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**The Concept of 'Local' in Local Chinese Television:  
a Case Study of Southwest China's Chongqing Television**

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**Keywords:** Chinese media, local, globalization, broadcasting structure, dialect programming, Chongqing Television

**Abstract**

This paper explores the role of the 'local' in Chinese Television, concentrating on a study of media personnel in Southwest China's Chongqing Television. Using official documentation and interviews with a range of key personnel, this paper outlines the ways in which local television personnel understand the concept of 'local' and what they consider as the counterpart of the 'local'. Furthermore, it will look at the circumstances under which these understandings have been formulated and how they are exercised in daily programming. It argues that concepts of the local, national and international in the context of contemporary Chinese local TV are fairly pragmatic. This is because companies need to fulfil political functions, to serve the local government and to maximise their own commercial income. These findings can, arguably, aid in refining our understanding of questions of 'cultural identity' and the process of so-called 'cultural globalization'.

This paper argues that concepts of the local, national and international in the context of contemporary Chinese local TV are fairly pragmatic. This is because companies need to fulfil political functions, to serve the local government and to maximise their own commercial income. These findings can, arguably, aid in refining our understanding of questions of 'cultural identity' and the process of so-called 'cultural globalization'.

The aims of this research are to examine how the concepts of 'local', 'national' and 'international' are understood by the personnel of a local Chinese television station, how these concepts relate to each other, and finally how research into the Chinese local media can contribute to the general understanding of the notion of cultural globalization. It forms part of my ongoing doctoral work on Chinese local media.

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*Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* © 2006 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 3(1): 28-41. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

Chongqing Television in Southwest China has been chosen as the subject of an in-depth case study and in the following paper I will concentrate on discussing the concept of the 'local' as established and used by the employees of a local television station.

Television broadcasting was first introduced to China in 1958, although the continuous political unrest throughout the 1960s and 70s slowed down the development of television considerably. In the early 1980s the Chinese government started to encourage the development of the television industry as part of its programme of economic reforms. After two decades of development and reforms, the scale of the Chinese media is vast and the country has been described as having 'the largest television market in the world' (de Burgh 2001, 131). In terms of household penetration and the number of TV sets counted per capita, television in China is well ahead of all other developing countries and high above the average level for Asia and the world (Ibid, 142).

Research on Chinese television started in the late 1970s alongside the development of television broadcasting. Until the events surrounding the Tiananmen pro-democratic movement in 1989, research on Chinese television was mainly descriptive, recording the development and the educational function of the medium.<sup>1</sup>

However, from the early 1990s to the beginning of the new century, these studies began to take a more exploratory approach. The main focus of studies in this period has been the changes in the ideology of television in a time of economic reform and in the aftermath of the Tiananmen movement. The first important change has been the shift from communism to patriotism as the official ideology (Zhao 1998). Secondly, the market economy has taken over almost every aspect of Chinese life. These changes have led to developments in the mass media, as Zhao (1998) has argued.

In media practice, one big step for the development of Chinese television was the emergence in the 1990s of investigative journalism, which was introduced by the CCTV programme *Focus (jiaodian fangtan)*. This kind of programme soon became popular with both broadcasters and audiences. Investigative journalism and in particular critical reports about public issues and corruption have helped to develop what an official source described as a sense of 'public opinion supervision' (Li 1991; 2002). In addition, as Chan argues, these programmes serve as a way to alleviate public anxieties (Chan 2002, 47). Another development has been a boom in entertainment programmes and TV dramas, as commercialization has given the Chinese media a chance to explore different ways of making profits (Keane 2002).

In recent years, work in Chinese television studies has been stimulated by the implications of China's entry into the World Trade Organization. Researchers are more and more interested in the interaction between Chinese television and the rest of the world (Sparks 2003; Chin 2003; Weber 2003), and in the question of how globalization will influence Chinese media practice and culture more generally. Another major development in Chinese television that has attracted scholarly interest is the so-called government led drive towards 'industrialization' (Lu 2002; Guo 2004). Under state regulations many smaller television stations have merged into multi-channel networks, and they also seek to expand into commercial areas beyond the business of television broadcasting.

