the Chinese population – the rural, the elderly and women from socio-economically disadvantaged groups – still see television as the main source of information and recreation, yet this audience has only minimum access to news of any kind due to the reduction of news on television. Given this, it would seem that the government has good reason to fear that news with ideologically sound messages may become a threatened or even an endangered species warranting extra protective and restorative measures.

In other words, the mandate to bring back more news may well be driven by a desire to recover a lost ideological battleground. While this impulse is understandable, there does not seem to be any evidence to suggest that the news as envisaged by the central authority will be allowed to be any different from the past. There is no talk of reforming formulaic news formats, the non-controversial didactic style of reporting, the preference for positive stories, or the reliance on government officials as news sources. There is no intention to change core standards of news worthiness, which currently focus on achieving harmony, preserving stability, stimulating the economy and promoting patriotism and nationalism. In fact, we can say with near certainty that at least in the near future only news which promotes harmony (rather than focusing on conflicts) will be allowed to air.

Two motivations are plausible as the reasons behind SARFT’s recommendations: First, by adding more unattractive news the party-state is simply trading the loss of audience appeal for an increased degree of balance and diversity. Second, entertainment programming

needs serious culling not simply because it is proliferating excessively. It is also because those entertainment programmes which highlight social conflicts and class tensions instead of promoting social harmony and stability are analogous to “poisonous weeds” – a metaphor which was in fact often used in socialist decades to describe “unhealthy”, “bourgeois” cultural texts that must be eradicated. In other words, control of both quantity and quality is seen as necessary to keep entertainment from growing wildly, like weeds, spreading unchecked and tipping the ideological-ecological balance.

Ideologically Sound Programmes

The vibrant growth of entertainment programmes such as *Only If You Are the One* is a direct consequence of cutthroat competition in the television market. This competition is largely due to the fact that since 1998, at least one channel from each provincial television station has gone national via satellite transmission. Whereas before then only CCTV could reach a national audience, now the average Chinese household receives up to 30 provincial satellite channels and a range of local channels in addition to the national programmes, taking the competition between central and provincial television and among various provincial television stations to an unprecedented level (Zhao 2008).

Throughout the past two decades, two television genres have been the mainstay of Chinese television. One is drama serials, which comprise about 30 per cent of the total television content (Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008: 1). Also, next to news and current affairs, it is also the most rigorously scrutinized and regulated form of programming (Zhao 2008). For this reason, the political economy and cultural politics of television drama as a genre and format has been systematically explored (Rofel 1994; Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008). In contrast, another staple genre, *shenghuo* (生活, “everyday life”) television, has so far largely eluded critical analysis.

The increasing popularity of *shenghuo* television can be explained in terms of privatization in the reform era. Privatization here does not simply refer to the rise of ownership of private property and the state’s retreat from a wide range of social services, including housing, education and health care. Equally important, it also refers to the subsequent process of “self-fashioning” (Ong 2008) and “self-train-

ing” in the realm of personal ethics, morality and emotion. Having transformed themselves from a “work-unit person” to a “social person” (Farquhar and Zhang 2012), individuals in China, more than ever before, are searching on their own for answers and solutions to a wide range of ethical, moral and practical questions. For the first time, many people realize that they are having to make decisions and choices on their own. This has given rise to anxiety, disorientation and insecurity in both material and psychological terms (Zhang and Ong 2008). In response to this, a wide range of media genres and formats have emerged to meet a number of political needs: to defuse discontent or even anger stemming from various types of social conflict, be it along the lines of gender, class or place; to provide people with practical information and advice for their everyday lives; and to give moral and ethical guidance to individuals caught in myriad dilemmas regarding how to conduct oneself in the world, and in relation to others.

Shenghuo television does precisely these things. Nowadays, most local, provincial and national stations have a number of designated channels and programmes designated for *shenghuo* TV. On any given day, Chinese television is filled with a perplexing array of *shenghuo*-themed shows, encompassing topics such as cooking, renovation, travelling, shopping, fashion, health and well-being, personal finances, legal advice, psychological and emotional therapy, relationship counselling, marriage advice and family dispute mediation. Ranging from CCTV 2’s renovation show *Changing Spaces* to Shanghai Television Channel Young’s *Fashion Guide*, from local Bengbu Television’s *Zero Distance to Health* to Zhejiang TV’s *Woman Who Likes to Help*, a plethora of lifestyle programmes that combine information with entertainment and employ a diversity of formats such as talk shows, reality TV and quizzes and games deliver on a regular basis much-needed knowledge about how to survive the economic and social challenges posed by economic reforms. The latest theme in the *shenghuo* programmes is job-hunting, with half a dozen shows on provincial television such as Tianjing Satellite TV’s *You Are Hired* vying for a national audience. In these shows, contestants subject themselves to the interrogation of prospective employers, and end up being accepted or rejected.

