

LIVE, FROM BEIJING!

*The National News Bulletin versus Super Girls:
The Power of China Central Television*

By Ying Zhu

Over the past decade, China has been aggressively exporting media overseas to cast a Chinese perspective on world affairs and project a positive image of China. In 2001, then-President Jiang Zemin urged the Chinese media to bring the nation's voice to the world. Soon afterwards, Xu Guangchun, who was deputy head of the Propaganda Ministry and the Minister of State Administration of Radio-Film-TV, launched a "going out" project to change China's international image, which was, and has remained, for the most part, negative. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) told Chinese media practitioners that it would be unrealistic to expect the West to promote China's cause and perspective. One of the key players in China's image-lifting campaign is China Central Television (CCTV), the country's sole national television network, established in 1978, two years after the end of the disastrous Cultural Revolution.

Television was entirely state-subsidized until 1979 when television commercials were introduced. The subsidy began to decrease over the next several years and in 1984, the state began to fix the size of its subsidy to CCTV, which forced the network to cover the rest of the expenditures by pursuing ad revenue. The network scrambled to become self-reliant, and did so quite successfully, quickly turning a profit. As it was weaned from state subsidy, it became able to return a percentage of its annual revenue to the state. Television stations have since become important revenue generating enterprises to local government and broadcasting bureaus. So the economic interest of state regulators is intricately linked to that of the broadcasters they purport to regulate, which leads to state control and monopoly, the foundation of the so-called China Model.

Though owned and controlled by the Chinese state, CCTV is now financially self-reliant and operationally autonomous. It is public television, but for profit, operating according to market principles; or from a different angle, it is a commercial broadcaster

▷ Supermarket window display, Wuhan, China, Nov. 8, 2012. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*



receiving little to no state/public funding albeit beholden to the party-state in the name of the public. The seemingly contradictory logic indicates that the party and the market have apparently worked in unison to transform CCTV from a broadcaster of inward-looking party drudgery into a modern media empire seeking international influence and recognition. For the time being at least, market and politics have converged in their common pursuit of prosperity and stability, essential to maintaining the status quo in China's political structure, and in the case of CCTV, its domestic monopoly/market dominance.

CCTV's Monopoly

To better see how CCTV operates, one must understand China's four-tier television structure, where stations are set up at the national, provincial, county, and city levels. Both national and local regulators operate their own stations and serve audiences within their own administrative boundaries. As a result, television stations, broadcasting bureaus, and governments at the same administrative level are closely linked in economic and political exchange. Local television stations depend on local government to protect their local market. Meanwhile, local government relies on television stations to maintain their political influence and to bring in financial revenue. CCTV is the only broadcaster allowed nationwide coverage, although the arrival of cable and satellite television would later complicate this neat structure.

The central regulator that oversees China Central Television is the State Administration of Radio-Film-TV (SARFT). SARFT is motivated both politically and economically to boost CCTV's market share. For CCTV to maintain its national monopoly, local cooperation remains the key. To ensure local support, SARFT mandated that local stations must carry CCTV-1's programs in full, including commercials. SARFT emphasizes that guaranteeing CCTV-1's national coverage is a political mission, an "undeniable" obligation and responsibility of local broadcasting bureaus and television stations. CCTV is further granted exclusive coverage rights to major national and international events, and the CCP regularly leaks exclusive information to CCTV, making it the go-to source for insight on the party. In addition, CCTV has the exclusive coverage rights to national and international sports events, including the Olympics and the football World Cup, which bring in huge profits. Regional sensibilities, including the usage of local dialects, accounted for part of the appeal of non-CCTV programming. But regulations were issued discouraging programming in nonstandard Mandarin.

As the financial stakes become huge, many local stations defied SARFT's preferential policies. To crack down on local rebellion, a campaign was launched by the state to recentralize what it saw as a "chaotic" and "disordered" landscape of Chinese television media. It ordered the closing down of unapproved television outlets across

the country, merged county-level local stations, and tightened control over program sources, requesting that county stations allocate most of their airtime to transmit central and provincial stations' programs. But local challengers have persisted, particularly in the satellite sector.

