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Soft power in the living room: a survey of television drama on CCTV's foreign language channels

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Abstract

In China's quest for soft power, serialized TV drama, animation and cinema are the top three cultural industries on which the Chinese government is betting to influence attitudes and perceptions overseas. But despite its prominence, television entertainment is largely absent from studies on Chinese soft power. This chapter contributes to addressing this gap by presenting the results of a content analysis of over 170 television drama series (*dianshiju*) broadcast in four of China Central Television's (CCTV) foreign language channels between 2004 and 2015. By analysing the genre, theme, time of action and location of the limited selection of television shows made available through these channels, I seek to understand how, through the narrative of fiction, China's public broadcaster contributes to building an officially-sanctioned Chinese narrative on contemporary Chinese society for global audiences.

Keywords: soft power, CCTV, TV drama, international broadcasting, self-representation, contemporary China

Introduction

Maximizing China's soft power has become a twenty-first century priority for Chinese political elites (M. Li). Formally incorporated into China's foreign policy goals in 2007 after President Hu Jintao made explicit reference to the concept during the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), soft power has since become a recursive concept in policy documents (Xinhua). Soft power, the power of "getting others to want the outcomes you want" (Nye 5), is by no means a new idea in international politics. For decades, if not centuries, nation-states have used a myriad of tools to exercise power without resorting to coercive force. Soft power tools took the form of expeditionary voyages around the world before the modern era; propaganda messages on radio and in print before, during and after the Second World War, and today, they are usually grouped into a new form of diplomacy: public diplomacy (Cull). What all of the above have in common is the aspiration of nation-states to exercise some influence on citizens living in other countries by means of politics, economy and culture. China's soft power initiatives in recent years have been driven by the belief among Chinese authorities that the mass media around the world provide inaccurate representations of China (Wang 5–10). In order to redress such views, the Chinese government uses an array of institutions, from the language-learning Confucius Institutes to mass media such as China Central Television (CCTV).

Inspired by the success of Japan and South Korea in harnessing soft power through TV entertainment, China has been trying to internationalize its television sector, hoping to match the achievements of its neighbours. Television drama, the most influential narrative form in contemporary China (Hong), occupies a central position in this process. In spite of this, the transnational circulation of drama is seldom discussed in academic studies of Chinese soft power. To fill the gap, this chapter provides a quantitative content analysis of television drama on CCTV's international channels, one of the multiple avenues through which China is

trying to extend the influence of TV fiction on public opinion overseas. It surveys all the 173 series broadcast between 2004 and 2015 in the Spanish, French, Russian and Arabic channels of CCTV in an attempt to make sense of China's soft power strategies when it comes to television entertainment. I hold that in contrast to the diversity of visual representations of China available domestically, the content rendered accessible to foreign audiences through CCTV is largely restricted to that which fits the "main melody" (*zhu xuanlü*). Moreover, I suggest that the tension between the market and the state which is often discussed in regards to China's media industry (Zhao) becomes problematic in international broadcasting. While CCTV is under commercial pressure domestically and thus needs to juggle between adherence to the Party line and audience success, internationally it enjoys a quasi-monopoly on distribution of content geared towards non-Chinese audiences. Without competition and with no pressure for commercial success, selection of content on CCTV's foreign language channels responds to a different logic than at home. Instead of showcasing the most popular series in China, CCTV's selection for overseas audiences is mostly based on ideological correctness. This top down approach to harnessing soft power, I argue, may be hindering its effectiveness.

International broadcasting and Chinese soft power

In contrast to hard power, which relies on coercion to achieve the goals of nation-states, soft power depends on attraction: it is about being liked and, at the same time, being perceived as a positive influence by other nation-states or individuals. The attractiveness of a country is the product of the interaction of multiple societal forces (cultural industries, civil society, norms and values...) and the government. Japan, for example, increased its soft power during the 1980s and 1990s because of the popularity of its visual culture, long before the Japanese