Based on this recent interest in issues concerning globalization, this study proposes to examine the influence of globalization on the Chinese media and in particular on Chinese television at a local level. Most studies to date have tended to look at the media as a whole, but few have explored the great diversity and complexity of Chinese society and broadcasting structures. They have also mostly focused on the elite central media (Li 1991; 2002; Keane 2001; Chan 2002; Zhao 1999; Ma 2000), or the more developed parts of Eastern and Central China (Ballew 2002; Weber 2002).<sup>2</sup> Television stations serving the many inland provinces of China are less well represented in academic research to date.

This leads us to the question of whether the elite media really are typical of the overall situation of the Chinese media and what similarities the media in less developed regions share with those of the more advanced provinces? 'Further research needs to assess the social needs and uses of the Chinese people in this dynamic relationship between a still centralized media structure and the potential for local media' (Yu and Sears 2003: 324). Keane (2002) calls for more attention to the question of localization, and how localization interacts with globalization in Chinese television. Previous academic writing on this subject has used the term 'local' to refer to various other administrative levels: province, city, town or county (Weber 2002; de Burgh 2001), or when talking about the 'local' media serving an even smaller community such as that of a university (Wu 1998) or a community cable television system (Yu and Sears 2003). The scale of what is understood as 'local' depends on the researcher's frame of reference and the insights they hope to gain. This question of scale adds complexity to the use of the concept of 'local'.

For the purposes of this research, 'local' was initially identified with the level of the Chinese provinces. In China, this level constitutes an important proportion of the broadcasting sector, serves a sizeable audience and constitutes a particularly interesting field of study since it is struggling to define itself in a level-based broadcasting structure, torn between the diverging demands of having to serve both the party government's propaganda requests and the stations' own commercial needs. Because the provincial television stations are placed at an

intermediate level and are subject to conflicting demands, focusing on them is particularly apt when examining the nature of the relationship of 'local', 'national' and 'international' within Chinese television. A detailed study of the media of the inland provinces promises to contribute to a fuller understanding of the Chinese media as a whole, and it was therefore decided to base this study on an inland television station. Chongqing television in the Southwest of China has been chosen as the subject of an in-depth case study.

### **The Structure of the Chinese Broadcasting System**

Before 1983, Chinese television operated on a two level system: Central and provincial. On the one hand there was the national station Beijing TV (later CCTV), and on the other several local stations operating at province level (Lu 2002; Guo 1991). During the 11th Chinese national radio and television broadcasting conference in 1983 the government delivered a set of important policies and principles for the development of Chinese television (including institutional reforms) (Li 1991; Chen 1995; Guo 1991). The most prominent among them was the policy of '*si ji ban dianshi*' (Running Television at Four Levels). In order to speed up the expansion of TV coverage throughout the country, this policy gave permission to the different levels of government to establish their own TV and Radio broadcasting stations catering for local public requirements (Chen 1995, 216).

The first of these four levels is the central national (or state) television station CCTV. The second level consists of the provincial broadcasters, including the TV stations of the provinces, municipalities and ethnic autonomous regions. The third level is made up of the cities, and the fourth is the counties (towns) and regions whose political administrative rank is lower than that of the cities. These four levels of broadcasting institutions are all answerable to the corresponding levels of administration. However, the non-central stations are not dependent branches of the central station and do not need to consult them on technical, management or financial matters. Their points of reference are local. Policy control is exercised through the party propaganda departments at the different administrative levels (de Burgh 2001, 148).

Guo argues that the establishment of the four-level structure policy was a strategic step allowing local government to establish television and other broadcasting stations without additional cost to the central government's budget. (Guo 1991, 187) Also, with a more integrated broadcasting structure the voice of the central government could be spread fast, far and efficiently to the general public (Fredrickson et al 2003, 27). This decision was synchronised with the mainstream of the economic reform at the time (Guo 1991, 187). The four-level system has stimulated fast development within the Chinese television infrastructure and

between 1983 and 1993 the number of TV stations increased from 52 to over 700. (de Burgh 2001, 132)

Since 1996, a series of announcements by the central government has started a new round of structural reforms of the broadcasting sector (Lu 2002). The aim of this so-called 'three-station merger' (*san tai he yi*) reform is to reduce the number of broadcasting organizations by merging the radio, television (including educational stations) and cable networks into one broadcasting company. The administration of management issues, human resources, propaganda planning, business development and finances will all be joined together under the unified supervision of the local broadcasting bureau. Eventually the company and the bureau will also merge into big local television networks. This means that there will be only one such unified local TV network (controlling Radio, TV and Cable) for each province/municipality. This restructuring has already resulted in a reduced number of radio and television stations. In 1997 there were 1363 radio stations and 923 TV stations but by 1999 the numbers had already dropped to 299 radio stations and 352 TV stations.