In China, each provincial television station is allowed to operate one satellite channel with signal coverage technologically capable of reaching the entire nation. Yet, because of administrative boundaries and local protectionism, each provincial station must negotiate with other provinces to bring its satellite channel to their local cable networks. Most provincial broadcasters have managed to extend their regional reach via independent satellite and cable distribution deals with other provincial broadcasters. The youth and entertainment oriented Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV), in particular, has become a formidable CCTV challenger in recent years. HSTV's *Super Girls*, a singing competition show modeled on *American Idol* with mobile phone voting, became an overnight rating sensation when it debuted in 2004. Feeling the heat, CCTV launched a campaign to attack HSTV, calling it a rogue broadcaster with vulgar taste.

Super Girls went off the air in 2008 as the Summer Olympic Games hosted by Beijing preempted everything else. In 2009, HSTV made an attempt to re-launch *Super Girls* albeit under a different name. *Happy Girls*, as the program was now called, was slapped with draconian restrictions by SARFT: the show was allowed to last for two months and each episode would air only after 10:30 p.m.; judges had to hold themselves to decorum; publicity revolving around private lives of contestants was banned; text-based and online voting systems were no longer allowed; most astonishing of all, competitors were forbidden from hugging each other or expressing extreme emotions on stage, and fans were forbidden to cheer for contestants in the studio. Stripped of its raw emotions, *Happy Girls* became a far more subdued version of *Super Girls*.

Overall, competition threatens CCTV's monopoly, which some see as encouraging a more open Chinese media sphere. Some influential Chinese media policy makers and professionals with whom I have spoken embrace competition and the market mechanism underlying it.¹ One high profile news anchor emphasized that the market mechanism has been a positive counterforce to state control. Commercialization, as he sees it, is a liberating force for Chinese media. Competition brings in program innovation and liberalization, but it also propels a race to the bottom line, where ratings become the only indicator of success and programs of popular taste reign supreme. Thus, many at CCTV consider commercialization and marketization a perilous road, detrimental to the network's overall program quality and reputation as a torch of China's high culture. In fact, CCTV's excessive drive for ratings in the last decade was viewed harshly by many seasoned CCTV practitioners who saw their professional standards compromised in the rush to produce programs of popular appeal.

Broadcasting to the World

As CCTV tried to fend off its domestic challengers, it has aggressively pursued international expansion in recent years. Only two and half decades ago, CCTV carried exclusively domestic news. Yang Weiguang, CCTV's former president, made Chinese media history on January 28, 1986, when he took the risk of running as the lead story the explosion of the Challenger space-shuttle for that evening's *National News Bulletin*, the primetime news program carried by all stations in China. The same year the network launched its English language program, *English News*, a daily fifteen minute news bulletin translated from the Chinese news the night before.

The idea of projecting a Chinese voice beyond national borders gradually took hold in the 1990s. CCTV eventually established its English channel in 2000. The following year the state launched the "going out" project to export China's media overseas and to project China's soft power globally. Chinese media would play in the same global arena as CNN, the BBC, and other big Western media firms. Specific "going out" strategies included broadcasting CCTV-4 (the Chinese-language International Channel) and CCTV-9 (then the English-language International Channel) in important regions around the world. CCTV-International rapidly expanded its foreign language services in the next few years, adding Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic, and Africa channels to its cocktail of foreign language services. CCTV-International emulated the style of CNN and built a 24-hour information assembly line and an open platform where journalists, editors, producers, and news anchors could share a large open space that accelerates information flow and unifies production standards.

In February 2012, a week before an official visit to the United States of Xi Jinping, who would become China's leader later in the year, CCTV launched its American outpost, CCTV-America, which is the network's first effort in producing English programming from an overseas base rather than from its Beijing headquarters. CCTV-America's political panel show *The Heat*, which is hosted by Mike Walter, a former journalist at *USA Today*, gave a preview of Xi's schedule that included an upcoming stopover in Iowa. The program revealed that in 1985, as part of an agricultural research trip, Xi spent a week in Muscatine, Iowa. The segment was carefully construed to highlight China's contribution to the U.S. economy, as Iowa is the leading soybean producer in the U.S. and a big supplier to China. With juxtapositions of old photos from Xu's previous visit and interviews with local town people who hosted Xu's visit, the segment suggests an emotional tie between the Chinese and American people.