government started to actively seek to boost Japan's global appeal (Kelts). On the contrary, China's push for increased soft power in the 2000s has been led by government agencies and state-sponsored institutions (Bell), mostly those related to the promotion of culture. As argued by (W. Zhang), culture and the arts occupy a central position in the CPC's understanding of soft power. Since Hu Jintao's endorsing of the concept in 2007, there has been a steady increase in the resources allocated to the development of cultural industries, mostly TV drama, animation and cinema. Cultural exports, however, are not sufficient to achieve the two goals of China's long-term soft power strategy: *cultural appeal* and *perception influence*. By cultural appeal I refer to the potential of a country's cultural products, norms and values to be attractive to global audiences, while by perception influence I mean the degree to which a country is able to influence foreign audiences in the formation of representations of itself. Sometimes, cultural appeal and perception influence are pursued simultaneously, but at times they are independent. For example, China's media overseas, such as Xinhua or *China Daily*, are almost exclusively oriented at maximizing China's discursive power by reproducing an official narrative on China's development (Shirk). Other times, the two goals are tackled at the same time. The 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo were predominantly circumscribed to generating cultural appeal, but at the same time they served the purpose of projecting an image of a modern and developed China (Svensson; Yang). CCTV's international channels also serve a dual function. As part of China's cultural industries, television can generate cultural appeal and influence the way China is perceived abroad.

International broadcasting is one of the tools available to nation-states to increase their soft power. China's international broadcasting includes dozens of multilingual radio stations operated by China Radio International (CRI) and six CCTV television channels aimed at audiences overseas in six languages, Arabic, Chinese English, French, Russian and Spanish.

CCTV's international channels are in full alignment with China's goal of harvesting cultural attraction and maximizing the ability to sway perceptions on China abroad. During the presentation to the press of the Arabic channel, Zhang Changming, vice-president of CCTV, indicated that the station would "present the world with the real China" (Bristow). When CCTV-E was launched, Ye Lulu, director of the channel, told the press that they wanted "to introduce China to foreigners" (Díez). These echo the views of former CPC propaganda chief, Li Changchun, who in a 2008 speech outlining the "going out" strategy of Chinese media, urged the country's television industry to make sure that "Chinese images and sounds are widely spread all over the world and present in every single household" (C. Li). Li's speech went on to highlight the need for Chinese media to properly guide public opinion (*yulun daoxiang*), not only domestically but also abroad. Content on CCTV's international channels exemplifies this guidance of public opinion. Far from being outright propaganda, as was the case of Radio Peking during the heydays of the Cold War, CCTV offers subtler, more nuanced messages that are hoped to ultimately help shape perceptions about China.

Although international broadcasting is most often discussed in regards to 24-hours news stations, a distinction needs to be made in the typology of channels. While some, like BBC World News, Russia Today or CCTV-News only broadcast current affairs programs (news, documentaries and debates), others also offer cultural and entertainment content such as movies, variety shows, soap operas and music videos. Examples of the latter include France's TV5 Monde, Japan's NHK World or the now-defunct Australia Network. CCTV's foreign language channels offer a combination of news and entertainment, mostly television drama. This is far from surprising, given that serialized TV fiction (*dianshiju*) is the "most popular audio-visual narrative form" in China (Hong 30). In 2005, Chinese citizens watched television drama for an average of 56 minutes a day (X. Zhang). In 2014 alone, 439 new series were produced, for a total of almost 16,000 episodes (SAPPRFT). According to a 2012

nationwide survey (Zhang et al.), only 4 per cent of Chinese said not to enjoy watching television drama; the most popular genres being historical (41 per cent) and war dramas (37.2). Today, serialized fiction is, despite strong competition from reality TV and variety shows, the main source of advertising income for Chinese television stations. Moreover, as Zhu, Keane and Bai note, “television drama in contemporary China provides a space for the society to engage in cultural debates about its citizens’ most prevalent concerns and deepest dilemmas” (13).

Chinese television drama is not only consumed domestically, but it is also distributed transnationally. Taking advantage of export routes opened up by Hong Kong’s martial arts drama in the 1980s and Taiwan’s idol series in the 1990s, China’s historical fiction has been attracting audiences in Asian markets (East and South East Asia) and the Chinese cultural-linguistic market (Hong Kong, Taiwan and the diasporas in Europe, Australasia and North America) since the late 1990s. However, Chinese drama has failed to match the popularity of South Korean and Japanese TV entertainment in multiple other markets (Iwabuchi et al.; Madrid-Morales and Lovric; Mori). The Chinese government has been trying to imitate these success stories for over a decade. In 2005, the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) called for the international success of Chinese TV drama and in 2007, Hu Jintao exhorted Chinese cultural industries to become more global. Despite the repeated calls and expensive efforts, many agree that China’s global cultural appeal remains limited (Shambaugh; Kurlantzick). Keane concedes that there are four forces pulling China back: the mediocre quality of the products, pre-production censorship and ideological aftertaste, lack of distribution rights-consciousness and cultural discount. Zhang adds that the red tape surrounding production and distribution of dramas further complicates promotion efforts. In the remaining of this chapter I analyse one of the main providers of Chinese drama to non-Chinese audiences overseas, CCTV, and provide two other possible explanations to the

