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Wenna Zeng

*School and Media and Communication, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China*

Colin Sparks

*School of Communication, Department of Journalism, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong*

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## **Production and politics in Chinese television**

Wenna Zeng, Shenzhen University, China

Colin Sparks, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

### **Abstract**

Political pressure and censorship are unavoidable conditions for producing an entertainment show in Chinese TV. The relationships between a production team and the government are, however, extremely complex. Based on participant observation in a TV channel and in-depth interviews with related television professionals, this article analyses the tensions between production and politics in Chinese television. The article argues that a centralized and top-down model fails to capture all the aspects of power relations in television production. A more productive starting point is that television production necessarily involves negotiation between different participants. This article analyses relations between the production team, the central broadcasting authorities and local governments. The production team in this case study utilized different strategies to negotiate with multiple levels of government.

### **Keywords:**

China, ideological control, negotiated power, negotiation strategy, production studies, television format

## Introduction

Most studies of Chinese media stress the top-down nature of political control, reflecting the fact that the Communist Party of China (CPC) controls all outlets (Zhao, 1998; Zhao, 2008). This paper, based on extensive participant observation in the production team of a reality show – *Hurry Up, Brother* -- offers a more nuanced picture of the ways in which power is exercised in Chinese television. Power relations, it is argued, are best understood as a process of negotiation. Different parties to a production process bring distinctive expertise that allows them to avoid complete subordination to those who, in the abstract, are more powerful than themselves.

In this paper, we concentrate upon the relationships between the production team and various levels of the Chinese state. We show that while the producers are bound to follow the instructions of the central government, even here there is some room for manoeuvre and to negotiate formulations that allow them pursue their own objectives within the frameworks set from above. In the case of the provincial and local governments with which they interact, they generally have greater scope for negotiation and a higher degree of freedom. The condition for their negotiations, however, is that they understand the parameters within which they operate and accept the legitimacy of the authorities.

This paper begins with a discussion of how ideas of power have been embedded in previous television production studies. It then situates the programme studied in the context of Chinese television and describes the methodology used to gather data. The bulk of the paper is an analysis of how some of the decisions necessary in any production were made. Throughout, the emphasis is upon the relationship between the producers of the programme and the mechanisms by which political power is exercised. This is not the only possible focus for a discussion of power negotiations. There are numerous other relations involving power

present in any production: there are, for example, internal relations within the production team itself as well as their relationship to various other bodies like advertisers etc., which involve the same kinds of issues (Zeng & Sparks, 2017; Zeng, 2017). The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the analysis presented here.

### **TV production and power**

This paper is part of a broader study concerned with different dimensions of power as they manifested themselves in the experiences of TV production workers and can be placed within a trend in production studies that has found that producers are ‘acutely aware of power differentials in the realm of media production and in the world at large’ (Mayer, 2008, p. 142). The prevalence of what we might term ‘Weberian’ external power sources intervening in creative decisions was captured in a classic study of Hollywood studio production, which argued that it involves the ‘business of satisfying executives who have to satisfy other executives – all with opinions about the opinions of a mass market’ (Gitlin, 1983, p. 132). According to Gitlin, the entertainment industry was divided into different layers, in which the proliferation of power means ‘executive involvement at every stage of decision-making and program production’ (Gitlin, 1983, p. 129).

In common with an overall shift in the intellectual climate away from theories of power as externally imposed, writers influenced by Foucault have tended to give more weight to the ways in which media workers shape their own selves in order to produce and reproduce the existing relations of power (Lee, 2012; Wei, 2012). One writer, discussing the situation of women production workers in Ireland, wrote: ‘It is deemed more viable by the workers to be the perfect disciplined subjects, to self-regulate, and deny gendered practices than to generate discussion of the structural problems of gendered work in the Irish television industry’ (O'Brien, 2015, p. 260).

In the Chinese case it is difficult fully to subscribe to either of these general

approaches to the nature of power. The notion of power as something imposed externally and from above has an obvious relevance in China since, as an authoritative commentator put it: ‘Party leadership remains the central and unchallengeable principle of political life in the PRC’ (Gilley, 2014, p. 120). On the other hand, there is also evidence to support a more distributed notion of power. The economic development of China has multiplied the centers of power within the CPC such that ‘government decrees fail to reach beyond the walls of Zhongnanhai [the government compound in Beijing]’ (Wang, 2016). Similarly, while economic success depends ultimately upon the support of the CPC, the wealth of the new entrepreneurial class allows them to exert influence over the government apparatus (Pei, 2016). The Chinese media consequently operates in an environment with multiple power centers (Tong, 2010; Sun, 2012). At the same time, there is certainly resistance in China, ranging from the ‘tactical’ evasion of social rules through to mass strikes over wages and citywide public demonstrations on environmental issues (China Labour Bulletin, 2017; Lee & Ho, 2014; Sun, 2014).