Shenghuo programmes combine practical knowledge and information with entertainment and are hugely popular (Xu 2007, 2009).

While they appear to be non-political on the surface, they are nevertheless more effective in teaching people a wide range of skills which are necessary to survive the turbulence caused by the transition from socialism to a neoliberal market economy. And in doing so, these shows perform a profoundly ideological role on behalf of both the party-state and capital (Lewis, Martin, and Sun 2012). In contrast to entertainment-oriented shows such as dating shows, which have offended central authorities for their provocative comments, the great majority of *shenghuo* programmes have served the twin masters of the party-state and the market most effectively by trumpeting the neoliberal messages, busily turning social issues such as poverty, poor health and lack of opportunities for individuals from disenfranchised groups into positive stories of diligent individuals achieving personal growth and self-cultivation, be it in the domain of health or mental and psychological well-being. These programmes give viewers the illusion – camouflaged as hope – that as long as one tries hard enough, these problems can be overcome. This is most clearly evidenced in the more than 1,300 lifestyle programmes on Chinese television which are devoted to teaching the nation how to engage in health improvement and take part in the “art of nourishing life” (养生, *yangsheng*) (Zhou 2011). In other words, a nation of individuals who are excessively preoccupied with and actively involved in maintaining and improving their own health is deemed patently more conducive to stability than a population that is politically subversive and socially discontented. While the didactic instructions from party leaders and government officials are often viewed with scepticism, the advice on a range of “life matters” comes from doctors, psychologists, scientists and experts, and the public often sees no reason to suspect that these shows have any hidden agenda other than transmitting scientific, objective and practical knowledge. It is precisely for this reason that some suggest that commercial media in China in fact can do more effective “thought work”, since readers, while they can be sceptical of the state media, nevertheless have an implicit trust in the commercial media outlets (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013).

Moreover, these programmes present themselves in such a way to have viewers believe that social issues such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, and so on, can in fact be solved if the individual seeks to improve her- or himself through learning and self-development – whether it is through improving one’s appearance, attitude or

social and cultural capital. Instead of advocating social change, which might have political and ideological causes and consequences, these programmes present solutions which seem technical and scientific (Sun and Zhao 2009). The ideological desirability and political viability of these media products that advocate self-responsibility becomes clear when judged against the criteria of “good” cultural practice envisaged by the outgoing Party Chairman Hu Jintao, who said in his report to the 18th Party Congress, “We must guide our people to engage in cultural practices in which they can express themselves, educate themselves and provide service to themselves” (Hu 2012).

In other words, SARFT has no problems with entertainment. What it does not like is entertainment with no clear – or worse, with a questionable – moral orientation. Entertainment that teaches people “desirable” values is eminently more preferable. Media practitioners are repeatedly reminded of the importance of “education through entertainment” (寓教于乐, *yu jiao yu le*). Producers of *shenghuo* programmes are masterful in acting out this ethos. Featuring the strong message of self-improvement and self-responsibility, and armed with experts, counsellors and scientists ready to dispense guidance and advice, these shows are thriving like “young spring bamboo shoots after a rain” (to use another ecological metaphor in Chinese).

Education through Entertainment

We now turn to some examples of how “education through entertainment” is accomplished. The first example is from national television. Every Sunday evening, the nation is treated to a new episode of *Under the Auctioneer’s Hammer* on CCTV. The programme follows this format: The owner of the art object introduces the item, usually an antique piece of art, be it a Ming Dynasty vase or a Qing Dynasty urn; the owner is then invited to weave in autobiographical information, including how the art object came into his or her possession. An expert – usually an art historian – is called upon to give historical and cultural knowledge about the art object; the owner is invited to name a price; a panel of bidders take turns estimating the worth of the object in dollars; the owner is offered a chance to provide a rejoinder to the evaluations from the panel; the three highest bidders are invited to engage in another round of bidding amongst themselves; and, finally, either a deal is struck or the object is passed on. The show

finishes with a final assessment and evaluation from an art investment specialist, who offers his opinion on whether the bidder has paid too much or the owner has sold for too little, according to the market price.