In addition, China's WTO entry has accelerated the structural reforms even more. In November 1999 the General Affairs Office of the State Council issued its No. 82 document which contained a series of policies regarding the restructuring of the cable TV network (Lu and Xia 2001). This document reinforced the merger of the radio, television and cable networks and officially announced that the 'Running Television at Four-Levels' system was to be abolished. In 2002, the ministers of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), Tian Congming and Xu Guangchun, announced a plan for future broadcasting development in China in the so called 'media industrialisation' policies. Under these policies the broadcasting structure will change to a two-level (central and provincial) administrative system. The city and county level radio and television stations (apart from those in certain central and big cities), and the cable networks will be required to switch to only relaying channels or broadcasting programmes supplied to them by the central and the provincial stations. Each province as a unit should merge all the provincial broadcasting stations to set-up a single broadcasting company. The city and county stations become the branches of this company (Lu 2002).

The industrialization reform dramatically reduced the number of broadcasting outlets in China and has created more integrated media groups, capable of not only producing and broadcasting radio and television programmes, but also of expanding their business into wider areas. The reform has on the one hand served to make the media market in China more orderly and regulated, but on the other to restructure the two-level broadcasting system which has helped the government to regain more centralized control of broadcasting sectors at grassroots level.

### **Chongqing Television**

Chongqing is situated in the Southwest of China on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, and was traditionally part of Eastern Sichuan Province. Chongqing was first established as a city in 1929 under the Chinese Nationalist government (1911-1949). At the beginning of the People's Republic in 1949, when China was divided into several regions (Dreyer 1993, 110), Chongqing was made the political centre of the Southwest Region, and a municipality directly answerable to the central government (*zhi xia shi*). In 1954 the Chinese government rearranged its local administration by abolishing the regional level and dividing the country into provinces. In the course of this rearrangement, Chongqing became a city under the administration of the government of Sichuan Province (Chongqing Municipal Government 2004 [www]). In June 1997, Chongqing again officially became an individual province-level municipality under the direct administration of the central government (Hutchings 2001, 77).

With a population of 31.44 million the Chongqing *zhi xi shi* (municipality under the direct administration of the central government) is the most populated province-level municipality in China. According to the annual report of the Chongqing statistics bureau in 2004, the majority of the population of the municipality live in rural areas and only 38.3% live in the urban area. This makes it similar to the average population distribution in China as a whole, which is 36.09% for urban areas. In 2004, the GDP per capita in Chongqing was 1161.8 USD, slightly below the national GDP per capita of 1269.9 USD (National Statistics Bureau 2004). Again, this is a typical figure for China.

As early as 1961 the Chinese Government had planned to establish a television station in Chongqing. It was not until 1970, however, that Chongqing Television officially started broadcasting, relaying programmes from CCTV and Sichuan Province Television and from 1981 onwards that the station started producing its own programmes (Chongqing TV 1998, 1). At this point, Chongqing TV station was a city-level station operating the main official television channel in the city.

Before the 1990s, the development of Chongqing television was thwarted by slow economic progress, a fate it shared with many city-level television stations all over the country. From 1992 onwards, the Chinese government announced its plan to open up Chongqing and the nearby Upper Yangtze region to direct foreign investment, attracting capital to the area and allowing the city to profit from the economic reforms (Hutchings 2001, 78). This economic development also helped the city to expand its broadcasting infrastructure.