A conception of power as complex and multi-directional thus provides a better starting point. The production of a television programme involves reconciling the divergent capacities of different participants – political, economic, technical, aesthetic, and so on. It follows that the various parties need to agree on how their capacities will be coordinated. Such an approach brings us close to ‘negotiated order theory’ that focuses on the informal aspects of organizations and how tacit internal agreements are made (Becker, et al., 1961; Freidson, 1974). From this point of view, the reconciliation of different capacities is ongoing and provisional, both for the wider society and for the organizations that constitute it, and thus ‘negotiation is fundamental for the understanding of social organizations’ (Svensson, 1996, p. 380; Strauss, 1978). Negotiated order theory views power as varying according to the nature of different events, situations and actions. Power is ‘situational and contingent’ and

subordinate groups, such as nurses in hospitals, can sometimes control events, rather than the theoretically more powerful doctors (Day & Day, 1977, p. 131; Svensson, 1996).

The shift in production studies away from a concentration upon key creative personnel towards what Mayer calls ‘workers below the line,’ (Mayer, 2011) and the stress upon the relations between the production staff and their audiences, opens the way for an approach to power in production as best analysed in terms of negotiation (Mayer, 2016). Hill, for example, writes that power is neither ‘overwhelmingly negative’ nor is ‘all power in the people’s hands’ but is better understood as a set of ‘push and pull’ relations (Hill, 2016, p. 765). Similarly, Heuman, writes that his aim is ‘to explore negotiations and transformations of the writers’ institutional role’ (Heuman, 2017, p. 43; Heuman, 2016). The concept of negotiation is utilised to understand the historical, social and cultural meanings of media contexts. The analysis of relations between media workers and the other factors, such as political participants, data analytics, new production models and global power relations, are central to the approach (Velkova & Jakobsson, 2015; Lundgren & Evans, 2017; Dindler, 2015; Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015 ).

Viewing production processes as the result of negotiations between parties that bring differentiated resources to resolution of creative disputes is a productive starting point for understanding the outcomes we observed in practice. It is true that the relationship between media producers and political power in China constitutes something of a limit case of such an approach, since the distribution of power is ultimately so systematically unequal but, if we can demonstrate a degree of negotiation in the exercise of power in these conditions, then it is likely we will find much more evidence in less constrained situations.

### **Chinese broadcasting**

All Chinese television production takes place under political supervision, since the CPC's political influence is decisive in any contentious issue (Brady, 2008; Volland, 2012; Tai, 2014). It involves, however, a minute division of labour and the co-ordination of a wide range of expertise to produce a successful programme and political will is only one factor. All of the participants in the production of television show – the CPC as much as the producers, advertisers and participants – want to produce a successful show, and their decisions are moderated by that desire.

'Success' in this context can be understood in three ways. One is the basic political criterion of meeting the CPC's propaganda objectives (Wang, 2010; Hawes & Kong, 2013; Guo, 2017; Wang, 2017). The second is commercial success: broadcasting in China depends upon advertising revenues and audience demographics are crucial to this income stream (Zhao, et al., 2013; Keane, 2015; Zhang, 2014) . Thirdly, the CPC emphasises moving up the value chain, from a reliance on foreign models that are only 'made in China' to original products 'created in China' (Keane, 2013; Pang, 2012; Su, et al., 2013). In television production, this means a drive towards 'creativity,' and the expertise of the professional staff is at a premium. A politically acceptable show that produces a large audience not only satisfies the professional aspirations of its production team and the financial aspirations of its production company but also meets the cultural and economic goals set by the Communist Party. As one scholar put it, China Central Television (CCTV) is trying to balance between 'becoming a professional source, [a] mouthpiece of the Party, [and] maximizing its profit by appealing to public interest' (Zhu, 2012, p. 3). Similar challenges face all broadcasters.

