



## Harmony, Olympic Manners and Morals— Chinese Television and the ‘New Propaganda’ of Public Service Advertising

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### Abstract

Over the past three decades, Chinese media have moved away from the tight controls under which they were kept since 1949. This forced those responsible for popular education to reconsider how their messages can be presented best to the public. Written propaganda, as published in newspapers, reached less and less people and was seen as boring and ineffective; the propagandist posters of the past could not compete with the many moving images and the glossy commercial messages that entered China. Television was seen as the most effective medium to present a modernized type of propaganda. As a result, the Party became a producer of ‘public service advertising’ (PSA, *gongyi guanggao*). Commercial advertising has inspired contents and forms of these PSA in major ways. Despite their important function in the wider framework of thought work, the production of PSA is hampered by three partially interrelated problems: financing, production and broadcasting. In the run-up to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the number and intensity of PSA increased.

### Keywords

Chinese media; Television; Propaganda; Public Service Advertising; Moral Education.

Over the past three decades, Chinese media have moved away from the tight controls under which they were kept since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. This development had to do with the gradual withdrawal of the State from the day-to-day interference in the lives of its citizens. As the successes of the economic modernisation policies started to benefit ever increasing numbers of people in the 1980s, it became more and more apparent to the population that there was more to life than political infighting and

ideological purity, and that it actually was allowed to have fun.<sup>1</sup> Although this process initially seemed to be restricted to the urban areas, as time went by even the countryside felt the constraints of political control slipping away. The ‘Open Door’ policy, started in 1977 under the late Hua Guofeng, in particular exposed many Chinese to the developments taking place outside of the borders. Images and influences from the transnational Chinese and Asian cultural spheres started to make their effects felt, as did elements of Western, or at least non-Chinese, art, music, fashion, lifestyles, media content, and various aspects of popular culture in general.

The television set, considered to be the ultimate symbol of modernisation and personal prosperity in the early 1980s, served as a conduit for these influences. It provided increasing numbers of people with their own Open Door to the world. Having no TV simply meant that one had lost out on the opportunities offered by the reforms. This is translated in the steady growth of the number of TVs owned: in 2006, 100 households in urban areas owned 134.8 colour TVs; in the rural areas, aside from the 21.8 B&W TVs still in use, 84 colour TVs provided entertainment.<sup>2</sup> Such figures suggest that almost every Chinese person has been given the opportunity to become a couch potato, watching television almost every day. But that is only part of a broader picture: a leisure culture has emerged that includes not only watching TV but also has given rise to the widespread use of Internet and the popularity of karaoke, even in the much less affluent countryside where most of the people still live. In urban areas, spare time activities such as eating out, bar hopping, cinema, shopping, *yangge* dancing, playing golf, etc., offer all sections of the population ample opportunities to spend time after work.

In the following, we will look at the way how the *gongyi guanggao*, or public service advertisement (PSA) has become the vehicle for the government’s message.<sup>3</sup> In the process, we will discuss the contents and phrasing of these government messages and whether this new form of government communication is as effective as its predecessors. While television has become the medium of choice to relay these PSA, the Internet plays an increasingly more important

<sup>1</sup> James Lull, *China Turned On—Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London, etc.: Routledge, 1991), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2006/indexeh.htm>, table 10.10 and 10.30, respectively. Accessed on 12 September 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Chinese PSA can be found here: [http://www.cnade.com/listck.php?typeno=DP1918&searchmode=refine&qry\\_cond=&order=pid&page=1](http://www.cnade.com/listck.php?typeno=DP1918&searchmode=refine&qry_cond=&order=pid&page=1).

role in the official communication strategy. Lately, even mobile phone messages have been employed to bring the PSA-message closer to the intended receiver. Our discussion, however, will focus on the use of television.

### “New Propaganda for the New Age”

The changes in society that resulted from the reforms made it imperative for the party and government departments to reconsider the way in which they addressed the population. The more traditional media like newspapers and blackboards had been favoured in the past for this activity, euphemistically called popular education. People increasingly saw this type of written propaganda as boring, therefore making it ineffective; likewise, the propaganda posters of the past clearly could not compete with the attractions of the many moving images and glossy commercial messages that entered with breakneck speed and in various forms through China’s Open Door. The question policy makers grappled with concentrated on how to present their messages to a public that gradually discovered that there was more than the unified Voice of China that had prevailed in the preceding decades.

The disappearance of the all-inclusive *danwei* (work unit) had made the search for a new medium to spread a “new type of propaganda for the new age” even more relevant; it had become obvious that the opportunities for conveying educational and culturally stimulating behavioural indications that the work unit had provided before, declined if not completely disappeared. With meetings and other communal events hardly any longer taking place and with public interest in such get-togethers waning, television had become the sole source of relaxation for most of the people returning home after a hard day’s work.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, the national television penetration rate amounted to more than 98 per cent, or some 1.17 billion viewers. And those viewers spent 179 minutes per day in front of their screens in 2003.<sup>5</sup> According to Stefan Kramer, for many Chinese, television had become the most important

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<sup>4</sup> Pan Zehong, *Gongyi guanggao daolun* (Introductory discussion of public service advertising) (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2001), pp. 46, 61. Pan Zehong, *Guanggaode geming—shehui wenhua guanggaolun* (The revolution of advertising—the theory of social service advertising) (Changsha: Hunan daxue chubanshe, 2001), p. 124; Ni Ning, *Guanggao xin tiandi—Zhong Ri gongyi guanggao bijiao* (The new world of advertising—A comparison of Chinese and Japanese public service advertising) (Beijing: Zhongguo qinggongye chubanshe, 2003), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Latham, “Powers of imagination—The role of the consumer in China’s silent media revolution”, in Kevin Latham, Stuart Thompson and Jakob Klein (eds), *Consuming China—*

medium for constructing modern reality and identity, providing “lessons about what it means to live in a changing world where competitiveness drives national economic productivity”.<sup>6</sup>

Television, then, became the obvious choice to carry the messages that were to inculcate desired behaviour. But blunt propaganda no longer sufficed and had to make way for a new approach of reaching the people with the goals and concepts that the policymakers deemed important. In short, coercion had to make way for suggestion. Initially, the government messages as broadcast on television looked like the messages in the printed media they tried to replace. Gradually the realisation emerged that different forms and structures were called for: what was needed was government-sponsored advertising, devoid of commercial contents. For want of a better term for the persuasive advocacy that was sought, I find the concept of social marketing coined by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman in 1971 appealing: “... the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas ... and involving considerations of product planning, ... communication, distribution, and marketing research”.<sup>7</sup> In the case of China, such messages were aimed at “influenc[ing] voluntary behaviour of target audiences” by providing behavioural indications, although not necessarily “in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society”.<sup>8</sup> However, as Nicholas O’Shaughnessy has pointed out in his suggestion to use the term ‘social propaganda’ instead, “[I]n contrast, propaganda is didactic. The propagandist is less concerned to moderate his/her message in the light of market research—he is convinced of its essential rightness and is in fact an evangelist”.<sup>9</sup> What bolsters