apparent limited success of China's drama industry overseas: the disconnect between domestic commercial success and the global distribution of drama and the restricted offer made available to global audiences.

Chinese drama on CCTV's foreign language channels

CCTV's Arabic, French, Spanish and Russian channels offer a very similar choice of programs, with Chinese Mainland television drama being one of the prime sources of content.¹ Table 1 presents a comparison of time distribution of different types of programmes, in percentages, across the four channels in May 2010 and May 2014. Some minor differences aside, news, documentaries and drama represent close to 75 per cent of airtime in all stations. In the Spanish, Russian and Arabic versions, drama occupies the largest amount of airtime. While documentaries and lifestyle shows, which are mostly about travel and cooking, are dubbed, drama on CCTV's foreign channels is subtitled. Only in 2014, the Arabic channel began airing dubbed versions of some series. By the end of 2015, the station had broadcast three series in Arabic: *The Happy Lives of Jin Tai Lang* (*Jin Tai Lang de xingfu shenghuo*, 2012), *Beautiful Era of a Daughter-in-Law* (*Xifu de meihao shidai*, 2009) and *Beauty's Rival in Palace* (*Meiren xinji*, 2010). As is the case of drama, almost all content on these four channels comes from CCTV's domestic stations and does not have foreign audiences in mind at the time of production. The only exceptions to this are educational programs, like those to learn Chinese, which are specifically produced for non-Chinese audiences.

[Table 1 should go approximately here]

Despite being one of the main pillars in CCTV's foreign language channels, television series directed at foreign audiences have received no scholarly attention to date. However, as

prime sites for the (re)production of public images, representations and discourses of China (Shen), television series are a potentially powerful soft power tool. In selecting which shows to present to global audiences, CCTV contributes to the construction of China's self-discourse on its past, present and future. Because decision-making within China's state-owned media is opaque and secretive, research on the subject requires bypassing traditional approaches in production analysis (i.e. interviews, observation...), and leaves the researcher with little other possibility than inferring plausible explanations based on the evidence provided by the content itself.² In this section, I discuss the results of a quantitative content analysis of television series shown on CCTV-E, CCTV-F, CCTV-A and CCTV-R.³ Because of the manageable size of the population, no sampling was needed for this study. The results are based on all the series ever broadcast in each of the four channels between 2004 and 2015. Given that no inventory of series was available, I first used TV listings to put together a comprehensive list of drama aired in each channel. Table 2 shows an overview of how many series aired in each station, including how many were shown for the first time each year. CCTV-F, which has been on air since 2004, has the largest number of series, 154 (excluding reruns), followed by CCTV-E (134), CCTV-R (68) and CCTV-A (51). The total number of series surveyed in here is 173, as many have appeared in multiple channels. For each drama, two Chinese native speakers collected the following data: year of release in China and abroad, number of episodes, genre, time of action, place of action and plot theme. Information was gathered from Baidu Baike (China's largest collaborative encyclopaedia) and by watching the first and last episodes of each drama. To guarantee the internal validity of the measurements, coders underwent several rounds of training. After reaching acceptable intercoder reliability scores for all variables in a subsample of eighteen series (an average of 91 per cent agreement and 0.81 Krippendorff's α), each coder was assigned half of the dataset. Coders also recorded the number of views, likes, user rating and type of drama from Youku (a popular Chinese

online video platform) and Douban (a Chinese cinema and television portal).⁴ For comparative purposes, this chapter also uses data about drama production in China released by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT, formerly known as SARFT), freely available online.