In many cases, including the one under consideration here, these conflicting pressures are reconciled through the processes of negotiation that we outlined above. There are, however, exceptions to this rule in which the outcome is less positive. The worst situation is when the authorities impose a ban. In the last few years a wide range of shows have been

banned, as the Table One shows. In most cases, the reason for the ban is either that the show is held to display 'vulgar' qualities or that it uses violent footage. The reasons are very often not directly political: two famous animations, *Tom and Jerry* and *Pleasant Goat and Big, Big Wolf* (in Chinese character 喜洋洋与灰太郎), were also banned (Mu, 2017).

### **[Table One about here]**

The banning of individual shows is part of a more general policy by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)<sup>1</sup>. One reason for the policy is to reduce the perceived 'low quality' of much entertainment and the vogue for copying foreign programming that followed the success of *Super Girl* (in Chinese character 超女) in 2004-2006. This kind of programme is thought to be 'homogenising' TV (Yang, 2014). The so-called 'Cutback on TV entertainment' (in Chinese character 限娱令) was launched in 2011 and has since had an impact on many aspects of Chinese entertainment television (Lu & Li, 2014). The policy has influenced the duration of programmes, the times at which certain type of programmes can be broadcast, and the quota and genres of imported shows. The effect has been particularly severe for talents shows, reality shows, dating shows and game shows. Broadcasters, however, have continued to license formatted reality shows from overseas but now broadcast them outside of prime time. Such changes in the market led the government to introduce a reinforced version of 'Cutback on TV entertainment' by way of a quota policy in 2013. The 'One format policy' stipulates that every channel can only import one foreign television format per year, and must apply for permission from SARFT two months beforehand (Qu, 2013). Subsequently SARFT introduced even stricter regulations, for example discouraging children's reality shows in 2015 and, in 2016, discouraging the import of Korean material.

### **'Hurry Up, Brother' and television formats**

It is against this highly politicized and restrictive background that the case examined here

was produced. *Running Man* was created by the Korean Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), the format of which was bought by Zhejiang Satellite TV (ZSTV) in 2014, who then localized it into *Hurry Up, Brother*. This show was extremely successful, having the highest audience rating in its class. ZSTV is regarded as one of the four main entertainment television channels in China, along with Hunan Satellite TV, Jiangsu Satellite TV and Shanghai TV. These channels are in fierce competition with each other as well as with the national broadcaster CCTV. ZSTV is owned by the Zhejiang Radio and Television Group and reports to the Zhejiang Provincial Government. Because of the limitations of expertise available to ZSTV, an independent company was hired for post-production work in this show.

The international trade in television formats has been a major research area in television studies for the last two decades. The trade has experienced rapid growth and involves global and regional format developers and partnerships with local producers (Oren & Shahaf, 2012, p. 14; Khalil, 2017; Fung, 2004). The popularity of formats is a consequence of the fact that they promise high audience ratings, low development costs, mature television ideas and easy applicability, constituting a ‘primetime staple’ (Esser, 2010, p. 273). Much of the discussion of formats has been concerned with their localization and the nature of the hybrid products that result from the adaptation of a global artefact to a particular national market (Rivero, 2012, p. 91; Beeden & Bruin, 2010, pp. 3-19; Straubhaar, 2007; Keane, et al., 2007; McMillin, 2007; Zhang & Fung, 2014; Turner & Tay, 2009; Elasmr, 2014). *Hurry Up, Brother* shares these elements of localization and hybridization in which the nature of the television format requires negotiation between foreign professionals and the local production team (Zeng & Sparks, 2017).

This research was based on six months of participant observation by the principal author in the production team of *Hurry Up, Brother* in 2015. It was supplemented by 29 interviews, including with 24 professionals related to the production of *Hurry Up, Brother*, working for

ZSTV, the post-production company, and Korean SBS. Another 5 interviews were with experts in the general television industry. All the interviewees and those observed in this article are presented anonymously and are assigned numbers with C (for Chinese) or K (for Korean) as a prefix, as in 'C1' or 'K1'.

### **Production and SARFT**

Like all programmes, entertainment shows in China operate under political control (Guo, 2017). *Hurry Up, Brother* was not the subject of any special intervention by SARFT, but it did require approval to begin production. These political realities were obvious to everyone. A DIY postcard hanging on the wall of the series editing room read: 'How to negotiate with SARFT is a compulsory course for all television people'<sup>2</sup>. Political control is not, however, all encompassing. A Chinese television professional explained:

The government encourages us to be creative, but the government has a bottom line, and we dance with our talents above it. We can try many things, but we cannot challenge authority in some areas, such as politics. You will not win (C1, 10th June 2015).

