

Globalization, Foreign media and Local response in China

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Abstract

Taking 2001 as a starting point that Chinese government formally allowed three overseas media to enter into local cable system, this article aims at unentangling the current complicated situation regarding the entrance of foreign media in China. It explores the media regulatory policies of government, the recent responses of both local and global media companies and the changing preference of local audience, from political, economic and cultural perspectives.

Specifically the focus is on the active reaction of the Chinese government; the competitive adaptation and localization strategies between local and foreign media; as well as the reflexive reception process of domestic audience. More attention is placed on considering the global-local interactions and an examination of the bottom-up influences.

In this article, the dialectic position adopted by the author contributes to the argument that the increasing influence of transnational cultural exchange to the local nation-states is not only a challenge, but also benefit that has been underestimated. What is more important is that Asian countries, especially China, the largest potential media market, have shaken off their roles as passive recipients and started the transformation processes, using the media as an agent of influence and exerting 'soft power' through the global broadcasting business. The increasing culture exportation from Asian countries serves as the catalyst for raising reverse influences that local brings to global and suggests a complex yet novel reciprocal interaction between them.

Regulation Policy---China gradually opens its market to foreign media

Since China joined WTO from 2001, the Chinese government has gradually opened its domestic media market. With the increasing degree of openness, a large number of foreign media organizations and companies attempt to enter the Chinese media market. From Oct to Dec of the year 2001, the Chinese government allowed three overseas television channels to go into Guangdong province---CETV (owned by AOL Time Warner), Phoenix Satellite Television (owned by both Today's Asia and News Corp) and Star TV (owned by News Corp). It is the first time for Chinese government to allow foreign-owned channels to land on local satellite and cable system. Despite of their limited entry only to Guangdong Province and the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone locating at southern China, this event has caused large ripples throughout the whole Chinese media industry. Moreover, it was reported that the Chinese government will later on allow more than 30 foreign television channels to enter this area (VOA, 2001). Furthermore, in Oct 2004, The State Administration of Radio Film and Television enacted another two regulation policies to allow foreign media in China through more diverse formats. These "allowances" after 2001 indicate that the television regulatory policies in China have begun to change. It implied a continuously -open media market toward foreign capitals in China, which is not only a challenge to Guangdong's local media, but also a fiery trial for the whole nation.

Joining WTO is a significant turning point in China's television history. The 'allowances' mentioned above not only indicate a gradually-open media market in China, but also suggest a significant change of governmental attitude toward foreign investment. The newly enacted regulations in 2004 make two breakthroughs : it is the first time for Chinese government to allow foreign media entering local broadcasting system which can be viewed by a large number of domestic local audience, rather than limited to 3-star above hotels and foreign affair offices as previously regulated; It is also the first time to allow foreign capital entering into the broadcasting production area in China which is tightly controlled before and sensitive for overseas investment (Xinhua, 2004).

Foreign Media---They actively hope to enter

As a result of the relaxation of regulation, a large number of foreign media has swarmed into China. Till the end of 2004, the number of overseas channels has exceeded 33 according to China National Broadcasting Bureau. Lots of broadcasting organizations have set up branches in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and Chongqing, including Time-Warner, Disney, Sony, Viacom and News Corp. Taking Shanghai for example, the total number of foreign media with branches in Shanghai has grown to 73. This includes globally competitive organizations such as BBC (British Broadcasting Company), CNBC (U.S. Cable Network), SUNSET (France), FBC (Italy FactBased Communications) and NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.), with investment coming from the U.S. Japan, UK, South Korea, Singapore, France, Germany and Switzerland etc (Shanghai Foreign Affairs Office, 2005).

Although the Chinese government tends to relax media policies, its regulations on foreign media have still been more rigid than other Asian countries. The new regulations of 2004 permit entrance of foreign investment in production area. However, it restricts the foreign investment from exceeding 49% and the number of authorized company which they are allowed to invest is only one (Xinhua, 2005). This indicates that the Chinese government still has some reservations on opening its television area and those foreign media giants cannot expand their business too fast in a short term. In current environment, the imported television programs have still been required to experience a strict censorship before publication. Highly sensitive contents like political news program are under rigid control. Compared with other Asian countries, China puts much effort to regulate the inflow of foreign media content.