[Table 2 should go somewhere around here]

The predominance of main melody drama

Series on CCTV's foreign channels air daily, often Monday to Sunday, and with two (sometimes four) back-to-back episodes. At times, there are two series airing at the same time in one station. Because the average length is around 28 episodes per show and the pool of ready-to-air series seems to be limited, the number of reruns is high, particularly in the Arabic (M = 5.40; SD = 3.64; Max = 14) and Russian channels (M = 3.57; SD = 2.29; Max = 10). In contrast, the average number of reruns on CCTV-E (M = 1.96; SD = 1.136; Max = 7) and CCTV-F (M = 1.83; SD = .74; Max = 4) is below 2. Although most of the series are available online and, therefore, can be streamed anytime, the intense scheduling on TV requires extreme audience loyalty. To follow a series from beginning to end, one would need to spend over ten hours a week in front of the TV. The two series that have been repeated the most (22 reruns each) are *Zhang Xiao Wu's Spring* (*Zhang Xiaowu de chuntian*, 2010), a story about a 30-year-old woman who overcomes all sorts of misfortunes to find happiness and love, and *Naked Wedding* (*Luohun shidai*, 2011), which follows the struggles of a young couple after their 'naked marriage', that is, marrying without holding a wedding ceremony and without the material goods expected for newly weds. Both series were released on the international channels within 12 months of their domestic release, most likely because of the relative audience success in China. *Naked Wedding* ranked as top TV drama on CSM's

audience ratings at the time of its release (Yu) and its 30 episodes had more than 600 million views on Youku by the end of 2015. Such a speedy release on CCTV's foreign language channels is rather infrequent. The average time difference between domestic and international releases is close to five years. We find the shortest delay (measured in years) on CCTV-F ($n = 152$; $M = 3.82$; $SD = 2.87$; $Min = 1$; $Max = 16$), followed by CCTV-E ($n = 134$; $M = 4.40$; $SD = 2.97$; $Min = 1$; $Max = 16$), CCTV-A ($n = 50$; $M = 5.12$; $SD = 2.33$; $Min = 2$; $Max = 11$) and CCTV-R ($n = 68$; $M = 5.41$; $SD = 2.83$; $Min = 1$; $Max = 13$). The mean score on the Spanish and French channels is pulled towards higher values due to the release in recent years of some costume dramas from the late 1990s such as *Sima Qian* (1997) or *Yongzheng Dynasty* (*Yongzheng Wangchao*, 1999), none of which aired on CCTV-A or CCTV-R. While *Sima Qian*'s biopic enjoyed little audience success, *Yongzheng Dynasty*'s account of Emperor Yongzheng's political integrity and plight against corruption during the early Qing Dynasty was a "phenomenal success" (Zhu).

Although audience success could be expected to be the main explanation for a series to be shown to foreign audiences if the ultimate goal was to showcase the most notable productions and generate cultural appeal, this is only valid for a small number of cases here. Given the lack of extensive, reliable and easily available television audience data, a feasible (even if imperfect) alternative to measure popularity is to use data available online on popular video platforms. If we take Youku data, among the top 100 most watched drama of all times as of December 2015, only one had been shown on CCTV's foreign language channels, *Naked Wedding*. The next drama on the list is *Beauty's Rival in Palace*, set during the Western Han dynasty, which has only aired on the Arabic channel. While the average number of viewers per drama among the top 100 shows on Youku is close to 800 million, for the 132 series surveyed here for which data is available on the video platform, the average is just over 22 million. When it comes to user ratings, only eight series included in this study have a

score of 9 and above (4.6 per cent), which is the threshold to be among the top 250 most popular shows on Youku. It is true that the most popular shows online do not come from CCTV's domestic channels, but from the much more popular Dragon TV or Hunan TV. However, even some of the most successful series in CCTV's history, such as director Zheng Xiaolong's *Yearnings* (*Kewang*, 1989), *Stories of the Editorial Office* (*Bianjibu de gushi*, 1992) or *A Beijinger in New York* (*Beijing ren zai Niu Yue*, 1993) have not been introduced to CCTV's foreign audiences. Instead, much less popular series from the same period, but better aligned with the Party discourse at the time of production, have aired repeatedly. These include: *The nearest, the dearest* (*Jinsheng shi qingren*, 1994), *Tomorrow will be sunny* (*Mingri you qingtian*, 1998) and *Urban Emotion* (*Dushi Qinggan*, 2000), all of which could be labelled main melody dramas (*zhu xuanlü ju*).