Every season, ZSTV needed to get approval for their plans from both the Zhejiang provincial government and SARFT before the starting production. According to one producer, the main documents presented to SARFT were concerned with what the show would look like overall and its popularity in Korea. The production team did not need to submit the full information and filming plans for every episode. They submitted basic information about the season, which included answers to questions such as: 'Who are the participants?'; 'What type show is envisaged?'; and 'How is the show planned to develop during the season?'. Once production was underway, SARFT reviewed the first episode to decide whether the program could be broadcast (SARFT, 2015). There have been cases where programs were postponed or cancelled at this stage, but that is rare (C2, 3rd July 2015). After the first episode of the first season, ZSTV did not need to hand over any further copies to Beijing. Normally, SARFT

does not participate in filming and editing with the production crew but monitors it during post-production.

For Season II, the first episode received criticism from ‘someone in SARFT’ over a ‘buttocks issue’ after its first broadcast. Two female celebrities, Angela-baby and Fan Bingbing, competed in a game (Chinese name 坐瓢) that involved shots of a part of their bodies that caused offence. The conflict between professional judgement and the government’s ideological concerns was explained by a professional:

Right after the live broadcast, we received critical feedback saying we used too many close-up shots of Fan Bingbing’s buttocks: ‘Why is it always about buttocks on the TV screen? What did you want to represent?’ Our managers imposed stricter self-censorship on our editing after that. [Interviewer: What happened to the first episode finally?] We did modify the video for the website and rebroadcast it on the second day. We deleted all the footage of her buttocks. Hence, the audience would only see pictures of a broken wooden bottle instead of her movements. It was much funnier to see the original version because it was unbelievable that Fan would do that. [Interviewer: Is this similar to the issue with Wu Mei Niang’s chest? <sup>3</sup>] At least that drama showed her body, but in this show, Fan wore trousers. I do not really understand why there was criticism (C3, 14th September 2015).

Since *Hurry Up, Brother’s* broadcast schedule overlapped with the editing of later episodes, SARFT could send messages to the post-production team as to what was permissible in future based on what had already been broadcast. For example, some of the catchphrases invented by celebrities in the show, such as ‘Are you a pig?’ and ‘What is the ghost?’ were forbidden by the government, since both ‘ghost’ and ‘pig’ are considered negative words and were thought to have a bad effect on teenagers.

In cases like this, the producers were unable to challenge SARFT and were obliged to negotiate with the celebrities to invent inoffensive catchphrases that addressed ‘positive energy and mainstream values’. A staff working in creative section said:

SARFT’s point of view is that reality shows are growing too fast recently, so all the producers should pay attention to quality. Especially for big shows, like *Hurry Up, Brother*, we should pay attention to positive energy and spread socialist values. Hence, in the following season, we changed a bit how we presented positive energy

and values. For example, the aim of all the games in the first episode of that season is to examine the celebrities' teamwork and unity. (C4, 13th September 2015).

The government's ideological concerns are regarded as firm guidance for the producers. The basic rule for negotiation with the central government by the local production crew is not to cross the boundary delimiting politically, socially and culturally sensitive content.

Government power is strong, but that does not mean that the production crew has neither negotiating strategies nor bargaining resources. Avoidance is one of the most common negotiation strategies to reduce the risk of political intervention. This includes changing sensitive concepts, playing word games, changing the business model, and changing the title. For example, in selling the idea of the program to SARFT, ZSTV faced restrictions on the number of imported formats. Their solution was simple:

You see, from 2014, every satellite channel can import only one format show, but the programs broadcasting now in China are almost all formatted shows. The limitation on imports, in fact, does not affect our work very much. We changed the title (in Chinese characters: 改头换面) and the business model of cooperation. For example, we 'co-create' with our foreign partners or we 'co-produce' with them. Then it is not an 'imported product', but a 'joint production.' Our government pretends not to notice it (C5, 15th April 2015).