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*Approaches to cultural change in contemporary China* (London, etc.: Routledge, 2006), p. 86. Jing Wang, *Brand New China—Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, etc.: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 248.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Kramer, *Das chinesische Fernsehpublikum—Zur Rezeption und Reproduktion eines neuen Mediums* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2006), pp. 14, 111. Stephanie Donald and Michael Keane, “Media in China”, in Stephanie Donald, Michael Keane and Yin Hong (eds), *Media in China—Consumption, Content and Crisis* (London, etc.: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, “Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change”, *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1971), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> A. Andreasen, *Marketing Social Change: Changing Behavior to Promote Health, Social Development, and the Environment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, “Social propaganda and social marketing: a critical difference?”, *Journal of European Marketing*, vol. 30, no. 10–11 (1996), pp. 66–67.

Chinese PSA, then, is a combination of the elements as proposed by Kotler and Zaltman, with a liberal dose of O’Shaughnessy: less suggestion, more persuasion; less care about personal welfare, more prescriptions for the welfare of the larger society.

Chinese scholars, however, insist that *gongyi guanggao* must not be confused with American-style PSA or with the Japanese *kōkyō kōkoku*. According to them, *gongyi guanggao* is a form of social advertising that is closely related to political and commercial advertising but is still different; unfortunately, while the experts have been quite adamant in stating what Chinese-style PSA is *not*, they have failed to indicate what it *is*.<sup>10</sup>

### The Birth of Chinese PSA

A commercial that urged the people to cut down on their use of water, broadcast by a local television station (Guiyang TV) in 1986, is acknowledged as the first instance where this new form of electronic propaganda was applied. A year later, in October 1987, China Central Television (CCTV) started a daily program, *Guang’er gao zhi*, that was devoted completely to messages focusing on the public interest. At the same time, this type of communication became an essential building block in the creation of the new socialist spiritual civilization that was called for in the new China of ever-deepening reforms.

After 1992, when the Deng Xiaoping dictum of the “socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics” was firmly established in practice, media organisations could no longer count on state subsidies and had to look elsewhere for funding. Commercial advertising, an important money maker that had been reintroduced in the print media in the late 1970s, became more prevalent everywhere, including on television. Television content changed considerably as well. The highly didactic tone and meaning characterising earlier programming made way for formats that provided more entertainment and amusement and that enabled some form of audience participation. The arrival of satellite broadcasters on the media scene in the mid-1990s, and in particular Hunan Satellite TV (since 1996), all competing with the established stations for a piece of the same audience pie, was instrumental in lightening up—or trivializing, as some would have it—program contents, bridging the

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<sup>10</sup> Pan, *Guanggaode geming*, p. 77.

gap between broadcaster and viewers. The situation where the more responsive the broadcaster is to the audience's desires, the higher his revenues, became a Chinese reality as well.<sup>11</sup>

With the discourse of consumption monopolizing the media, official communication had to adopt a new tone: what was needed were highly sophisticated, extremely well made forms of communication that Geremie Barmé calls partimericals or politico-tainment.<sup>12</sup> In developing these official messages, the government 'marketeers' obviously were inspired by and have learned from the techniques used in commercial advertising. This is visible in the growing convergence and interchangeability between commercial and moral messages, both in form and contents. Pleasure/entertainment and sex are applied by both as attention-grabbing strategies.<sup>13</sup> Like their commercial counterparts, the norm for the duration of the moral messages tends to be fifteen to thirty seconds. Occasionally, partimericals can last sixty seconds, or even more than two minutes.<sup>14</sup>

Chinese television viewers thus have been confronted with a new type of propaganda that often is very difficult to identify as such at first sight. The messages embedded in PSA are less crude than in the earlier forms of propaganda. Partimericals are included in the avalanche of commercial commercials with which the spectators are inundated as soon as they switch on their sets for their daily dose of entertainment. Chinese viewers initially really liked watching commercials and considered them a good source of information about new products and their uses. However, over time, the audience increasingly has started to develop strategies to avoid having to sit through the ever longer commercial breaks.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Zhang Jianzhen and Wu Haiqing, *Shei bi shei zhenshi—dianshi* (Who is more real?—television) (Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2004), pp. 34, 56. Mark Harrison, "Satellite and cable platforms: development and content", in Donald, Keane and Yin Hong (eds), *Media in China*, p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> Geremie Barmé, "CCP™ & ADCULT PRC", *In the Red* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Scammell, Ana I. Langer, "Political advertising: why is it so boring?", *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 5 (2006), pp. 768–770, 781. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship* (Lanham, etc.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, pp. 14, 137–138, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Lull, *China Turned On*, pp. 162–165.

## Financing, Production and Broadcasting PSA

From the start, Chinese PSA have been plagued by three partially interrelated problems: financing, production and difficulties encountered in their broadcasting. Similar problems confront PSA in other countries all over the world. The Chinese case presents interesting characteristics not found elsewhere as a result of the specific conditions under which the media system is still developing.

### *Financing*

With the withdrawal of the state from day-to-day management of society and the accompanying redirection of funds, the budgets for propaganda or public education have decreased. Faced with an ever more complex social reality that calls for more messages and with the higher production costs of more sophisticated forms of government communications (as compared with the ‘old-fashioned’ propaganda produced under pre-reform conditions), financing PSA is seen as one of the main problems hampering the development of the genre.

At the moment, there are four sources of funds to produce PSA. The first and most logical source for funding is the state, a situation that is aided by the fact that many if not most of the ‘suggestions’ to produce PSA originate with the state.<sup>16</sup> Organisations that suggest topics include the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department; the Central Committee Office for Guiding Ethic and Cultural Progress; the State Administration for Industry and Commerce; the State Administration of Radio Film and Television; the General Administration of Press and Publication; and the Ministry of Culture.

Private capital of the producers of the PSA is a second source. In some cases, advertising agencies produce PSA free of charge, prompted by feelings of social responsibility. Another source is where broadcasters contribute in the costs of PSA, for example by producing PSA with in-house facilities or by not charging fees for broadcasting. Still another way is by letting advertising

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Wang Daquan, Associate Director of Administration, Guang'er gao zhi/MMIA, Beijing, 14 May 2009. Liu Linqing and Zhang Jie, “Jianlun gongyi guanggao fazhan licheng” (A short discussion on the development of PSA), in Beijing Advertising Association, Beijing Media University Beijing municipal advertising management service centre (eds), *Jianzheng: Zhongguo guanggao sanshinian* (Testimony: thirty years of Chinese advertising) (Beijing: Zhongguo chuanmei daxue chubanshe, 2009).

agencies or advertisers pay for the construction of the facilities to advertise. The Beijing Municipal Government, which constructed a number of billboards along streets and roads in 1996, requested the users, i.e., companies that wanted to advertise, to produce PSA to offset the costs.