CCTV-America's substantial financial resources brought it other veteran news people from the U.S., UK, and Australia. Among the notables onboard are ex-Bloomberg Television anchor Phillip Yin, former CBS *60 Minutes* producer Barbara Dury, and the Havana-based veteran BBC correspondent Michael Voss. The veteran

Asia journalist Jim Laurie is an executive consultant and Beijing dispatched Ma Jing, a young professional woman with an excellent command of English, as the managing director of CCTV-America. Besides *The Heat*, the channel's programming lineup includes *Americas Now*, a Latin America-focused magazine program, *General News*, which features North and South American perspectives on current events, and *Biz Asia America*, a daily global business show covering economic and financial issues in North and South America as well as China and the Asian region.

CCTV-America is highly skewed towards reporting economic and financial news. When it comes to political news, it actively engages in major events elsewhere, except those in China. When it comes to major news about China, the Chinese state broadcaster's America branch is tightlipped, showing little interest in treating viewers with new revelations about the party-state. It falls short of providing alternative narratives about China, allowing the standard mostly negative narrative in the Western media to go unchallenged. Unlike Qatar's Al Jazeera, which has managed to be a go-to source for information about the Middle East, CCTV-America has yet to be taken seriously as a credible source about China due in large part to the Chinese government's control and censorship of state media.

Propaganda or Journalism?

The Chinese central government oversees CCTV via two interlocking systems; the ideological system of the party's Propaganda Department, which provides guidelines and thought directives on the whole, and the administrative system of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television that performs the actual daily oversight—including censorship of sensitive content. SARFT coordinates and evaluates the network's key propaganda efforts, regulates its signal coverage, controls its senior appointments, and decides on its organizational structure as well as all of its programming. Within CCTV itself, the internal leadership duplicates this same organizational structure, with a party committee responsible for ideological control and a senior management team overseeing the station's daily operation. The memberships of these two groups closely overlap, though the party committee ultimately overrules the management team, which is typical of the organizational structure of the Chinese state-run companies, true to the maxim that 'the Party controls the State.' In practice, regulatory policies and ideological guidance are routinely handed down from the Propaganda Department. The party committees within media institutions act as censors to re-enforce guidelines and approve proper programs for broadcasting while censoring inappropriate programming.

As the party becomes more sophisticated in its PR effort, it has loosened its top-down grip; self-censorship by media professionals has now become an effective mode of control. Contradictory policies and frequent political swings contribute to the on-the-job training of a new generation of media professionals who are thoroughly invested in the fine art

of intuiting what is permissible. If programs deviate from the socialist core, the producer would be fired and the party official in charge of approving the program would also be fired. The system thus encourages self-censorship, and producers and middle level managers can become even more cautious than the state regulators in determining what could or could not be put on the air. So envelope-pushing within boundaries has become the norm among Chinese media professionals. For instance, the management team at CCTV knows better than to run stories about the *New York Times* report on Wen Jiabao's family wealth. There is no need for any explicit bans from the party in this regard. Make no mistake though, that despite relaxation and deregulation, the Chinese party-state still filters media content by censorship. Compulsory censorship has been imposed so that all programs must be approved before broadcasting. The party often tightens its control in anticipation of major political events such as the 18th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China in November 2012 when the latest leadership transition took place.