For *Hurry Up, Brother*, the local team changed some elements of the original show. Local producers tended to use games from the Korean version, but sometimes these did not fit the Chinese context. For example, in the fifth episode of Season II, the concept of the original *Running Man* was not consistent with mainstream ideology and the producers made changes to preserve the content of the episode:

We copied the story from the Korean version of *Hurry Up, Brother* in the fifth episode of the second season. The main story is about a child that died in Minguo times. At that time, Zheng Kai (a celebrity) played the role of a dead man as a ghost. Before we filmed, this proposal was approved by our managers, but after filming and editing, this concept was questioned by our senior staff because SARFT would not allow us to promote the concepts of feudalism, ghost spirits, and horror. Hence, we decided to use the concept of 'travelling across the third time world' (in Chinese characters: 穿越) to avoid the concept of 'ghost' (C6, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

The word ‘ghost’ was not used at all in this show. In addition, the animation was designed to portray a romantic love story with a feeling of ‘time-travel,’ not the impression of any ghostly presence.

The cumulative effect is that, even though the government has many regulations, the complex definition of cultural terms allows professionals to use their creativity to avoid trouble. The production crew pay close attention to political concerns but they also use their knowledge to define the content in ways that will avoid censure. There are clear rules laid down by SARFT that cannot be challenged and there are other rules that can be redefined and negotiated informally. A professional working in this channel summed up the relationship between broadcasters and SARFT as the same as that between an employee and a manager with whom one can negotiate:

SARFT is our authoritative department; they can control, can give us suggestions, and can take charge of us.... [But] to me, SARFT seems like a manager. For example, XX is my manager in this channel, but what XX gives me is a suggestion saying that ‘this may be better’ or ‘that may be better’. However, I will not listen to XX all the time, and I will probably respond with ‘XX, what do you think about this, it may be better’. XX may accept my view too (C4, 13th September 2015).

The political bottom line obviously cannot be ignored, while overall Chinese policy is unclear and changeable. This gives the production team the room to be more flexible. As one producer puts it:

I personally feel that our country’s policy is a big problem. They do not have stable rules; they do not regulate the percentages of production produced by independent companies and broadcasters in the market. I do not know the direction for general policies either. SARFT is quite smart: they do not tell us very clearly, they require us to apply for approval and they want a detailed plan (C8, 13th August 2015).

The standard of censorship is not fixed; on the contrary, it can be changed all the time depending on the location, the broadcaster, the local government, and even a powerful individual who makes comments on the program.

### **Local problems and local negotiations**

As an outdoor reality show, *Hurry Up, Brother* is also involved with many local governments. Gaining access to a suitable location involves negotiations with propaganda departments, police stations, and city councils. Season II's outdoor filming was difficult because huge audiences visited the locations to see the celebrities involved in the show. In Chengdu, where the famous film star Fan Bingbing made her first appearance as a guest in a reality show, thousands of people surrounded the location at the Chengdu International Finance Square, wanting to get a glimpse of the star.

Before filming, ZSTV got oral permission from the local government, but the crowd was so big that the local police did not want to risk a public stampede like the Shanghai accident in 2014. As a television professional working with this show put it:

It was around 4pm in Chengdu. While we were filming the second game, more than one hundred police officers got out of three buses and took charge of the location. The police commander negotiated directly with our head coordinator, and told us to stop the filming immediately. However, we could not simply stop because, without this game, the episode would be too short. In addition, because the game needs a specialized and complex set, and Fan Bingbing planned to leave Chengdu the next day, we could not film in another place (C9, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

This constituted a major crisis for the production team. If they followed police instructions and abandoned shooting, they would be left without the material for a complete program. On the other hand, they were certainly not in a position to defy a senior police commander. The production team began a series of tense negotiations with the local authorities. Although the latter had the power to physically control the situation, the production team could wield the weapon of popular opinion:

Zhejiang TV put pressure on the local (Chengdu) authority because we had made a verbal deal with them beforehand. They (the Zhejiang producers) said that if the city council did not allow us to film, we would call a press conference immediately and tell the audience that this episode could not be completed because of the police. Hence, the city council backed down and gave us one hour to finish. However, the name-tag ripping game still could not be filmed because this game needs space and there were too many fans around the building. Even our car could not access the building. It was almost impossible to control the area, so finally we moved elsewhere (K1, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015).

The temporary deal meant that the first and second games in the show could be filmed, but filming the final, iconic, game, the ‘name-tag ripping’, was not allowed. The team had to change the game to another less popular one called ‘eagle and chicken’ which could be shot more safely in a single location and which provided the necessary running time to make a full length program.