Sponsoring of PSA, usually by social organizations, is seen as the third source. Foundations such as Project Hope, the Song Qingling Foundation and the China Knowledge Foundation (*Zhongguo wenzue jijinhui*) have financed PSA in the past, with or without supplemental help from commercial companies. However, these foundations have strict conditions for the contents of their messages: Project Hope PSA *must* revolve around rural schooling issues and cannot address other topics.

The last source for PSA consists of funds raised by society, as happened after the 1997 Yangzi floodings and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.<sup>17</sup>

Most commentators agree that these funding options are insufficient for the number of PSA that they feel is needed. For quite some time, there has been talk that it would be advisable to devise and use tax incentives for PSA purposes. These could benefit the originators, the producers and/or the broadcasters of PSA. At present, this option is much debated, but it has not lead to any concrete results.<sup>18</sup> Another option to solve the funding problem would be to turn to the commercial companies themselves. Most critics see the production of PSA as something of a social obligation for them. At the moment, there still are some obstacles to that solution. First, comprehensive legislation governing the commercial funding of PSA is lacking. Secondly, companies generally shy back from funding PSA, because when they do, fulfilling the social obligation mentioned above, they still are criticised instead over the fact that they actually try to promote—or downplay the harmful effects of—their own products or services. Thirdly, many companies that by law are not allowed to advertise on television, for example manufacturers of tobacco products or strong alcoholic beverages, have turned out to be eager producers of PSA as an opportunity to circumvent the ban prohibiting the presentation of their products. Lastly, there is the fear of commercial ‘pollution’: already PSA are becoming more commercialised in form, use of language and other aspects.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, pp. 136, 74–75. Personal observations, Beijing, May 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, p. 90. Interview Wang Daquan, 14 May 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, pp. 65, 67. Luo Lanqiu, *Wenhua: rang guanggao fenghuang* (Culture: Frenzied by commercials) (Chengdu: Tiandi chubanshe, 2003), p. 25. Xu Jianhua and Zhang Zhijun, *Dianshi fuhao—guanggao lun* [Television symbolism—discussions on advertising] (Beijing: Zhongyang guangbo dianshi daxue chubanshe, 2003), pp. 131, 138.



Despite the ambiguous situation, more and more instances of cooperation emerge between companies, PSA producers and government agencies. Not all PSA sponsored by companies are considered tainted by ulterior, commercial motives. The Harbin No. 6 Pharmaceutical Company, for example, spent more than 100 million *yuan* in 2001 to finance a yearlong PSA-campaign. In the first half of 2003, when SARS kept China in its grip, national market leaders like Hai'er (consumer electronics), Lenovo (computers), China Mobile (mobile phone provider), China Unicom (mobile phone provider), Mengniu (dairy products) and Huabei Pharmaceuticals all sponsored, financed or produced PSA.<sup>20</sup>

After the severe earthquake in Sichuan Province in May 2008, many companies quickly came up with PSA tailored to the occasion. These ranged from mere slogans in black-and-white, the most prevalent being *Kangzhen jiuzai zhongzhi chengcheng* (Earthquake Rescue, Unity of Will Forms a Stronghold) with a company's name attached to it, to messages with more specific contents, usually showing suffering, salvaging, solidarity, etc. Some were devoted to companies' efforts to provide direct material support to the victims. Examples of such PSA included Mengniu (with a specific message devoted to its milk donations to the stricken areas; all other Mengniu commercials carried a text line at the bottom expressing solidarity with the victims); Kangshifu and Wahaha (donations of bottled mineral water); China Telecom (message addressing the speed with which communications with and within the disaster areas had been restored); Yili Dairy (co-produced PSA with Chinese Red Cross); and many others.<sup>21</sup>

A rate card that circulated on the Internet in May 2008 suggested the following formats for event-related PSA:

1. Earthquake Rescue PSA: Produced by the [CCTV] Ad Department. A PSA with the content, 'Earthquake Rescue, Unity of Will Forms a Stronghold.'
2. Company-Specific Earthquake Rescue-Themed Corporate Brand Identity Advertisement:
  1. Produced by the company itself. Content to be a corporate brand identity advertisement that complements the theme of the earthquake rescue effort.
  2. Broadcast order to be determined according to the invoice.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Personal observations, Beijing, May 2008.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ideobook.net/420/cctv-shameless-ad/>, and Joel Martinsen, "CCTV disas-

### *Production*

The emergence of (the need for) PSA has led to a growth in the number of specialised companies responsible for their production. Many have started as bureaus attached to ministries, but increased marketisation has turned them into semi-autonomous specialized PSA-companies. One good example is the Guang'er gao zhi/MMIA Company, which evolved from the pioneering CCTV program with the same name mentioned earlier.<sup>23</sup> Another example of a media company specialized in PSA is the Beijing-based Sanghua Ad Agency, founded as early as 1994. Cooperating with BTV, the local Beijing broadcaster, Sanghua has produced more than 400 PSA in the period 1995–2002. From the start, the company has studied closely public service messages originating in 'other' Chinas, i.e., Hong Kong and Taiwan.<sup>24</sup>

The state is withdrawing gradually from the actual production of PSA while maintaining its advisory role. It stands to reason, then, that organisations or companies that are economically active, no matter whether they are selling products or designing publicity campaigns, should be made responsible for the production of PSA. As stated above, funding remains a problem, leading to a situation where both producers and consumers of PSA increasingly question where commercial interests stop and politics begin, or vice versa. The situation is indeed murky, as PSA are not intended to sell products or services; but in the end, they *do* contribute to the reputation of the company that produces or sponsors them.

### *Broadcasting*

And that brings us to the difficulties PSA encounter in their attempts to reach their intended audiences. Comparable to practices elsewhere in the world, Chinese broadcasting organisations are required to air PSA during prime time (19:00–21:00 hrs): in the Chinese case, at least three per cent of the time-slots reserved for ordinary, commercial advertising in this time frame is to be reserved for government sponsored messages. This requirement was first laid down in the Circular on Producing Good Public Service Advertising Propaganda (*Guanyu zuohao gongyi guanggao xuanchuan de tongzhi*), promulgated

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ter rate card", [http://www.danwei.org/advertising\\_and\\_marketing/cctv\\_disaster\\_rate\\_card.php](http://www.danwei.org/advertising_and_marketing/cctv_disaster_rate_card.php), both accessed 19 May 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Interview Wang Daquan, 14 May 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, pp. 45, 142.

by the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, television stations, film companies, news agencies, etc., on 4 August 1997.<sup>25</sup> The requirements and percentages in this “Document No. 211” were reaffirmed in subsequent government documents and remain in effect to the present day. In 2005, for example, of all commercials shown during prime time on the national flagship channel CCTV-1, 11 per cent consisted of government messages, making up almost 23 per cent of all commercial airtime.<sup>26</sup> With such ironclad rules in place, the problem of access seems to have been solved sufficiently.