There are no right and wrong decisions made on this show – only sound and unsound investments, and risk-taking or risk-averse individuals. By providing a regular dose of knowledge that mixes art, history, money and objects for the high-brow viewer who is seeking opportunities to maximize his or her financial gains from a wide range of middle-class financial activities – be it dabbling in the stock market, investing in real estate or purchasing antique furniture or expensive art work – the show encourages the formation of a “prudent subject of risk”, who must be “responsible, knowledgeable and rational” (O’Malley 1996: 202). The crucial point of linkage is the notion of value, to be explored, understood and assessed according to the interweaving logic of the artistic value and market worth. More importantly, the show encourages the individual to own up to their responsibility for the choices and decisions they make and the risk they take. Each participant in the show – the bidders as well as the owner of the art object – is there to take a calculated risk. While everyone can win, the winner is someone who has taken it upon himself to master the knowledge of the most useful market-driven strategies and calculative tactics, and who is most capable of translating this knowledge into practice. In other words, if you win, you deserve it because you have done your homework; if you lose, you deserve it equally, because you have not done your homework. Here, the difference between the rich and poor seems attributable to the difference in one’s willingness and capacity to take the initiative, own up to one’s responsibilities and acquire the techniques and skills necessary to exploit the logic of risk, rather than becoming the victim of it.

To move from national to local television and get a representative sample from the latter, let us turn to Bengbu TV. Bengbu is a third-tier city in the relatively less developed province of Anhui in Eastern China. In comparison with national and metropolitan channels, *shenghuo* programmes we see on local terrestrial television such as Bengbu TV are made on a shoestring budget and appear decidedly basic – some may say crude – in their style, presentation and content. Despite this, *Zero Distance to Health*, a health and well-being programme featuring a number of segments, including the “Health Hot-

line” and “Doctors’ Forum”, runs for half an hour each day, and is repeated once the following day. On the episode from 30 May 2011, a day I chose randomly for analysis, viewers are told to be aware of ten killers in the kitchen, including but not limited to dishwashing rags (containing germs), cupboards (harbouring germs), the refrigerator (a place for germs to cross-fertilize), detergent (for its chemical ingredients), food packaging (plastics can cause infertility), plastic wrapping (which can cause cancer when heated and consumed) and frying pans (which can cause a fire). Again, this information comes from experts, whose identity, credentials and sources of information almost always remain unknown. The host of the Health Hotline seems to assume it is sufficient to tell viewers, often through her own voice-over, that this advice comes from “a report written in Europe and the US”, and that the suggestions are based on the “latest scientific research”. The final segment on the show is about how to correctly choose antibiotics, in view of a widely held assumption that newer and more expensive antibiotics deliver a more effective outcome. The programme suggests, quoting doctors, that generic antibiotics, which may not be as expensive as new brands, may be even more suitable or effective than the brand-name varieties, so patients should learn to discern the appropriate antibiotics based on function rather than brand.

Local television such as Bengbu TV regularly presents a large amount of “neutral” information and knowledge – scientific, legal, financial and technological – which consumers and citizens must acquire in order to manage the risks of everyday life. Although the figure of the cultural intermediary – doctors, scientists and counselors – is crucial, it is down to the individuals to assume the responsibility for managing risk. With the dissolution of work units, and the disappearance of its attendant modes of top-down, mass-movement, campaign-style propaganda, television in the living room in the reform era, turned on and off with the remote control of an entire nation of individual viewers, becomes the means and medium of inculcating the new-fangled ethics of self-responsibility.

Audiences are not only encouraged to be self-responsible, they are also told to adjust, correct and improve their behaviour, personality and their ways of thinking and feeling in order to achieve harmony and success in life. To promote this idea, emotional, psychological and relationship counsellors are in high demand. We can see how this works from an episode of *Speak Loudly*, a relationship coun-

selling show on Chongqing Satellite TV. The episode from 3 June 2013 features a young, quarrelling couple about to get married. Having given the couple the opportunity to justify and account for their respective behaviour, the experts step in to diagnose the problem, offer advice and, above all, provide moral critique. When the young woman complains that her fiancé no longer indulges and spoils her as he did in their university years, Tu Lei, a prominent relationship counsellor on the panel, has this to say to her:

Have you thought about why he is no longer happy with you? It's not just because you can't make beds or you don't want to wash dishes. You have a more serious problem. You haven't realized that that when you were young, put on your feminine charm, and demanded to be indulged by your boyfriend, people may think you are cute; but now you are an adult and about to start a married life, and if you still behave like a child, you will repulse people. People change, and their roles change, too. You need to grow up.