The term "main melody" first appeared in the official jargon of the CPC in the 1980s and became pervasive in essays about film, theater and literature after 1989. Artistic expressions tuned to the main melody are different from traditional forms of propaganda in that they are "interesting, touching, entertaining and extravagant" (R. Li 56), while retaining a pedagogical value. According to Ma, "main melody drama transforms the direct propaganda of socialist drama into ideological persuasion so that it can effectively address the market's demands and the needs of consumerist audiences" (524). The epitome of main melody is an artistic form that blends CPC ideology with the latest artistic fads, updating traditional forms of socialist realism and, still, serving the educational function expected of socialist culture. Once predominant on Chinese television, main melody dramas are today diluted in a saturated market in which ideological purity is often driven over by new societal values which are not always aligned with the party line. Still, most drama on CCTV, be it domestic or international channels, fits the profile. A good example is *Urban Emotion*, based on a 1998 novel by Guo Xiaoli and directed by Wu Tianming. Set in late 1990s Beijing the series presents an array of

family plots in which the morally righteous protagonists fight against the ills of a profit driven society (nepotism, bribery, individualism).

We see the adherence to the main melody also in seemingly more progressive plots, like that of *Naked Wedding*, which portrays the falling apart of the leading couple, as they decide not to follow social norms expected from newly weds. The series, based on Tang Xintian's popular online novel *Naked Wedding - a new marriage era for the post-80s generation* (*Luohun - balinghou de shin jiehun shidai*), was first released on Zhejiang TV and Shenzhen TV in June 2011, followed by CCTV-1, where it aired on prime-time. While the point of departure of *Naked Wedding* is the personal struggle of part of the post 1980s's generation (*balinghou*) to get social acceptance for choosing life paths different to those of their parents', the ultimate message is about the importance of norm conformance and social orthodoxy: marriage has some rules that should not be broken. The plot highlights the desirability of conventional marriage with the ultimate goal of establishing a normative family (husband, wife and child), which is depicted as a paramount social institution. In *Naked Wedding*, there are no diverging views on what constitutes a family in today's China; there is no mention of family outside marriage, as marriage is seen by all characters as a pre-condition to forming a family. In the apparently innocuous mirror-like portrayals of everyday life and the absence of contestation to prevailing social norms, main melody drama tells a simplified narrative of contemporary Chinese society, which emphasizes homogeneity over diversity.

Programming strategy and limited choice

Even if audience success does not determine that a series is going to be shown on CCTV's foreign language channels, when selecting series, some degree of planning seems to exist. There appears to be different strategies for the French and Spanish channels on the one side,

and the Russian and Arabic channels on the other. Significant correlations can be found between the series aired on CCTV-F and CCTV-E ($r = .223, p < .01$) and those shown on CCTV-A and CCTV-R ($r = .348, p < .01$). For an overview of how these differences and similarities are expressed in terms of content, Table 3 presents percentages of different types of drama by channel. With a longer history of television drama in the Spanish and French channels, the diversity of genres is more evident. During the first years (2004-2008), CCTV-E and CCTV-F had a predominance of what Li Zeng has called, “transnational drama” or stories set in a foreign country, where Chinese characters (economic migrants, students, expatriates) are faced with the complexities of an increasingly globalized world. Series like *Student Abroad* (*Xiao liuxuesheng*, 2005), about a group of students in Canada, or *Romantic Getaway* (*Langman zhilü*, 2000), the story of a young couple relocating to Malaysia, told the story of an internationally-aware China and exalted the pivotal role of the family and the state in finding answers to multicultural encounters. The first ever drama aired on CCTV-E was *Modern Family* (*Modeng jiating*, 2002), which humorously describes the vicissitudes of a family that needs to come to terms with the fact that their daughter has married a foreign man. Most of these stories never made it to the Arabic and Russian channels. Instead, in these two stations we find a number of series that appeal to the historical and ethnic connections between China, Russia and the Arab world. It is the case of Gao Feng’s *An Eternal Lamb* (*Yongsheng yang*, 2010), a story about the Kazakh minority in Western China, which was released in film festivals abroad as a motion picture, and then reedited into a five-episode series for CCTV, or *Raspberry Flowers Open* (*Hongmei huaer kai*, 2009), a love story between a Russian woman and a Chinese man spanning over three decades of Sino-Soviet relations.