Nonetheless, many consider the legal guarantees formulated for the unimpeded showing of PSA to be insufficient.<sup>27</sup> The main problem is the tension that broadcasters are exposed to under the contradictory ‘regimes of truth’ they have to serve: on the one hand they are expected to perform their patriotic duty or shoulder their social responsibility while at the same time they have to fight for their survival: broadcasting PSA during prime time means losing income, income that is so desperately needed to keep the broadcaster alive and running.<sup>28</sup> It should be no surprise that in the past many broadcasting organisations have attempted to find ways to avoid airing PSA during prime time, relegating them to late-night time slots. This behaviour is of course not unique to Chinese broadcasters.<sup>29</sup>

An interesting development is that the authorities actually can force TV stations to ban all their commercial advertising in favour of PSA: in June 2007, a local TV-station in Ningxia had to replace its commercial ads with PSA about combating piracy and promoting family planning. Designated overseers such as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) intend this as a punishment for ignoring the rules or urgent requests to comply with them.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, p. 61. The full text of the 1997 circular can be found on pp. 275–276.

<sup>26</sup> Wang Lusheng and Gu Longfeng, “Dangqian woguo dianshi gongyi guanggao zhuangkuang fenxi—yi Zhongyang dianshitai zonghe pindao (CCTV-1) wei li” (An analysis of the current state of televised PSA in China—Taking CCTV-1 as an example), *Guangzhou daxue xuebao (shehui kexue bao)*, vol. 4, no. 8 (2005), p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Wang Chunyue, “Gongyi guanggao zhongde shangyexing tezhenqiantao” (Discussion of commercial characteristics in public service advertising), *Shangchang xiandaihua*, no. 484 (2006), p. 193.

<sup>28</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, p. 60. Latham, “Powers”, pp. 85–86.

<sup>29</sup> Interview Ko1 (media expert), Shanghai, 9 July 2007. Interview Mo1 (media expert), Beijing, 19 May 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Interview Ko1 (media expert), Shanghai, 9 July 2007. Joel Martinsen, “SARFT pulls

### The Public service of Celebrities

A presentation device that government messages clearly have adopted from commercial advertising is the celebrity endorsement. Advertising and other research has proven that Chinese consumers have a preference for commercials starring celebrities; moreover, celebrities lend a high degree of credibility to the messages they present.<sup>31</sup> Ideally, the celebrities are Chinese from the PRC, Hong Kong or even Taiwan, but some foreign icons of global consumption have built up an image in China as well, like David Beckham. Most recently, even male and female Korean soap and pop stars (Rain) have become popular celebrities—and thereby credible spokespersons—among Chinese youngsters.<sup>32</sup>

In this respect, it is worth quoting the *2004 Chinese Education Blue Book* (*Zhongguo jiaoyu lanpi shu*), which reported that children and young people were attracted to: “(a) stars, including such personages as film stars, pop song stars, sports stars, and models; (b) distinguished personages, including political and military leaders, scientists (technical experts), writers, artists, thinkers, heroic role models, entrepreneurs, and well-known persons in commercial circles; (c) parents and family members; (d) teachers and friends, including teachers, schoolmates, and contemporaries; (e) fictitious persons, including gods and figures in legends, roles in novels, films, and TV, and characters in games, animated films, and cartoons; (f) oneself; and (g) others, including negative roles and other undefined personages.” On the basis of the surveys at the heart of this report, it transpired that the Top-Five of idols chosen by young people consisted of: 1. Zhou Jielun (a Taiwanese pop star and energetic endorser of cosmetics, mobile phones, soft drinks, etc.); 2. Zhou Enlai; 3. Father; 4. Mao Zedong; and 5. Michael Jordan (former NBA basketball star from the USA). Ironically, Lei Feng only came in on the number 22 spot, even though he was the ultimate model who has been held up

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all commercials at two TV stations”, *Danwei* ([http://www.danwei.org/tv/sarft\\_pulls\\_all\\_advertising\\_fr.php](http://www.danwei.org/tv/sarft_pulls_all_advertising_fr.php), 23 June 2007, accessed 23 June 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Bradley R. Barnes, Philip J. Kitchen, Graham Spickett-Jones, Qionglei Yu, “Investigating the impact of international cosmetics advertising in China”, *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2004), p. 368. Xu, Zhang, *Dianshi fubao*, p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> Lang Xianping et al., “Daiyanren—ruhe dizao chuanqi” (Spokespersons—how they become legendary), *Chuangfuzhi*, no. 155 (2007), pp. 50–63.

for emulation since 1963 and whose selflessness must have inspired hundreds of millions of youngsters over the decades.<sup>33</sup>

Lei's model status was based on four principles. He literally was a good student of Chairman Mao, despite his non-intellectual background. He was a true representative of the people, easy to identify with. In his person he combined the class status of the three pillars of socialist society: poor peasant turned worker turned soldier. And the many good, but rather unspectacular deeds he performed were easy to emulate: he sent his meagre savings to a fellow soldier's parents who had been hit by a flood; he served tea and food to both officers and recruits; he washed his buddies' feet after a long march, and even darned their socks while they were asleep; he toiled endlessly for the common good; and he went all-out to show his devotion to the revolutionary cause. In his diary, he expressed that his greatest desire in life was to be nothing more than "a revolutionary screw that never rusts". The 'spirit of the screw' (*luosiding jingshen*) was derived from the Stalinist ideal that "... Soviet man should consider himself a mere 'cog' in the gigantic wheel of the Soviet State".<sup>34</sup> In short, he taught the people how to be happy with what they had and to obey the Party.

This modern use of celebrities to drive home a message is interesting when compared with the propaganda practices of the distant and not so distant past. For hundreds of years, the government presented human models to try and influence the behaviour of the rest of the population. And after 1949, the Party itself made extensive use of role models to explain policies and to give examples how the people should live their lives. One of the main reasons that these models tended to be so effective over time was that they were recognizable, ordinary people, 'nobodies', or like 'revolutionary screws that never rust', as Lei Feng termed his ultimate goal in life. In present-day China, however, where individualism is becoming more and more important, it is precisely the star status of the celebrities that is expected to influence the people who are exposed to the messages in which they appear.