In 1989, Chongqing TV-2 was set up as a department within Chongqing Television station operating on an independent budget (Chongqing TV 1998, 1). Broadcasting on a separate channel it mainly produced news and other programmes concerned with the local economy. In 1994, the Chongqing Cable Television Network Company was set up by the Chongqing Broadcasting bureau. Its main purpose was to receive the officially approved satellite channels and distribute their programmes to local audiences through cable TV networks. Chongqing Education TV was founded in 1999, enjoying the same status as CQTV-2 but specializing in education and news programmes concerning the local education sector. The income of Chongqing Cable Network consists both of the annual subscription fees from audiences and of advertising airtime sales from their own channels, while Chongqing TV, Chongqing TV-2 and Chongqing Education TV are mainly funded by advertising sales, with a small amount of government subsidy (Chongqing TV document 1999). These are the main players in Chongqing's television industry. This expansion in the infrastructure and channel availability at Chongqing TV not only reflected local economic growth but also served to provide Chongqing residents with wider media access, paving the way for a more integrated and sophisticated broadcasting sector.

In 1997, the upgrade of Chongqing city to a province-level municipality<sup>3</sup> meant that the previous city-level broadcasting stations were now also upgraded to province-level stations. On October 1 1998, Chongqing Television started to transmit its main channel via the Apstar-A1 satellite. In 2001, Chongqing signed a contract to have its analogue cable system upgraded to digital. 'The number of cable subscribers in this area alone is expected to grow from 3.5 million to 6 million in the next five years' (Fredrickson et al 2003, 42). In September 2003 the company started trial broadcasting on this digital platform and there are already plans for further digital channels to be launched in the near future.

In 2001 the Chinese government started its so-called 'industrialization reform' of the broadcasting media in an attempt to reorganize the media market and re-centralize control of the broadcasting sector. The following year Chongqing TV heeded the call of the government to reform and merged the financial management of CQTV-2 and Chongqing Education TV. In 2003, Chongqing TV took over the administration of the various city and county TV stations, and, in the same year, merged with the Chongqing Cable TV Network to form a big multi-channel television network. By April 2004, Chongqing TV had completed the integration of management, finance, and human resources and started to restructure programme making, taking into account its expanded resources. This reform created a new multi-channel television station for Chongqing – the 'Chongqing Television Media Group' (*chong shi chuan mei ji tuan*) - and reflected a formula of change found throughout China (Sun 2002, 89-90).

The methods used for this research include semi-structured interviewing and documentary research. Twenty-six members of staff at Chongqing TV working at a range of levels were interviewed. They included personnel such as the channel controller, the producers and production consultants, company researchers, as well as journalists in junior positions. The documents that were examined for data gathering purposes included official documents, company documents, listings, rating analyses and company internal publications.

### **The Concept of the 'Local'**

From the analysis of the interviews and documentary data collected, six different understandings of the concept of 'local' can be identified.

Firstly, 'local' as the counterpart of 'central'. 'Local' in this sense is used as an attribute describing non-central television organizations. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) uses two categories to describe the different television broadcasting institutions of China: 'national stations' (*guo jia tai*) and 'local' stations (*di fang tai*). Under the category of 'national' there is only China Central Television (CCTV), whereas all other stations are in the 'local' category. This interpretation seems to have been adopted by most personnel at Chongqing TV. In its documents the station frequently refers to itself as the local station. In general, the employees also agree that all stations other than CCTV are 'local' stations. However, although for some people 'central' is completely conflated with 'national', others criticize the close relationship of the central station with the party propaganda department. They argue that a 'national' station should represent the interests of the people rather than the party. The local stations have a cooperative relationship with the central one in exercising propaganda functions. Because it has the backing of the central party, the central station speaks with the voice of absolute authority, while local stations cover local issues which cannot be adequately addressed by CCTV. In doing so local stations provide a link between local and central government, using the resources of CCTV to disseminate reports about local development and progress. Combined, the central and various local stations constitute a propaganda structure which covers all of China. This system echoes the structure of the Chinese party political system and takes account of the immense economic and cultural diversity in China.