[Table 3 should go somewhere around here]

Across all four channels, there is a predominance of stories that take place in urban settings (86.6), geographically concentrated on the Eastern part of China: Beijing (37.5), Shanghai (12.6) and the coastal provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian (12). The predominance of prosperous metropolises, lined up with expensive shops and elegantly designed restaurants, the modern-looking homes, orderly traffic and clean streets offer somewhat idyllic portrayals of urban life. The absence of rural areas, particularly the North and West, also means that stories do not reflect the ethnic diversity of the country. Even though ethnic minorities account for 9 per cent of China's population, only in very rare occasions non-Han actors play leading roles. The lack of geographical diversity, however, is not exclusive to dramas on CCTV's international channels. In Table 4, I present aggregate data for all TV series produced in China between 2007 and 2014.⁵ Even though not all of these series ended up being distributed and broadcast, data gives a general sense of trends in the domestic market. In terms of geographical location of stories, the values in Tables 3 and 4 are considerably similar and point towards a general deficit of ethnic diversity in the industry.

Differences, however, surface when comparing genre and time of action. The majority of series on CCTV's foreign channels take place in the twenty-first century (58.4). These are followed by plots set during the reform and opening up period (15.3) and during Republican China (11.7). If we compare this data with that of SAPPRT for the 2007-2014 period, it is easy to notice a striking difference: while domestically, over 40 per cent of series were set in historical periods (before 1949), these amount to just over 20 per cent in CCTV's foreign language channels. Period drama, as mentioned earlier, is the most popular genre in China. As such, it takes up a substantive part of airtime. But this is not the case of CCTV's foreign language channels, where costume drama only accounted for 7.6 per cent of shows. The main focus of these stations is on domestic and idol dramas (65.2), which tell the stories of 'ordinary' Chinese families and contemporary heroines (and sometimes heroes) trying to

make righteous choices, to uphold moral values and to become prosperous, while enduring the severities of an ever-changing China. Loyal to the pedagogical nature of officially sanctioned entertainment, these series offer lessons on what it means to be a civilized citizen (*wenming gongming*) in an aspiring harmonious society (*hexie shehui*): to abide by social rules and norms. Overall, the emphasis is on telling a story of a rising China, inheritor of a long and glorious history, which is now focused on achieving modernity on its own terms. The decision to emphasize series that showcase a modern and urban China to global audiences comes at the expense of being able to promote some of the most popular genres domestically, most notably period drama set in Qing and pre-Qing China.

Conclusion

Today, Chinese television series circulate transnationally more than ever before. Not only are they prominent in channels aimed at overseas Chinese communities, but they are also widely distributed online through formal and informal means. This chapter has looked at one of these transnational distribution channels, CCTV's foreign language stations, the content of which is tightly controlled by Chinese authorities, making them good case studies to understand what images of China are being presented to foreign audiences in Beijing's attempts to maximize soft power. Through a content analysis of over 170 television series, I have shown evidence that television dramas on CCTV's foreign language channels are characterized by being predominantly urban and contemporary. This contrasts with the domestic market, where historical plots are much more prominent. The results of the content analysis also show that the diversity in genres that can be found domestically is not replicated internationally. Moreover, there appears to be no relationship between the success of a TV series in China and the likelihood of it being presented to foreign audiences. Of the 100 most

popular series on the video platform Youku, only two had been shown on CCTV's foreign language channels by 2015.

Television content is a powerful social institution and reproducer of social order (Kong). It is also a prime source from which we build images of foreign countries and societies. Given the limited availability of television fiction from China in languages other than Chinese, CCTV's foreign language channels play a much bigger role than they are often credited for. News and entertainment on CCTV are the only way to get acquainted with contemporary China for many people residing overseas. When it comes to television drama, the offer available on the four channels surveyed for this chapter is largely restricted to what has been called main melody drama: productions that strictly follow the ideological line of the CPC. They are morally and socially instructive productions that emphasize the collective rewards of non-deviance from societal norms. As noted by Keane, the international broadcast of television drama is "invariably framed as sending out politically correct accounts of Chinese history and society" (p. 148). These series highlight the material achievements of China, hide its failures and diversity, and stress social values such as filial piety, perseverance and hard work.