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<sup>33</sup> He Xiaozhong, "Survey Report on Idol Worship Among Children and Young People", *Chinese Education and Society*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2006), pp. 86, 96. The original Chinese source is: He Xiaozhong, "Guanyu qing shao nian ouxiang chongbai de diaocha baogao," in *Zhongguo jiaoyu lanpi shu* (Chinese Education Blue Book) (Beijing: Higher Education Publishing House, 2004), pp. 314–331.

<sup>34</sup> Shi Yonggang and Liu Qiongxiong (eds), *Lei Feng 1940–1962* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2006); Mikhail Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel—The Formation of Soviet Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), p. 6; Børge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society—Human Improvement, Social Control and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (Oslo: University of Oslo 1994), p. 152.

The trend is certainly not uncontested. Pan Zehong mentions that many elder, more staid cultural critics—who unfortunately remain anonymous—stress that although the tenets of Confucius and Mencius are centuries' old, they still are at the core of the social morality of the present—a rather interesting observation in a nation that to all intents and purposes tries to hang on to its Marxist-Leninist credentials. Moreover, these critics rather would see the more frequent appearance in PSA of models of the modern era who have proven their dedication and moral qualities in the service of nation and Party; such heroes would include Xu Hu—an exemplary plumber from Shanghai—and Kong Fansen, a cadre working in Tibet who died from exhaustion.<sup>35</sup>

### A Chinese Celebrity Culture

But old-style model citizens and model workers like Xu and Kong and emulation campaigns surrounding their deeds are simply unable to satisfy the popular demand for celebrities and their shenanigans.<sup>36</sup> Thanks to the explosive need for entertainment generated by the popularity of television (and the internet), a star system has emerged in China. Many 'famous' national and international Chinese—or "consumption-type idols" as they are called disparagingly<sup>37</sup>—from a variety of disciplines (sports, popular music, television shows, movies) have been called upon, or have offered their services, to do their thing for the public good. Often, the patriotic attitude of the celebrity is invoked to persuade him/her to participate.<sup>38</sup> But the media's and the audience's demands for fresh faces to identify with are insatiable. This has given rise to 'celetoids', "... the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Pan, *Gongyi guanggao daolun*, pp. 69, 82. For Xu Hu, see Michel Bonnin, "When the Saints Come Marching Back", *China Perspectives*, no. 5 (1996); Shao Wu et al., *Gongheguo qunyingpu* (Register of Heroes of the Republic) (Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 2003), pp. 354–359. For Kong Fansen, see Bonnin, *op cit.*; Shao, *Gongheguo qunyingpu*, pp. 295–302; Xu Yan, *80 wei Gongchandang rende gushi* (The stories of 80 Communist Party personages) (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 2001), pp. 285–288.

<sup>36</sup> Lull, *China Turned On*, pp. 82–84.

<sup>37</sup> He, "Survey Report", p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> Interview ToI (documentary maker), Beijing, 17 June 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), quoted in Graeme Turner, "The mass production of celebrity—'Celetoids', reality TV and the 'demotic turn'", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2006), p. 156.

Aside from disposable one-day media wonders, a substantive number of more established stars and celebrities have become involved in PSA-work.

- Movie director Zhang Yimou rendered his assistance in producing PSA and even appeared himself in a PSA in 1999, part of a series of 40 messages titled “Knowledge changes your life” (*Zhishi gaibian mingyun*) that was financed by the Hong Kong entrepreneur Li Ka-hsing; Zhang recounted in 60 seconds how he evolved from a seasonal cotton picker to an international celebrity.<sup>40</sup>
- Actress Zhang Ziyi, of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers* fame, is an endorser of a wide variety of skin-care products and luxury goods. Although Zhang seems to be more popular in the West than in China itself,<sup>41</sup> she featured in a 2003 Mengniu-sponsored PSA calling for more attention to personal hygiene to prevent SARS contamination.<sup>42</sup>
- Pro-basketball legend Yao Ming, playing for the Houston Rockets in the American National Basketball Association—one of the most popular programs on Chinese television—and otherwise fond of Apple personal computers, Pepsi Cola and McDonalds, appeared in a number of PSA. One of them, showing Yao and the HIV-positive NBA legend Magic Johnson, none too subtly urged people not give the cold shoulder to those infected with HIV/AIDS.
- The Canadian Mark Rowswell, known in China as ‘Big Mountain’ (*Dashan*) became a Westerner the Chinese love to embrace by honing his language skills to such an extent that he has become the embodiment of the Westerner in Chinese eyes.<sup>43</sup> In the words of the *People’s Daily*, the CCP mouthpiece: “Although Dashan is a foreigner in China, he’s not an outsider.”<sup>44</sup> Rowswell has become a successful media star, appearing in television programs (*Communicate in Chinese* and *To 2008*, in preparation of the Beijing Olympics) and commercials, including a PSA calling for energy and

<sup>40</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, p. 110. Luo, *Wenhua*, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Craig Reid, “Zhang Yimou—Blood, Sweat, and Daggers”, *Kungfu Magazine Online* (<http://ezine.kungfumagazine.com>, accessed 12 March 2006).

<sup>42</sup> See <http://www.cctv.com/advertisement/special/C12802/20040830/102310.shtml>.

<sup>43</sup> See <http://www.dashan.com/en/index.htm> (accessed 30 May 2006).

<sup>44</sup> “To some in China, a Canadian Is the West”, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200406/23/eng20040623\\_147314.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200406/23/eng20040623_147314.html) (accessed 30 May 2006).

- resources saving to slow down climate change (*Jiangnan qihou bianhua—nide xuanze hen zhongyao*—Slow down climate change—your choice is very important, 15 April 2008).
- Li Yuchun, winner of the 2005 television hit program “Mongolian Cow Sour Milk Super Voice Girl Competition” (*Chaoji nüsheng*), broadcast by Hunan Satellite Television and sponsored exclusively by the giant Mengniu Dairy Company, evolved from a ‘celetoid’ into a popular singer. As a result of her star potential, she started appearing in PSA, including one for the Chinese Red Cross urging the improvement of health care facilities and services in the countryside (Spring 2008).
  - Celebrities do not only propagate the public good. The actor Wang Baoqiang, for example, known as the naïve Sha Gen in Feng Xiaogang’s movie “A World without Thieves” (*Tianxia wu zei*, 2004) and more recently as Xu Sanduo in the popular TV show “Soldiers Sortie” (*Tubing tuji*), appeared in a PLA recruitment film (featuring the slogan: “Do you want to become a soldier like Xu Sanduo?”) using clips from the show in November 2007.<sup>45</sup>
  - The actor Pu Cunxin is a regular fixture in PSA. He appeared in various ‘serious’ productions staged by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre but is better known abroad for his role in the movie “Shower” (*Xizao*, 1999, directed by Zhang Yang). Pu endorsed the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign of 2003, both in posters and in TV-commercials; in late 2007, Pu again appeared in an HIV/AIDS awareness commercial. He has also supported various national blood donation drives (2005). Even more interesting was Pu’s appearance in a public service advertisement that premiered in June 2007 in which he initially sets out to debunk the effectiveness of PSA in general. He then continued to show how small, individual acts of human decency may actually improve society as a whole (*Wenmingde Zhongguo*—Civilized China, 25 June 2007).