One question is now going to be naturally asked. The media regulation is rigid in current China, why do so many foreign media companies still want to enter? The promising media market, a large number of audiences, their potential purchasing power and the incredible economic revenues in China without doubt are the key answers. It is the largest market full of opportunities for the global media conglomerates. Till 2005, television coverage has reached 95.81% and cable subscribers are close to 126 million in China, 10 million users more than 2004 (Zeng,

2006). According to the assessment from PricewaterhouseCoopers, the global entertainment market will be increasing with 7.2% per year, while the increase of China's market is much more prominent, 3 times larger than the global average. According to another survey conducted by ACNielsen in 2001, the annual increasing rate of advertising revenue in mainland China has already reached 15.8%, with the total amount of 1.2 billion US dollars which is at the top of Asia Pacific region and 3.7 times that of Australia. Obviously, the promising media market in China is like a magnet attracting more and more global media companies. As Peter Chernin, the News Corp. chief operating officer, has foreseen the future: 'We have already got a chance. What we should do is to work it hard and work it well' (Tong, 2003).

Localization---How do foreign media companies adapt to China's market

Since a lot of foreign media giants have entered China, some commentators argue that mass western media products transmitted by these media giants will bring along a heavy challenge or even a damage influence on local culture. However, my tentative argument is that the consequences of what they have caused in Chinese local media market have been found not to be destructive to local cultural heritage, but to be constructive. Before developing the argument, I first examine how these foreign media giants have performed in Chinese media market.

Foreseeing the increasing profitable environment in China, the global media conglomerates, which have seemed to become too impatient to share this big cake, have taken much effort at filtering into the Chinese market through diverse methods. They wish to hold their feet in the country quickly, take firm root in the cities like Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai and eventually win an advantageous situation before China fully opens its media market for foreign capitals. What they have done in China and how they operate their businesses in China can be generally characterized as the strategy of 'localization'.

In recent years, imported television programs have been found losing their charming in China while locally-produced ones are gaining far more popularity (Lu, 2003). Audiences show an obvious preference for local content as they can easily

comprehend the language and may feel more comfortable while watching those programs with similar cultural background. Only translation seems to not satisfy the audiences' flavor. Brent's study (1998) has found that the most popular programs in China tend to be the locally or regionally produced soap dramas and television series, such as *Ke Wang* (Aspirations) which has been produced by CCTV and re-aired three times due to popular demand. Moreover, compared with programs imported from neighbor regions, domestically produced contents seem to be more welcomed. According to the surveys conducted by CCTV's Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS) on July 2002, the position of Guangdong's television programs has exceeded that of Hong Kong's Jade and ATV Channels which originally dominated the Guangdong television market over the last decades. Referring to the reason of watching local programs, 52 percent audiences choose "prefer local information" (Shi, 2006).

Such a local cultural taste has made the transnational broadcasters have to make their global business strategy involve localization, and produce the 'new content' for their local audiences rather than directly importing the ready-made programs from other countries. For instance, STAR TV which attempts to expand business to Asia has realized this phenomenon and has to hire local actors, launch domestic branches, open Mandarin-language television channels, and produce local-taste television programs for its Asian audiences (FEER, 2000). Other transnational broadcasters have also adopted series of 'localization' strategies. Taking Viacom in China as an example, it encourages and cultivates lots of local talents in order to increase the affinity of its music programs to Chinese audience. Viacom Chief President Sumner Redstone said: 'We create music with local people for local audiences respecting local culture. I think that's one of the reasons that we have been so successful in China' (Georg, 2005). He adds: 'We believe in cultural exchange...We are very conscious of the taste of the Chinese people and the Chinese government' (TIME, 2004). MTV, held by Viacom, is one of the successful localized television programs in China. Choosing local compere is a basic strategy for Viacom to spread MTV globally. In China, Viacom appoints a group of excellent local comperees who are very popular and familiar by local audiences. Giving up its pan-Asia strategy, it now emphasizes on the local

characteristics both in programs format and contents. Charles Chau Suk Poon, the managing director of MTV Networks (North Asia) puts it: 'creating compelling content for local consumers is equally crucial in China as localization plays a key role for doing entertainment business...MTV Networks now produces and shoots all of its five Chinese programs...100 per cent locally in China...If we don't localize the programs and they are only with Chinese titles, there is no success here' (Jian, 2004).