Secondly, 'local' is used to define a specific location and target market. In the case of Chongqing, 'local' can refer to three different scales. The first is the city of Chongqing, consisting only of the urban areas in which the main commercial activities take place. The second is the area of greater Chongqing, consisting of all the urban and rural regions and counties. The third scale of reference is much wider, and some argue that 'local' encompasses the whole Chongqing region which shares a similar historic background and dialect. Producers at Chongqing TV



consider the 'local' to include a region encompassing the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan and a part of Shannxi and Hubei provinces, an area with a total population of 300 million sharing a similar culture. In the interviews, junior staff at Chongqing TV tended to take the first of these scales as their frame of reference, because this is where their everyday activities were centred. However, senior staff tended to consider a wider scale, definitely including rural audiences and if possible those from a wider area with a shared culture as well. Redefining 'local' in such a wide sense opens up a much bigger target audience and potential market to sell programmes with a 'local' flavour.

Thirdly, 'local' can stand for local dialect, local values and the things local people like. Programmes using the local dialect were among the first and most likely to be identified as 'local' programmes. Dialect programmes are very popular among local audiences and enjoy relative commercial success. However, many employees at Chongqing TV point out that the criterion of dialect use in a programme is not quite enough to categorize it as a 'local' programme. Truly 'local' programmes should be dealing with the daily life and issues of local people, in a manner which not only acknowledges the language they speak but also the value systems they hold. Some argue that programmes made in Chongqing will always remain 'local' because the production team is mainly local and shares local values and ways of understanding, even though the programmes may later be broadcast throughout China. Although they certainly hope to attract a wider audience, they still feel very strongly that local programmes are mainly for consumption by local people. It is therefore important that local content is presented in a style favoured by the local audiences.

Fourthly, local is sometimes equated with 'low quality'. The term 'local' is often used by employees at Chongqing TV to describe the quality of programmes, as well as audiences. Most of the time, local programmes are associated with low production values and low quality. In my interviews, the employees regularly demanded that 'local' should not to be used to define the quality of programmes. However, they quite often thought of 'local' audiences as having a low level of education and income. They also complained about the audiences' parochial taste, and that they were only interested in meaningless entertainment programmes or in what immediately concerned their daily lives. The producer of the *Hot & Spicy Life Show* (*sheng huo ma la tang*), the most popular programme of Chongqing TV, argues that programmes which are meant to appeal to 'local' audiences do not need to be polished technically and do not even need professional actors 'as long as they tell a good story' close to everyday life (Luo, interview). Some are frustrated by this situation and believe that dialect programmes of low production value damage the overall prestige of the television station, but no one can deny the high profits being made by this kind of programme.

Fifth, 'local' is seen as a *unique selling point* in the struggle for ratings and market share. In China, the more than twenty provincial television stations all have very similar listings, and all broadcast drama series are bought from the same suppliers. This uniformity easily confuses the audience about which channel they are watching. The personnel of Chongqing TV all emphasize the importance of producing *brand-name programmes* in order to stand out and be able to compete in the battle over audience share. My interviewees admitted that 'local' culture is the most valuable resource for programme making in this respect. One of the channel directors even said that because Chongqing TV was a poor station in a poor area, 'local' programmes were all they could afford to produce (Jing, interview). Chongqing TV in 2003 branded its satellite channel as 'spicy and trustworthy'. 'Spicy' here refers to the station's most popular local dialect soap and the famously spicy local cuisine, both of which emphasize the localness of the channel. In terms of ratings, Chongqing TV's top three programmes are all in the 'local' mode broadcasting in dialect, and the station has recently dedicated a whole channel to dialect programming. These programmes also fit the latest official requirements for television media entitled 'Being close in three respects' (*san tie jin*) – Close to reality, close to life, close to the masses (Li 2003). These programmes are both profitable and popular with the propaganda departments. Operating in economically less prosperous areas, one of the few advantages local stations have is their privileged access to local cultural resources, and it is only natural that they will try to improve the perceived value of programmes by sticking on the 'local' label. These programmes are both profitable and popular with the propaganda departments.