Even the conceptual photographer and fashion designer Zhao Bandi, also known as Pandaman, has contributed his own approach to spreading normative information, both in an artistic and financial sense. In 1999, the Beijing Subway Advertising Corporation put up prints of Zhao and his trademark Baby Panda toy in entrances, exits and passages of all subway stations as public service announcements. The prints, sponsored by the Kodak Company, were concerned with topics that touch upon the lives of ordinary people, such as

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<sup>45</sup> “I want to be a soldier—like on TV!”, *Danwei*, ([http://www.danwei.org/front\\_page\\_of\\_the\\_day/xu\\_sanduos\\_new\\_role.php](http://www.danwei.org/front_page_of_the_day/xu_sanduos_new_role.php), 3 December 2007, accessed 4 December 2007).



planting trees in the city, observing traffic regulations, safe driving, fighting counterfeiting, quitting smoking and so on, in short, the same subject matter also featured in televised PSA.<sup>46</sup>

There is an inherent danger to overexposing wildly popular celebrities, a danger of overkill as well as the pitfall of sending out mixed messages. An excellent example of the potential conflation of meaning caused by using celebrities both for commercial and moral or public service messages is the case of the prolific endorser Liu Xiang, the Olympic hurdler who unceremoniously bowed out of the 2008 Olympics. In a commercial endorsing the Visa credit card, Liu flashes the V-sign, but he does the same in a PSA designed to promote his hometown Shanghai. By using a similar gesture, he ultimately makes it unclear in what capacity he is appearing and what message he is promoting.<sup>47</sup>

### Public Service Advertising Contents

A major part of the official commercials are engaged in “the construction of Socialist Spiritual Civilization”, the cultural complex that was designed in the 1990s to *propagate* (*xuanchuan*) ideas, behaviours and attitudes that would enable people to confront the staggering social changes. At the same time, this provided for continued government control over that same society.<sup>48</sup> The PSA commercials deal with the many pressing problems that contemporary Chinese are confronted with:

- healthcare problems. Such PSA included messages devoted to SARS, avian flu and, most recently, A/H1N1 (Mexican or swine) flu. Around every 1 December, World AIDS Day, PSA focusing on HIV/AIDS are aired;
- the deteriorating environment. This theme grew more urgent as the Beijing 2008 Olympics neared and international worries about air quality etc. increased.
- the need to improve the living and working conditions of the millions

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<sup>46</sup> Ni, *Guanggao*, pp. 252–253. Zhang Zhaohui, “Penetration into the Society: the Strategy of New Arts—Taking the Practice of Zhang Dali and Zhao Bandi as Examples”, *China-Gallery.Com* ([http://www.china-gallery.com/en/zhang/art\\_penetration.htm](http://www.china-gallery.com/en/zhang/art_penetration.htm)), April 2001 (accessed 26 March 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Lu Zhongyang, “Dazhong chuanmei yu gongyi guanggao” (Mass Media and PSA), *Xinwen jizhe* (2007), pp. 87–88.

<sup>48</sup> Luo, *Wenhua*, p. 24. Xu and Zhang, *Dianshi fuhao*, p. 131. Steven Wayne Lewis, “‘What can I do for Shanghai?’—Selling spiritual civilization in China’s cities”, in Donald, Keane and Yin Hong (eds), *Media in China*, pp. 141–145.

- of migrant workers that contribute to China's economic development (for example *Xiangcunlu gaibianle, ye gaibianle jia* (Rural roads have improved me and everybody), 25 November 2006);
- the necessity to provide education for migrant children to prevent the emergence of a lost generation;
  - the necessity to improve the opportunities for education in the countryside is a topic that receives increasing attention, leading to multiple PSA. These include a message produced in collaboration with Project Hope (*Zaifang Dabieshan, jianshe xin nongcun*—Return to Dabie shan, establish a new countryside), II, 13 August 2006) and another series of messages sponsored by the China Knowledge Foundation (*Zhongguo wenxue jijinhui*), titled *Haoshu songgei aishude haizi* (Giving good books to children who love books), 14 January 2006, 25 November 2006. Some of these messages have been co-sponsored by commercial companies, for example carmaker Citroën;
  - the necessity to pay more attention to the development of the countryside that has been left behind in all if not most respects when compared to the urban areas (*Zaifang Dabieshan, jianshe xin nongcun*—Return to Dabie shan, establish a new countryside, I, 13 August 2006);
  - the dangers of adolescent addiction to Internet gaming (health issues, overstimulation, negative effects on education) and the necessity to combat the phenomenon;
  - the need to combat the production of fake goods, including warnings to potential customers not to buy fake goods;
  - the dangers of smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke. This issue became a more prevalent PSA topic after 1 May 2008, when smoking was banned from public venues as part of the preparations for the Olympics (*Jiankang Aoyun jiankang Beijing*—Healthy Olympics, healthy Beijing, 16 March 2008);
  - the dangers of drinking and driving;
  - gambling;
  - domestic violence, etc.

Although the negative social phenomena addressed in these PSA may have existed before Reform, they simply were not acknowledged, and even if they had been, they were never mentioned anywhere at all and therefore could not exist in the public eye.

But the government's messages are not limited to addressing broader social problems, children's education, family ethics and interpersonal relations. They

also are intended to make the people feel proud of the nation and in the process contribute to the rapidly growing surge of nationalist feelings. The underlying argument is that the successes of the modernisation process have made the world once more stand in awe of China. The newfound self-confidence resulting from this often is expressed by a desire to stand up for what China sees as its legitimate rights. Small wonder that patriotism has become a striking and recurring element in commercial advertising, ranging from messages for toothpaste and shampoo (Chinese toothpaste or shampoo for Chinese people), fast food and instant noodles to sportswear. And expressions of love for the nation in turn have found their way into the official government commercials as well. Concrete examples used to illustrate China's growing importance and stature can be found in PSA related to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and to Shanghai's hosting of the World Expo in 2010.<sup>49</sup> PSA devoted to this event currently are shown under the slogan "Better city, better life (*Chengshi, rang shenghuo geng meihao*)" (12 March 2007).