Nowadays, more and more global television broadcasters adopt the strategy of localization through setting branches in local market, hiring local actors, collaborating with local producers as well as making contents more localized. Imported programs always have been modified to cater for local taste. Even some of them have been re-produced for better fitting domestic market request.

Constructive or Destructive---The consequences to local culture

Some commentators argue that a mass of imported foreign programs will bring along a heavy challenge or even a damage influence on local culture. However, my argument is that the effect of localization has been found not to be destructive, but to be constructive to the local culture, at least in the case of China.

First: Foreign programs offer opportunities for reflexive awareness. Audiences are not passively receiving meanings. They are very active and critical during the reception process. Watching a lot Hollywood movies does not necessarily mean they are being American. Instead, local audiences have been alarmed to form a reflexive awareness, like, who am I? or, Who am not I? Reflexive awareness is a new type of bonding and solidarity as well as a new way of shaping cultural identity. Exposure to a large number of unfamiliar images has very probably awakened or augmented people's reflexive awareness, or even nationalism. Studies in China, Korea and Japan found that the opposition to US culture has been engendered through watching the imported television programs and hence evoked a protective attitude toward local culture. The purity of cultural identity, till now, is still a contested issue. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that recipients have also been urged to reflexively consider about their own identifications while facing increased importation of alien cultural products.

National or regional consciousness rather than a homogenous global identity has been enlarged as the exposure to other cultures speeds up. Despite some quite visible evidences of cultural homogenization as part of our lives, like westernization and Americanization, people do not seem to feel a reduced sense of membership in their groups, in stead, feel much stronger (Morris, 2002). Harvey (1989:306) suggests that 'localism and nationalism have become stronger precisely because of the quest for the security that place always offers'. There is little evidence shows that 'cultural abrasion' has been found, but the increasing reflexive awareness and protective attitude within the receiving nations (Varan, 1998).

Second: Localization is a form of cultural adaptation. Cultural adaptation, here, does not only refer to a simple comprise strategy, such as adding Chinese subtitles for foreign programs, but also refer to an active devotion into the local cultures made by transnational broadcasters. Only with Chinese subtitles is not enough to achieve high audience rate. How to create compelling contents for local consumers is very crucial for them. In order to produce and shoot 100 percent locally in China, they actively delved themselves into local cultures and even hoped to thoroughly penetrate by means of employing totally domestic materials, including production groups like producers, performers, directors as well as original scripts and scenes. The contents are purposely produced to cater for local taste, full of native cultural factors and background. In this sense, what those transnational media giants have brought to China seems not to be the threat of alien cultural products, but the large amount of foreign investment which has been used to produce 100 percent locally cultural programs with local producers. From cultural perspective, these programs owned by overseas media organizations would not have much damaging influences on Chinese native values or norms since what overseas media giants produced is what local audience likes and actually imbedded with strong indigenous cultural background. From economic perspective, the large amount of foreign capital brought by foreign media giants can contribute to the prosperity of local media market since local media companies could benefit from the competition through cooperation with foreign ones. In fact, this is also the consideration of Chinese government when it opens the door

for foreign competition. Local media industries can improve their capacities and enhance the quality their programs through competition. On the other hand, due to the localization strategy adopted by foreign media companies, their media products have been embedded with a strong local cultural taste, which constitute little destructive influences on local culture but many constructive influences instead.