Sixth, 'local' is not seen as the counterpart of 'international', and the employees usually make no direct connection between the local and the 'international'. Many use 'international' as equivalent to meaning 'receiving international recognition' or 'internationally renowned', implying a judgment on quality. 'International' in this sense is used to mean 'the West' or 'Anglo-American'. Some define 'international' as featuring universal values which can be appreciated and understood by different cultures. They do not seem to fear the pressure of 'international' competition, since it is generally expected that the Chinese media market will stay closely supervised by the propaganda authorities for the foreseeable future. Whichever direction development will take, it is unlikely that state ownership of the broadcasting sector will be under debate any time soon, and the market will therefore not escape control. The local television stations' limited resources do not allow them to compete with overseas and foreign media, but they also do not think that this is necessary. The main concerns voiced are about defending the share of Chongqing TV in the domestic market, and consequently the main competitors are identified as CCTV, other provincial stations, the print media and new media such as the Internet. The documents I looked at express a desire for increased interaction with broadcasters outside China, through activities such as meetings

and programme exchanges. However, such plans are of little importance for the day-to-day running of the station.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the concept of 'local' as used by the employees of Chongqing TV is the result of complex political and social conditions. It reflects the habitual political and institutional use of the term as well as its cultural meaning. In China, the structure of the television sector is closely related to that of the Party government. The term 'local' is used in a complex but at the same time very pragmatic way, denoting the non-central administrative rank of the television station. The employees' understanding of the term is determined by what they perceive the role of the media to be, by their own professional expectations and day-to-day experience, as well as how they consider the relationship between themselves and their audiences. The incoherent system of management whereby a local station has to function as both a market economy enterprise and as part of the propaganda machine adds another layer of complexity. The popular 'local' programmes with a large audience are seen as a useful vehicle for propaganda, while at the same time the economic value of a 'local' flavour has been recognized and is being widely used in production. This unique production resource is largely associated with the use of local dialect and local stories. However, as a cultural value, 'local' is still undecided. On the one hand, 'local' programmes are often perceived to cater for the taste of the less educated, but on the other calls for a re-evaluation of how the term is used are also being heard.

As we have seen, direct interaction and competition with 'international' media is of little concern to the practice of running this local television station. Similar studies about the media of Saudi Arabia (Al-Gahtani 2004), Malaysia (Wahab 2002) and India (Virmani 2004) found that a main concern in these countries was that globalization would overrun Muslim values and local culture. In Chongqing however, there were few similar concerns among media workers. For most of my interviewees, globalization was an issue they were neither concerned with when going about their everyday work nor at an ideological level. They tended to describe globalization as a commercial reality rather than a cultural threat. Their attempts to give a definition of Chinese culture were rather tentative and few of them drew a clear boundary differentiating it from the foreign. This may explain why there is no wide-spread feeling that the culture itself is under threat. It has to be said however that this study was only concerned with the example of a Chinese local television station, and it would be wrong to draw too far-reaching conclusions from it.

I would not claim that Chinese local television today operates in total isolation from the rest of the world, but that their system of reference has certain limitations. Keane (2001) has noted that in China the further away the media are

from the central control organs, the more flexible the media workers' interpretation of the central media policy will be, and the higher the temptation to play 'edge-ball'<sup>4</sup> to suit local needs. However, this does not sufficiently describe the situation of the local television media. Although executed in subtle ways, state control is still strong and the government's media policy clearly shuffles the cards in favour of the central media such as CCTV. The local media are never tempted to compete with or even overtake the central-level national media, but instead have to focus on negotiating their fair share in the domestic television market for the sake of their own survival and sustainable economic development. In order to achieve this, local television stations have to strike a balance between limited resources, strict broadcasting control, the responsibilities of the profession and the realities of economic competition.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, Chu (1978) has written an introduction to the Chinese broadcasting industry and Guo (1991) has written the first book with the title 'A History of Chinese Television'. Lull & Sun (1988) as well as McCormick (1980) argue that television has been used by the Chinese government as a tool for education.

<sup>2</sup> Also Hunan (Keane 2002), Zhejiang (de Burgh 2000), and Tianjin (Wu 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The National People's Congress decided this on 14 March 1997, and Chongqing officially became a province-level municipality on 28 June 1997 (Mackerras 2001, 64, 246).

<sup>4</sup> 'edge-ball' is a direct translation from the Chinese term *ca bian qiu*, here refer to practices that are on the borderline of legality. (Keane 1998: 498; 2001)

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