Despite the levels of control and censorship, CCTV launched several investigative news magazine programs in the 1990s, emulating the American-style investigative magazine format and covering cases of corruption and power abuse. *Oriental Horizon*, a current affairs program that debuted in 1993, endeared itself to audiences by documenting, for the first time on Chinese television, the "real lives" of ordinary people. *Focus* began broadcasting in 1994 and emphasized investigative, edgy exposé stories. During its heyday, *Focus* ranked second only to the *National News Bulletin* in ratings but its exposure of corruption and power abuse touched a raw nerve. As the show began to threaten CCP's power base, it was told to tone down and exercise greater caution in topic selection and in the timing and intensity of its criticism. Quotas were issued that the program was permitted to do at most two critical reports per week. Another news magazine program, *News Probe*—launched in 1996—was explicitly designed to be China's *60 Minutes*. *News Probe* was to differ from *Focus*'s edgier approach and report stories with a calmer tone yet with equal provocation in its choice of content. But when the show started aggressively pursuing corruption related stories, it too ran into obstacles and had to scale back, which incurred criticism from news watch groups outside China.

Zhang Jie, one of the executive producers, defended *News Probe*'s softer approach, insisting that his program was making a transition from exposé to "enlightenment," a traditional Chinese intellectual value that sees journalists as enlightened intellectuals bringing information and ideas to the public in order to supervise and mobilize public opinion and to ultimately influence government policies.² Chinese journalists are supposed to be independent intellectuals, beholden to their cultured aspirations not political or market directives. As CCTV appears to appease the party and the market, Zhang and his team are far from achieving that goal. Despite the ups and downs and muckraking, watchdog-style journalism has captured the imagination of a new generation of Chinese journalists.

Another instance of control pertains to disaster reporting, which was highly restricted in the past. Domestic disasters of any sort used to be highly-guarded secrets by the authoritarian state in fear of projecting a weak national image. Disaster reporting has gradually become less of a taboo since the 1990s, as the rapid flow of information across national borders makes it difficult for the state to exercise full-scale blockage and alternative information channels have become easier to access by savvy seekers. The attempted cover-up of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003, for instance, turned many Chinese citizens away from state-run media as they sought out alternative news sources from overseas. The Chinese state came to the belated realization that too much information management could turn a natural disaster into a credibility crisis. And a milestone in Chinese disaster reporting came in 2008 when an earthquake measuring 8 on the Richter scale devastated China's Sichuan province killing an estimated 68,000 people.

CCTV reported news of the earthquake minutes after it struck. The swift reporting and frankness of the coverage were unprecedented and surprised everyone, including Western media, especially in light of the tightly controlled media environment in the run-up to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. That period saw Western media blasting China on the Tibet issue, human rights, and the tainted infant formula scandal—a PR disaster for the Chinese state and its media. The government responded with stricter controls on the media but nonetheless, the coverage of Sichuan earthquake was in notable contrast to the habitual cover-ups of the past.

Several factors contributed to CCTV's swift actions. First, the scale of the earthquake made it impossible for CCTV to not respond—this was not some mysterious disease that could easily be covered up. Also, CCTV was mindful of the competition from a formidable new challenger—the Internet, which has been a positive force in compelling China to open up. Online media have made it much more difficult for Chinese authorities to shut out undesirable news or keep unwelcome news out of the traditional media. Keeping the state media from reporting certain news items when millions of people could access such news online was undermining China's traditional media by driving people further towards the Internet for their information.

Yet, CCTV's earthquake coverage was not the result of a sudden change in the state's regulatory policy. On the contrary, the state was so shocked by the sudden quake that it failed to come up with immediate directives, thereby creating a window of opportunity for journalists at CCTV who strived to provide reputable and respectable news coverage by performing their journalistic duties. The state soon recovered from its initial disorientation and issued an order to bar news organizations other than CCTV and the official Xinhua news agency from sending reporters to the disaster zone. That gave CCTV an exclusive opportunity in its news coverage, as local news agencies were requested to use only information released by the two state-sanctioned news organizations. Thus, for the

next three to four days, CCTV faced little competition and its news crews reported freely the devastating impact of the earthquake. In its initial phase, the open and free coverage on CCTV looked much like the usual coverage in Western media. Some one billion people tuned in to CCTV's quake coverage between May 12 and May 21. Western media outlets too made extensive use of CCTV reports. It was a redemptive moment for a network long suffering from derision and distrust. It also demonstrated that, when free to follow their professional instincts, the Chinese media professionals were ready and able to work to international standards.