The focus of this chapter has been on the stories told by television dramas. This, however, should not be equated to an understanding of messages as decisive in the formation of images and representations of China. Audiences are not passive actors in the process of television consumption, but rather active agents (Ang). However, when exercising their agency, audiences that seek content produced by China about China—which is still marginal and only accessible through limited channels—need to be looked at carefully. They are active information-seekers about China but cannot be assumed to share the same criticism arising from the knowledge of the Chinese media system that Chinese consumers have. In other words, messages themselves are important because without further research into the matter, it

cannot be ruled out that in their interpretation of content, instead of making critical readings of the plots and story-lines, foreign audiences adopt the representations of China that they see on Chinese television as truthful images of contemporary Chinese society. Certainly more research needs to go into studying the reception process of China's soft power strategies so that we are able to discern whether China's desired image projection matches pictures in audiences heads, paraphrasing Lippmann, and whether being exposed to content selected by China has an effect on how the country is imagined and perceived abroad.

As in many other areas of China's public diplomacy efforts, when exporting television drama preference has been given to quantity over quality, breadth over depth. Instead of showing the best that China has to offer, CCTV has chosen to offer a lot, regardless of quality and popularity, as long as it is politically non-controversial. For a country to successfully increase its soft power, however, two conditions are needed: credibility and appeal. If the messages conveyed are not perceived as truthful, they are likely to fail to resonate; if the cultural products presented to foreign audiences are not of high-quality, they are likely to generate no appeal. Both quality and credibility have a subjective dimension, but most of the time audiences will agree. As opposed to the changes that the process of commercialization has brought to the media sector domestically (Zhao), China's international broadcasting remains non-commercial and State-managed. Nonetheless, without an audience, the relevance of international broadcasting is reduced to zero. With no audience data available for any of China's foreign language channels it is difficult to assess the real impact that Chinese drama is having on foreign publics. However, what cannot be overlooked is the fact that there is a mismatch between the series shown on the four stations studied in this chapter and those being circulated through other means, be they market-led or consumer-led initiatives.

China has opted for a top down approach to soft power as opposed to, for example, Japan, which is one of the most successful cases of soft power accumulation in Asia. In China, the

State has taken the lead in promoting the export of cultural industries and, by doing so, it retains a strong grip over what stories are being presented to overseas audiences. The effectiveness of this strategy has been called into doubt (Rawnsley; Shambaugh). In Japan, government intervention occurred only after audiences globally had embraced Japanese visual culture, boosting the country's cultural appeal. While CCTV has a powerful platform on which it could showcase some of China's most popular cultural productions, it chooses to restrict its programming to content that is not necessarily the most popular. Maximizing soft power this way seems difficult to achieve. With time, as alternative distribution channels become more commonplace and Chinese entertainment programmes increase their presence overseas, the States' monopoly over the construction of images through televised fiction might be eroded. Until then, CCTV's foreign channels occupy such central position in China's soft power efforts, that they might require some more attention than they have received in the past.

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Yearnings (Kewang, 1989)

Yongzheng Dynasty (Yongzheng Wangchao, 1999)

Zhang Xiao Wu's Spring (Zhang Xiaowu de chuntian, 2010)

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Average time allocated to different types of programmes (percentages) on CCTV's foreign language channels

	CCTV-E		CCTV-F		CCTV- Русский		CCTV- العربية	
	2010	2014	2010	2014	2010	2014	2010	2014
Documentary	25.0	19.0	16.7	22.9	28.8	15.5	26.8	12.2
Drama	27.8	25.0	27.8	25.0	37.5	41.5	25.0	37.5
News and debate	21.9	22.6	25.8	25.6	17.4	17.4	26.3	24.1
Educational	2.7	5.2	8.3	12.5	3.7	3.0	3.1	4.2
Lifestyle and Arts	22.6	24.0	21.4	11.0	12.5	22.6	18.8	15.8
Cartoons	0	4.2	0	3.0	0	0	0	6.3

Source: Compiled by the author

Table 2. Number of television dramas aired each year per channel (new releases in parentheses)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
CCTV-F	5 (3)	18 (10)	17 (15)	16 (13)	13 (9)	14 (14)	13 (10)	30 (16)	44 (21)	39 (18)	32 (16)	39 (9)	280
CCTV-E	-	-	-	4 (4)	16 (16)	16 (16)	14 (14)	27 (16)	49 (25)	51 (23)	46 (17)	39 (3)	262
CCTV- Русский	-	-	-	-	-	5 (5)	15 (15)	32 (11)	48 (8)	55 (13)	46 (10)	42 (6)	274
CCTV- العربية	-	-	-	-	-	8 (8)	16 (16)	34 (7)	53 (7)	54 (4)	56 (7)	53 (2)	243

Notes: CCTV-F first aired a drama in October 2004; CCTV-E, in October 2007. CCTV-Russian and CCTV-Arabic only started operations in the second half of 2009.