The government's commercials that address political themes explicitly are much rarer. Their appearance on the screen often coincides with national celebrations, for example that of the founding of the Party, of the founding of the nation, Army Day (1 August), etc. Their contents can revolve around the historically inevitable leading role of the Party in China's successful development, as in the late 1990s and coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the PRC. After the conclusion of the 17th Party Congress in late 2007, a PSA was broadcast on Hunan Satellite TV that promised "more and better (*yuelai yueduo*)" in all aspects of economic and social life, as a reflection of the Congress spirit. Another favourite topic is the ethnic unity that has come about under the leadership of the Party, ranging from eulogies over the overall welfare of the nation to representation of China as a healthy tree with 56 branches.

More recently, the formation of a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*) as proposed by Party leader Hu Jintao has become a topic that merits PSA attention and complements the innumerable examples of open-air advertising for the same. As opposed to the billboards that explicitly address the harmonious society as such without defining its contents, television PSA put more stress on the behavioural aspects of harmony. An example is an exceptionally long commercial—more than 6 minutes—produced by the Shanghai Media Group that premiered in early 2008, featuring a number of local—

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<sup>49</sup> Luo, *Wenhua*, p. 16. Judy Polumbaum, "Capturing the flame—Aspirations and representations of Beijing's 2008 Olympics", in Chin-Chuan Lee (ed.), *Chinese Media, Global Contexts* (London, etc.: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 67–70.

Shanghai—celebrities (Harmonious city, deft movements, *Hexie chengshi, xinling yuezhang*, 2008) A PSA from May 2007, on the other hand, featuring a security guard at the Great Hall of the People who is so busy at work that he is unable to attend his son's birthday, ends with the slogan "Protect judicial impartiality, establish a harmonious society (*Weihu sifa gongzheng jigou hexie shehui*)".

### Olympic PSA

The Beijing Olympic Games of August 2008 offered many opportunities to generate PSA. Intended as a showcase of China's return to the front of the world stage, as expressed in the Olympic slogan "One World, One Dream (*Tong yige shijie, tong yige mengxiang*)", the messages not only celebrated the fruits of Reform and Beijing's new 'face', formed by the Bird's Nest Stadium, the Water Cube Natatorium and the contours of Rem Koolhaas' new CCTV headquarters. A PSA revolving around this return to the world stage while at the same time expressing China's welcoming the world to its coming-out party is *Rang shijie jizhu womende zhangshen* (Let the world hear our clapping, 15 April 2008), stressing welcoming, supportive and cultured applause. Another broadcast addressed the problem of air quality, urging people to make less use of their cars (*Shaokai yitian che, weile Beijingde lantian*—Driving your car less will make Beijing's air blue, 2007). Potential Olympic and Paralympic volunteers were shown how and where they could sign up (bilingual commercial, November 2007), and many commercials were aired to show how their volunteer activities contributed concretely to these moments of national glory. Even 'ordinary' citizens in 'real life situations' were used to show how ready Beijing as well as China was for the event (May 2007). Another commercial that premiered in 2007, featuring a traffic warden, urged all drivers, cyclists and pedestrians to obey the relevant rules.

The Games also allowed for the foregrounding of salient elements of the socialist spiritual civilization campaign, in particular where it concerned the behaviours and manners of the population. A stress on small individual civilised deeds strongly resonated in many of the PSA that were aired in the *Ying Aoyun, Jiang Wenming, Shu Xin Feng*-campaign (Welcome the Olympics, Be Cultured, Establish a New Way of Doing Things) that started in earnest in Spring 2007. These deeds included keeping the city clean, the parks in good order, using public transport in a disciplined manner, assisting foreign visitors (implying knowledge of foreign languages), not speaking too loud in public, assisting the handicapped (not necessarily athletes), not smoking in public,

participating in cultural activities, in short, showing China to the world in a favourable manner while at the same time showing the people what sort of behaviour was desired. Paraphrasing the title of a book that hit the bookshelves around the same period, it after all seemed to be a widely held belief that “winning manners” actually could help “win the Games”.<sup>50</sup> The same campaign also included a commercial that featured nationally known performers of Beijing Opera expressing their readiness for the Games, providing an interesting mixture of traditional culture and the modern trappings of Olympic Beijing. Another interesting instalment was a PSA devoted to the preparations of a young boy responsible for raising the flag.

Harmonious society in the form of harmonious interpersonal and even altruistic behaviour also was the substance of a very long PSA (*Guanzhu*—Pay attention) that was first aired in Spring 2007. In the 2.06 minutes of its duration, a slew of media celebrities was trotted out, including top sports anchor Zhang Bin and popular presenters Li Yong, Wang Xiaoya and many others, giving saccharine examples of civilised behaviour: opening doors, letting elevators wait for others, allowing people to cross the street using the pedestrian crossing, etc. Many members of the target audience watched this message in disbelief: the behaviour propagated simply was too far removed from everyday reality.<sup>51</sup>

Security and safety were addressed as well, as in the rather urgent *Ping'an Aoyun—dajiade jinpai* (Safe Olympics—everybody’s gold medal) from 2008. Accompanied by a sound track that makes the message sound like a sports broadcast, various aspects of security and safety are presented, at the same time paying homage to the various uniformed branches of the police, fire fighters, security guards, etc.

### Engaging the Audience

The switch to PSA confronts the Chinese propagandists with the problem that vexes network managers and advertising executives all over the world: how can the viewers be persuaded to refrain from “zapping” to another channel when the commercial break starts, or from “tuning out” when shown essentially

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<sup>50</sup> See Shi Yongqi, *Aoyun liyi* (Win Manners Win Games [sic]) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Various informants, Beijing, May – August 2007, May 2008.

repetitive messages.<sup>52</sup> These problems of audience segmentation and formulating relevant corresponding message concepts are encountered by others elsewhere.

First and foremost, it is clear that PSA must address issues that resonate with the intended audience.<sup>53</sup> It is obvious that the long Olympic Manners PSA mentioned above falls short of this target. One way to better draw the viewers in, to keep them glued to their screens while presenting them with more multi-layered public service messages is to package them in attractive and more sophisticated formats. The wildly popular television plays that have become almost as omnipresent as advertising are successful examples. The formats of such programs themselves contain many scripting opportunities for sustained topical instructions on the numerous social and moral issues facing the viewers. Children's programs offer similar opportunities to address an important and impressionable audience segment with topical issues.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the soap operas, and sit-coms in particular, attract faithful, often perfectly segmented audiences that can be addressed by structured offerings of PSA.