For a moment, the Chinese media appeared to have broken free of their propaganda mandate. The euphoria proved to be short-lived however. On May 17, the propaganda chief Li Changchun paid CCTV a visit, praising and encouraging positive coverage. On the night of Li's visit, the *National News Bulletin* added a new segment, "Heroes in the Disaster." The free-flowing, broad-ranging early coverage was changed to elaborate narratives about government-led disaster relief efforts. Two weeks later, Li visited reporters in the earthquake zone to encourage more coverage of state-led efforts, and CCTV reverted to its customary mouthpiece mode. Accounts of the deaths of thousands of school children as a result of shoddy school construction went viral on the Internet but appeared nowhere on CCTV. Though mentioning the collapse of school buildings, CCTV avoided covering the topic from the angle of corruption, and any images of death and despair and online complaints and appeals for punitive measures were carefully filtered out. *News Probe* did produce a story about collapsed school buildings, but the episode never made it to television screens.

Despite its mixed performance, CCTV's earthquake reporting did help repair its tarnished image. Instead of resulting in instability and turmoil, the relative free coverage of the earthquake promoted national cohesion and international praise. The state saw that policies promoting "the public's right to know" could project to the international community the image of a respectable press and a responsible and responsive state. Chinese media later reflected upon the benefits of a more relaxed media environment in projecting a credible voice for guiding public opinions.

CCTV and the China Model

Though financially independent and operationally autonomous, CCTV continues to be encumbered with the burden of political water-carrying. In return, it is guaranteed domestic market dominance. To the extent that political and economic interests intertwine in sustaining CCTV's monopolistic practice, the network becomes a microcosm of the China Model. China has cherry picked among market mechanisms, Confucian ideas, and socialist principles to pursue a hybrid course of development that has so far kept the one-party state entrenched and the masses mostly satisfied with their improving living standards and

the invigorating spectacle of China's rise in the world. Even the anti-communist crusader George Soros marveled at China's spectacular economic performance and praised China for having a better functioning government than the United States.³

Better functioning indeed as the market and politics have converged in their common pursuit of prosperity and stability to essentially maintain China's current political structure of one-party rule. But how far can this model carry China? Corruption as a result of inbreeding between money and power is not just rampant, but normalized and acknowledged by many as unavoidable. The shame associated with corruption is replaced by an eagerness to partake, to be part of the privileged few with means to corruption. As one kindergarten girl in China told a reporter in 2009, when asked what she would like to be when she grew up, "I would like to be a corrupt official."⁴ This leads to another huge problem facing China, the obscene wealth gap between the rich and the poor that threatens to destabilize Chinese society. The Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, was singled out by the *New York Times* for his family's enormous amount of wealth, but he is certainly not alone. Wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the politically powerful while political power is handed down within the established political dynasties.

Success is now inherited, and that risks stifling the social mobility that created the vibrant economic growth and cultural flourishing of the last decade. Leaving behind the totalitarian state of Mao's era, China glided through a relatively open phase with rapid economic growth and political exploration only to wind up with an authoritarian and plutocratic rule anchored on "extractive economic institutions," to borrow a term from *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson.⁵ As opposed to inclusive economic institutions that benefit all, the term extractive economic institution refers to a system that is designed and maintained by the politically powerful elite to extract resources from the rest of society. The sustainability of an extractive model, for CCTV and for China at large, is questionable.

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- 1 See interviews in Ying Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television* (New York, New Press, 2012).
 - 2 Ying Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes*, 3.
 - 3 Meredith Jessup, "Soros: Communist China Has 'Better Functioning Government' than the U.S.," *The Blaze* (November 16, 2010), <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/soros-communist-china-has-better-functioning-government-than-the-u-s/>
 - 4 Joshua Keating, "I Want to Be a Corrupt Official When I Grow Up!" Danwei.org (September 10, 2009). Retrieved October 16, 2012 from http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/09/10/i_want_to_be_a_corrupt_official_when_i_grow_up
 - 5 Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York, Crown Business, 2012).