Table 3. Typology of television drama on CCTV's foreign language channels (percentages)

	CCTV-F (n = 278)	CCTV-E (n = 262)	CCTV-A (n = 270)	CCTV-R (n = 243)	Total (n = 1059)
Genre*					
Costume	11.6	11.9	2.2	4.5	7.6
Domestic/Family	23.9	23.8	35.2	31.3	28.4
Crime/Police	3.6	3.4	1.1	---	2.1
War/Military	8.3	13.8	4.8	2.9	7.5
Youth/Children	3.3	2.7	7.0	2.9	4.0
Idol	33.7	31.8	35.6	46.1	36.8
Reform and development	7.6	5.4	4.1	7.0	6.0
Other	8.0	7.3	10.0	5.3	7.7
Setting*					
Urban	83.3	82.0	88.5	93.0	86.6
Rural	13.0	14.6	7.4	3.7	9.8
Abroad	3.6	3.4	4.1	3.3	3.6
Location*					
Beijing	34.6	30.5	38.9	46.0	37.5
Shanghai	9.7	8.8	19.8	12.1	12.6
Northeast China	9.3	8.4	2.0	2.2	5.6
East China	10.5	13.0	9.1	16.1	12.0
South China	5.4	9.6	4.4	6.7	6.5
Southwest China	4.3	7.1	6.0	6.7	5.9
Northwest China	.8	3.3	5.2	---	2.4
North China	1.6	1.3	1.2	---	1.0
Ancient China	7.8	8.8	5.6	2.7	6.2
Not a real city/town	16.0	9.2	7.9	7.6	10.2
Period*					
Before Qing Dynasty	8.3	9.2	---	2.5	6.1
Qing Dynasty	4.3	3.8	4.1	2.9	2.7
Republican China	12.3	19.5	7.8	7.4	11.7
1949 to 1978	5.1	4.6	5.6	4.1	4.8
1979 to 2000	15.6	11.5	20.4	14.0	15.3
2001 to present	53.6	50.6	61.1	68.3	58.4

* Only one category was coded for each series.

Table 4. Television series produced in China between 2007 and 2014 by genre, setting and period (percentages)

	Number of drama (n = 3,714)	Number of episodes (n = 121,161)
Genre		
Costume	16.3	18.6
Domestic/Family	45.8	43.9
Crime/Police	5.7	4.5
War/Military	17.6	17.5
Youth/Children	3.0	2.6
Other	12.6	13.0
Setting		
Urban	86.2	89.2
Rural	13.8	10.8
Period		
Before Qing Dynasty	10.8	11.9
Qing Dynasty	27.0	29.5
Republican China	4.3	4.1
After 1949	56.4	52.5
Other	2.1	2.1

Source: State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television

¹ CCTV's foreign language channels do not broadcast content produced in Taiwan or Hong Kong, although this is often available domestically. For simplicity, whenever I refer to Chinese drama in this section, I refer to series produced in the Mainland.

² Over the course of my research about CCTV's foreign language channels, I have repeatedly tried to interview those involved in the process of choosing what content goes on air, only to find all requests declined. In my previous research about CCTV-E, "foreign experts" explained that neither them nor their direct Chinese supervisors were involved in such decisions (Madrid-Morales).

³ To simplify the naming of channels, I opt not use the official names of the Arabic and Russian channels, which are written in their respective scripts, and instead use the abbreviated forms CCTV-A and CCTV-R.

⁴ Data was collected between 2014 and 2015. All Youku and Douban data was collected during November 2015.

⁵ Data was aggregated from yearly reports by SAPPRFT and, although it does not follow the same criteria used in the content analysis of this paper, it offers some room for comparison.