The popular sit-com *Jia you ernü* (*Home with Kids*), featuring comic actress Song Dandan and Gao Yalin, is a good example of a series that offers ample opportunities to present examples of desired behaviour. In a format that resembles the popular British sit-com *My Family*, starring Zoë Wanamaker and Robert Lindsay, the Chinese version deals with a family consisting of two remarried parents with one daughter and two sons (three children!).<sup>55</sup> Aside from addressing issues of parenting, harmonious relations between three generations, gender roles, etc., questions relating to living in as well as growing up in

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<sup>52</sup> Donald and Keane, "Media in China", p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Xu and Zhang, *Dianshi fubao*, p. 82. Ni, *Guanggao*, p. 62. Latham, "Powers of imagination", p. 86. Feng Nianwen, "Tan gongyi guanggao fazhanzhongde zhengzhi xingwei" (Discussing political behaviour in the development of public service advertising), *Zhongguo gongshang guanli yanjiu*, (2006), pp. 27, 28. Paul N. Bloom and William D. Novelli, "Problems and Challenges in Social Marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 45, no. 2 (1981), pp. 81, 82.

<sup>54</sup> Wu Qiuya, "Ling yizhong guanggao meijie" (Just another Ads media), in Zeng Qingrui (ed.), *Zhongguo chuanbo luntan 2002—Zhongguo dianshiju cha chuanbo* (China Communication Forum 2002—The communication of China's media play [sic]) (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2003), pp. 255, 256, 257. Wang and Gu, "Dangqian woguo", p. 94. Pan, *Guanggaode geming*, pp. 125–126, 130.

<sup>55</sup> See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0257315/>.

a rapidly evolving urban consumer society are addressed as well. Episodes from various seasons can be seen on a number of different (satellite) channels; multi-episode boxed DVD-versions are available in DVD-stores and bookshops.

Other successful formats may include channels that make PSA their only type of programs—CCTV2 springs to mind as an example. Specialized programs that focus on specific PSA themes or PSA-type contents, for example reality shows, are another option.

A good and popular example of a reality show with educational contents is the program *Honglüdeng* (Traffic Light), which can be seen on BTV9, one of the local Beijing channels every morning and evening, seven days per week. BTV9 styles itself as a channel devoted to public service information (*gonggong pindao*).<sup>56</sup> *Honglüdeng* made its first appearance in 1997; in its current format, it is presented live by a traffic police officer and a civilian anchorperson. It provides traffic information, using traffic surveillance cameras to show Beijing rush hour gridlock on the ring roads and suggesting alternative routes. At the same time, it dispenses information on traffic rules, regulations and signs, provides good examples of commendable road behaviour and criticizes unlawful situations and actions, sets up quizzes on traffic situations, etc. The program presents altogether some three hours of sustained traffic-related information and educational contents per day.

According to some critics, another reason why viewers try to skip PSA as much as possible is that so much is wrong with the messages themselves. Viewers have become weary of the adverts that are not well made in technical terms. Viewers find PSA too superficial, too uncritical, too formulaistic, too dull, containing too much sloganeering, or even uncivilized; they also feel they are not taken seriously by the producers of these messages. Another problem is that some of the more slick and “sexed up” partymercials and indoctrainment look more like their commercial counterparts than ever before and run the risk of being drowned out.<sup>57</sup>

Most importantly, the PSA contents are too one-sided, thereby harming their efficacy. In the expert opinion of the critics, there is too much stress on urban-related themes and not enough attention for rural problems; too much attention for Han-majority topics and not enough interest in topics related to the 55 ethnic minority groups; too much emphasis on young people and their problems (Internet addiction, etc.) and too little interest in the elderly;

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<sup>56</sup> See [http://hrw.org/english/docs/200/10/23/usdom1440\\_txt.htm](http://hrw.org/english/docs/200/10/23/usdom1440_txt.htm).

<sup>57</sup> Pan, *Gongyi guanggao daolun*, pp. 192–198. Xu and Zhang, *Dianshi fuhao*, p. 137. Lu, “Dazhong chuanmei”, p. 86.

too much stress on following laws and regulations and not enough attention on (developing) morality; and, lastly, too much emphasis on (the behaviour of) the ordinary people—the *laobaixing*—and too little of that when it comes to (the behaviour of) the cadres and officials. In the eyes of these critics, the moral character of the latter two groups, after all, has to define the contents of successful PSA.<sup>58</sup>

### Closing Remarks

The Chinese government has shifted its use of media to educate the people almost completely to television; in the near future, the Internet and mobile phone messages may be employed for the same purposes. But the ultimate effectiveness of the modern forms of propaganda presented there may be less than that of their old-fashioned paper predecessors. An important reason for this is that coercion has made way for suggestion. Moreover, both the available media themselves and what they have to offer have become more abundant and varied than ever before. There is a growing convergence and interchangeability between commercial and moral messages in the sense that pleasure, entertainment and sex are used by both to grab the spectators' attention. This convergence is most visible in those PSA that make use of the same popular celebrities that also are appearing regularly while promoting commercial products. At the same time, all these developments make it more difficult to discern the urgent message that the government tries to propagate.

Chinese PSA are plagued by a number of problems. The questions of financing, producing and broadcasting are as structural as in other countries. Although agreement exists that more PSA should be produced that address an increasing number of pressing social issues, nobody is really willing to pay for their production. There is talk of the social responsibility of commercial companies or ad agencies, to make them shoulder the costs of PSA production; there are indications that tax measures will be formulated to assist producers of PSA or ad agencies; broadcasters are urged to air PSA without charge, and so on. But in the end, it is the party-state that foots the various bills, a situation that those in charge of popular education want to see changed.

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<sup>58</sup> Pan, *Gongyi guanggao daolun*, pp. 35, 83, 192–193, 195–211. Ni, *Guanggao*, pp. 168–169. Wang Dongdong, “Dui woguo gongyi guanggao fazhan xianzhuang he qianjingde sikao” (Reflections on the current state and future course of the development of China's public service advertising), *Zhongguo baoye* (2006) p. 64.



On the contents side, there are problems as well. A serious difference of opinion exists between what can best be termed traditionalists and modernists as to how PSA ought to be structured, what message they should spread, and most importantly, how this message is spread. Traditionalists deplore that what they consider to be well-tested propaganda experiences from other eras and through other media seem to have fallen in disuse. The modernists, on the other hand, try to model contemporary propaganda as much as possible on the successful examples that commercial advertising provides them with. This dual-track approach makes what could have been a clear-cut PSA message ambiguous. Lacking systematic research into the reception of the PSA message by the audience, it is hard to say which of the two approaches will prove more effective in the end.

It is obvious that promoting and positioning Chinese politics is no longer as much at the centre of government communications as before. But the mediation of moral exhortations and behavioural indications truly has become a serious business. One of the problems that have been noted is the difficulty of engaging the intended audience for an extended period of time. A further examination of the development of PSA, as well as the use of popular soap operas, situation comedies or serialized television dramas can shed more light on alternative ways that may be employed to spread messages for the public good in a sustained manner.\*

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\* A DVD with a substantial number of the PSA discussed in this article is available on request.