The presence of intermediaries such as emotional and psychological counsellors makes these shows more didactic than *If You Are the One*. This difference may partly explain why they do not travel as well as *If You Are the One*, which appeals to international as well as Chinese audiences. At the same time, more anchored in Chinese morality and cultural values, the aim of these didactic shows is to guide as well as to entertain. Their gentle persuasion as well as scathing condemnation (as evidenced in the above comment) constitutes for viewers a new form of disciplinary power in post-socialist China. This power requires the individual to engage in the “process of problematization” by asking which aspects of their behaviour can be changed and improved (Rose 1998: 25).

Actively promoting the message of self-responsibility and self-improvement, these programmes are the unsung heroes in the ideological ecology of the Chinese television, but their role in the process of stability maintenance has gone widely unacknowledged. To be sure, they are not as spectacularly highly rated as dating shows such as *Only If You Are the One*, and they are not a direct vehicle to communicate the government's political agenda. They are analogous to those flora species which, though they are humble in appearance and grow easily in most places, are nevertheless crucial in preventing soil erosion, desertification, droughts and floods. These programmes can simultaneously promote socialist values and a neoliberal agenda, and

yet the ideologies implicit in them are so deeply embedded that they appear to be merely common sense and “natural”. Rather than highlighting social tensions, as some dating shows do, these lifestyle programmes activate the trope of motivation, self-help and personal growth, giving people the message that everyone has equal access to opportunities and social mobility. For this reason, such shows have a profoundly ideological impact of rendering social conflicts invisible, yet the party-state, television sector and the market do not care to openly admit their ideological and political usefulness.

Conclusion

Focusing on controversial media formats and genres tells us what happens when political needs and market initiatives clash, posing a potential threat to stability. But this is only half of the picture. The other half, which runs the risk of being obscured by the focus on censorship, is equally, if not more, important: How do the party-state authorities and the market work together to ensure that the stability-maintenance machinery is well-oiled and functioning smoothly?

There is a widespread assumption informing the regulation policy: Diversity in media content is necessary not in spite of, but precisely because of, the mandate to preserve stability. The implicit assumption is that if various parts of the media are implemented and interact as they should, the balance and “biodiversity” of the ideological-ecological system should remain intact, and hence stability can be ensured. Similarly to the way that balance and equilibrium are needed to ensure ecological soundness in the natural world, policy statements and top leaders view the balance and equilibrium of various forces – social, cultural, economic and political – as the key to both maintaining stability and realizing the China Dream. Although it is widely known that news on state television has to promote “main melodies” through hackneyed formats, the propaganda dosage is mostly well-balanced, counteracted and made bearable by its being sugarcoated with a plethora of entertainment programmes so that, ultimately, watching television is on the whole an entertaining experience rather than a didactic one.

In light of this, the mission of the party-state is not to control media for the sake of control, but to carefully monitor and intervene in a timely fashion to stem any tendency which, from the authorities’

point of view, threatens the balance and equilibrium of the ideological ecosystem. In the same way that the introduction of a foreign species or the sudden death of an existing species may be cause for concern regarding the balance of the natural world, the diversity of various media genres is a delicate and ongoing balancing act. When the political need to maintain diversity dovetails with the market's drive for profit, equilibrium is achieved. This equilibrium may well be what Hu Jintao means when he says that the social benefit of cultural production must take precedence but that the ultimate goal is to achieve "synergy between social benefit and economic benefit" (Hu 2012). However, when the market forces get the better of the politics, SPPRFT does not hesitate to step in and "play God". As Brady (2008) observes in her study of the control mechanism of propaganda, ideological concerns are still more important than economic concerns, as far as the mission of propaganda work is concerned.

Comparing television genres and formats on state-owned Chinese media outlets to living organisms in the natural environment is analytically useful, as long as we are clear about one major premise: The diversity of media genres, formats and practices on Chinese television is not the same thing as – and in fact, may even work to inhibit – political pluralism, tolerance of alternative ideological perspectives and an expanded space for public debate or in-depth investigation. In deploying the metaphor of biodiversity, it has not been my intention to imply that the party-state, through SARFT, has consciously applied an ecological approach in its policy deliberations. What I have done is to describe and account for the ways in which the Chinese propaganda authorities manage the environment of the Chinese media and communications sector to achieve and maintain social and political stability. This perspective allows us to better delineate the internal connections and relationships within the sector. We are therefore able to throw into sharp relief a large proportion of media content, such as life advice programmes, whose stabilizing role is largely unnoticed, let alone understood. An ecological lens enables us to view the various parts of the Chinese media landscape as inherently connected and mutually impacting. Unlike the control and propaganda perspective, which focuses on censorship, an ecological approach allows us to illuminate areas that have previously been obscured despite demonstrating a profound political impact.

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