Homogenized or Hybridized---The consequences from local response

The localization process not only spurs the indigenized strategies of global companies, but also spurs the globalized reactions of local industries. Localization strategy cannot simply be understood as a unidirectional impact of global power on local media industries. Mutual influences imply a complex reciprocal interaction between global and local, taking into account the reverse influences that local brings to global. Similar to active audience, local media companies also exhibit their active ability to face the challenge. For example, Oct 2001, CCTV allowed AOL/Time Warner to land on Guangdong province. However, what is more important behind the business is the precondition to exchange CCTV's programs. AOL/Time Warner promised to air CCTV 9th channel which is an English-speaking channel through its cable network in New York, LA and Houston. CCTV 9th channel contains news report, music, nature, travel, cook, mandarin education which is designed for expanding Chinese traditional cultures. BBC reported that Chinese television officials wish to change American's attitude toward China through broadcasting Chinese official television programs in U.S. cable system (BBC, 2001). This shows that Chinese television officials have already realized the importance of program exportation. They wish to borrow the foreign media organizations as bridges to send out Chinese produced products, shaping foreigners' attitude toward China ideologically. More concerns have been given to the importation of foreign media channels. However, what has been underestimated is that local culture and media would not passively wait for being challenged forever, but turn to actively fight back. The process of media globalization cannot be simply understood as a one-way influence. It should be interpreted as a two-way influence, a mutual influence, with the local responses taken

into account. It is a new form of reverse impact.

Partly due to this tendency has just taken place in few years ago, there are few empirical studies conducted to find out how these reverse impact works. However, it is also noteworthy that some other Asian broadcasters have already started to target populations in overseas market. For instance, TVB has moved into North America and Canada, serving Chinese speaking subscribers. Similarly, the Korean broadcaster MBC has established a channel aimed at Koreans in the United States. South Asian broadcaster Zee TV has also entered into UK and USA (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000). As cultural globalization goes intensive, the further reaction taken by receiving societies cannot be limited to the cultural resistance of local audiences any more. Also, it no longer has been the increasing competence of indigenous producers within the Asian region. It now has changed to their active competition and exportation of cultural contents outside Asia. Such active exporting activities from the developing countries or Asian nations are expected to increase in the next decades, especially from China and India. With their stronger economic development, the exportation of television content will become more and more. In recent years, South Korea provides a ready example. Considerable TV series and soap dramas are exported from it. Its television programming has attracted a large number of audiences throughout the Asian region which is currently called Korean Wave. This wave has been winding to North America in a few years ago. It can be expected that western countries including Europe and North America will also encounter the similar challenges of foreign cultural products with the increasing number of exported television content from Asia.

Here, I still want to argue that there is actually no absolute strong and weak culture in the trend of media globalization. Each culture is subject to change all the time (Ang, 1996; Morris, 2002). In economic area, the category of 'developed countries' or 'the Third World' has already been challenged and forced to change. It is the same situation in media and cultural area. No one will be the weaker or stronger culture forever. Looking back to China's history, China has encountered numbers of challenges brought by surrounding minorities. However its culture stood against alien

threat and finally made other cultural factors melted into. Its history implies the surprising elasticity of Chinese culture and its compatibility. What we call 'local' now probably will change to 'global' in the next century. In the long term, as Tomlinson argues (1997) that the complexities of globalized networks and their unpredictable consequences may shift the advantage away from the West. The increasing culture exportation from Asian countries serves as the catalyst for the interchange between the positions of local and global.

Conclusion ---- It is a win-win competition

The influx of transnational broadcasters has not yet threatened local culture as seriously as it has been proclaimed. Foreign media adopt cultural adaptation to produce hundred percent local programs; Local audiences raise a strong reflexive awareness or even a hostile sentiment toward foreign cultural products; local media industries are not passively waiting for challenge, but actively compete with media conglomerates and borrow them as bridges to exert their cultural influence outside. What media globalization brings to the less developed countries is not only the challenge, but also the benefit. While the western and eastern cultures become increasingly mixed due to the media globalization, local culture also has a chance to keep its independence and its own characteristics. Taking China as an example, the consequences seem to be constructive other than destructive both from local economic and cultural perspectives. Cultural hybridization rather than homogenization, on the contrary, is foreseen to be promoted by the growing influences of local responses. As details show, recent exporting activities in Asian nations, such as China, suggest a complex yet novel reciprocal interaction between global and local. Analysis of the bottom-up forces is an attempt to supplement the existing discourses regarding Asian broadcasting scene and provide a re-examined perspective for the diverse forms of localization and globalization.

Notes:

This paper consists of the collection of a large number of events, news and reports. Some are published in Chinese. English translation is provided in the bracket behind each title.

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