Normally, however, such direct confrontations did not occur. Control of the physical space used for location work remained a matter of concern for the police but the professionals have a standard solution to the problem:

Nowadays, the police’s attitude is that, if we ask for an application to film, then normally it is hard to get approval. However, if we can confine ourselves to a small area, and promise safe conditions by using our own security team, then the police will pretend they do not notice us (in Chinese characters 睁一只眼闭一只眼). If everyone is safe, then it is fine. If anything goes wrong, then it is our fault, not theirs, because we did not file an application before filming (C10, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2015).

Similar to the negotiations with SARFT, relations with the local state depend upon the authorities tolerating substantive circumventions of the proper procedures if there is sufficient excuse to justify their inaction. Broadcasters have media power that they can use to argue with local governments who are not their direct administrative authority but who need media support, since they wish to be seen to sustain the social harmony central government demands.

The above case involved the Zhejiang broadcaster and the Chengdu government, which are not from the same province. In cases where the broadcaster and government are in the same province, the degree of provincial political support in negotiations with the central government is the result of several factors, in particular the importance of a media organization to their province. Even though ZSTV is a big satellite broadcaster, its economic contribution to Zhejiang province is small and ‘they are not that much of a concern to the local government’ (C11, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2015). Zhejiang Radio and Television Group is a

provincial-level broadcaster headquartered in Hangzhou, the very prosperous capital of the very prosperous East Coast province of Zhejiang. On the other hand, one of its main competitors, Hunan Satellite TV, is more significant to the provincial government of impoverished Hunan and has more economic power in the capital city, Changsha, which does not have so many big companies. The provincial government is thus more likely to argue the broadcaster's case with higher levels of government.

### **Parents with Chinese characteristics**

These complex and subtle relations between the broadcasters and various levels of government were illuminated by interviewees who called SARFT a 'parent' who takes care of her children, but also punishes them when they 'cross the line'. These attitudes towards SARFT interventions differ amongst Chinese production teams. There were some interviewees, especially junior producers, who consider them wholly unwarranted infringements of their creativity. One spoke very frankly about their doubts on censorship and the bureaucratic system in traditional broadcasters (C12, 28th June 2015). However, the majority of respondents, particularly those in senior positions, do not argue against SARFT's censorship. One senior staff member in an independent company remarked:

Most of the people demonize SARFT by saying they do not give us any freedom. That is because we do not take the whole country into consideration when we respond to SARFT's guidance. One day, I saw a picture showing a classroom in a primary school. The whole class was watching *Hurry Up, Brother*. Then I began to understand SARFT's concerns. We must take the responsibility for these children, who do not have the ability to distinguish TV from reality (C7, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2015).

More experienced producers tend to respond to government policy and intervention more positively, since they consider them necessary. Most share the opinion that: 'Even though SARFT indeed has lots of policies, I do believe those policies are for the good, to protect our society, to protect our television network' (C2, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015).

The main reason given for this view concerns the vulnerability of the audience. Chinese television does not have a grading system and everyone, including children, can watch the same programs. That pushes SARFT and television professionals to regulate the content so that it is not violent, not vulgar, and does not encourage a negative attitude to the world. They fear that audiences, particularly those who are not well educated and are migrant workers, may imitate celebrity behaviour or copy a show's content and thus act illegally or inappropriately. An experienced television professional said:

Television has social responsibility, and indeed, most of it is political responsibility. Television still represents government; hence, the sensitive political issues are untouchable. We do not touch violent topics either and I think it is fine for government to regulate our society. We still have a certain degree of freedom, even though it is not that much compared with some other countries. The main reason is that our audiences are quite easily incited and many people do not think independently. For example, there are always rumours about our shows, saying how the producers manipulate the name-ripping game, saying that we have already planned the end of the show, such as who wins and who loses. That is ridiculous, but people believe it. Hence, I think we need SARFT to regulate something like that (C3, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015).

Moreover, some of the producers argued that censorship from the government is not that influential on the core of the show. They claimed it is mostly about tiny changes that can be replaced by different and equally interesting items. A senior staff member working in an independent company stated:

I think SARFT's management is good. Besides, the comments from SARFT are not involved with the structure or content -- most of it is similar to our editorial meetings and is about words and concepts. We can change it and still keep the main story. They criticize for good reasons, just like a parent and a child. If your show is famous and influential, the content will spread quickly, so SARFT will focus on your show more than others since they are taking responsibility for that. However, they will not require you to delete content, most of the time (C13, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015).

The senior producers and managers mostly understand the censorship and guidance from the SARFT in the context of 'guan' (Chinese character 管), which in Chinese has a positive meaning, that is, 'care of' and 'love' from parents to children, rather than simply 'to govern' (Tobin, et al., 1989; Chao, 1994, p. 1113).

Senior producers generally preferred to act more positively and maintain good relations with SARFT. They stressed the ‘positive energy and mainstream values’ of their show and tried to make sure that the broadcast texts contained nothing that would provoke a reaction. This is clearly a form of conscious self-censorship which is widely understood and shared amongst Chinese TV production staff and to which they are accustomed. Almost as much as in news production, part of the skill of an experienced and successful entertainment producer is to know what cannot be said and done, what needs to be handled carefully, and what it is safe to represent. This knowledge, much more than external censorship, is the major mechanism by which political conformity in Chinese television is reproduced on a daily basis.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence presented here suggests that, while political authority concentrated in SARFT is certainly the most powerful actor in the Chinese context, it does not operate in a wholly hierarchical fashion. There is some room, albeit highly constrained, for negotiation and adaptation. As well as the direct political influence of SARFT, negotiations involve economic factors, the importance of media as a propaganda tool, and the producers’ professional ability to substitute sensitive terms and issues with more acceptable material. Central control as exercised by SARFT represents a force against which ‘you cannot win’. Its instructions must be followed, whether one thinks them legitimate or not. More pervasive, however, is the fact that the production staff use their knowledge to pre-shape the material they produced in order to avoid problems. SARFT is, for example, quite aware of the ways in which broadcasters are manipulating the ‘one format’ policy, but they do not intervene, at least not publicly. They know that satellite television channels, provincially funded but competing in a national market, need popular content and financial success.

Central government itself is pursuing conflicting aims. One aim is promoting the development of entertainment divisions in order to separate them from the news department in traditional television channels (C8, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2015). At the same time, SARFT's successor has recently demanded more ideological conformity in entertainment, especially drama, as well as in news (Zhang, 2017). They still wish, however, for commercial and international success. This means they are obliged to permit a degree of flexibility outside of directly political questions. The complexity of cultural production, and the vagueness and generality of SARFT's prescriptions, mean that supervision of the details of production is generally exercised *post hoc*, as with the issue of Fan Bingbing's anatomy.

The acceptance of, even support for, SARFT's policies amongst senior staff are, in practice, of a more pervasive character than direct intervention. The Chinese broadcaster changed its relationship with SBS in order to evade the 'one format' policy and producers changed the details of the show to avoid conflicts. This 'self-censorship' is not, however, an exclusively Chinese characteristic, although its sharply political form certainly is. Studies of western media workers have demonstrated how they, too, learn to accommodate to the preferences of their superiors and to tailor their creativity to what they know will be acceptable (Draper, 2014; O'Brien, 2015; Petersen, 2017).

With local representatives of the state, there is more room for manoeuvre. In some cases, it is possible to construct fictions acceptable to both sides to avoid conflict. In others, it is possible to bargain, for example by threatening to call a press conference exposing their unreasonable actions. The links between provincial channels and their own provincial government can also be used to recruit the latter for bargaining with SARFT. In the case of ZSTV, however, staff felt they were too economically insignificant and looked with envy at Hunan Satellite TV who is able to persuade their provincial government to argue their case at a higher level.

As we stated above, relationships between Chinese broadcasters and politics is a limit case for the negotiated order theory. The evidence we presented demonstrates that, even in these unfavourable circumstances, in which ‘Weberian’ power is unquestionable, there remains a dimension of negotiation, particularly at the local level. In Western media organizations, as in Chinese media organizations, there is an unequal distribution of power and the production of any programme necessarily involves process of negotiation, and thus compromise, in which those differential powers will inevitably play a central role. Chinese television has distinctive national characteristics, but it also displays important features that are shared with broadcasters elsewhere.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Usually known by its acronym, SARFT has since been replaced by the State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television although, because of its absurd acronym (SAPPRFT), many people still use the old one.

<sup>2</sup> In Chinese characters: 与广电总局斗智斗勇是每个电视人的必修课.

<sup>3</sup> The reference is to SARFT’s insistence that an historical drama, in which the female costumes were thought to be too revealing, must be re-edited to show less flesh.

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**Corresponding author:**

Wenna Zeng, School of Media and Communication, Shenzhen University, 3688 Naihui Ave, Nanshan, Shenzhen, China, 518060.

Email: wenvina@hotmail.com