

# Global Media Journal

German Edition

ISSN 2196-4807

Vol. 3, No.1, Spring/Summer 2013

URN:nbn:de:gbv:547-201300302

## **How Neoliberal Imperialism is Expressed by Programming Strategies of Phoenix TV: A Critical Case Study**

**Shuang Xie**

**Abstract:** This project is a case study of Phoenix Television, which is a Hong Kong-based satellite TV network broadcasting to the global Chinese-speaking community, primarily to the mainland of China. In the theoretical framework of media imperialism and neoliberal imperialism, this study focuses on the programming strategies of Phoenix TV and examines how the global trend of neoliberalism, the Chinese government's tight control of the media, and the sophisticated ownership of Phoenix TV intertwined to influence on its programming. The analysis of the format, content, naming, and scheduling reveals that US-inspired neoliberalism is expressed in the network's programming strategies. This expression, in fact, is the balance that Phoenix found between the tension of global and Chinese interests, the tension between revenue making and public service, and the tension between Party-control and profit seeking.

**Keywords:** Television, TV programming, Phoenix TV, Neoliberal Imperialism

### **Introduction of Phoenix TV Ownership and Channels**

Phoenix Television (Phoenix TV) was established in 1996 by a joint investment from Murdoch's News Corporation, Today's Asia Ltd., and China Wisdom International in Hong Kong. In 2006, a 20% stake in the company was acquired by China Mobile, a state-owned and state-run enterprise of the People's Republic of China, registered in Hong Kong, with a 65% share of the mainland Chinese mobile market. The stake was bought from News Corp, whose Phoenix holding fell to 17.6%. China Mobile's entry into the Phoenix venture puts a question mark over whether it is appropriate to continue to describe Phoenix as a purely commercial as opposed to a hybrid private and commercialized state-controlled operation. Boyd-Barrett and Xie (2008), through analysis of Phoenix's ownership and business model, argue that from its beginning to now, Phoenix "has transitioned from commercial, corporate ownership to an entity which state controlled entities have a significant, but not controlling ownership presence" (p. 14).

Phoenix is conceived primarily as a media agency of news and current affairs, but was focused on offering entertainment. To date, Phoenix has seven channels: Phoenix Chinese, Phoenix Movie, Phoenix Infonews, Phoenix North America, and Phoenix Chinese News and Entertainment (CNE) are channels broadcasting in Chinese Mandarin featuring a variety of programs, including broadcast news, current affairs, talk shows, analysis, documentaries, and entertainment programs, like TV dramas and movies. In 2011, Phoenix started two channels broadcasting in Cantonese with residents in Hong Kong and Cantonese speakers in Southern provinces in China as their target audience. Phoenix has long been identified as “Hong Kong Phoenix TV” among their viewers; however, it has been little viewed in Hong Kong and Cantonese-speaking area for it serves in Mandarin Chinese. The launch of Cantonese service brings Phoenix up to its identity as a media organization from Hong Kong. Also, it provides news services of international perspective Hong Kong audience who have been served with a plethora of entertainment and a little local news service. According to its website, its main target audiences are “urban residents, higher income earners and educated sectors” (www.ifeng.com) of Chinese society. This group of people arguably constitutes an emerging urban middle class, the social class which benefited significantly and gained considerable purchasing power during the economic development of China. According to Zhao (2001), this group of people – together with the bureaucratic capitalists of a reformed party and the capital of transnational corporations – constitute a new power bloc that has assumed dominance over both internal and external communicative processes in China.

Phoenix TV, as a TV station established in Hong Kong with no initial investment from the government, is definitely unique when compared to TV stations in Mainland China. This is unsurprising; however, with Mainland China as its primary target area, Phoenix should have some similarities with other Chinese TV networks. In the theoretical framework of neoliberal imperialism, this study focuses on the programming strategies of Phoenix TV and examines how the global trend of neoliberalism, the Chinese government’s tight control of the media, and the sophisticated ownership of Phoenix TV intertwined to influence on its programming. The analyses were focused on but not limited to the format, content and scheduling.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted in this study is neoliberal imperialism (Thussu, 2007). After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) stated „the end of history”, and finally the end of ideologies, because of the „winning” of capitalism in the world system. However, a growing number of scientist of different disciplines disagree, they state the past decades have been formed and transformed by the ideology of neoliberalism.

Based on the arguments of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1969) and media

imperialism (Boyd-Barrett, 1977, 1998), Thussu proposes the term neoliberal imperialism. He argues that the United States has endeavored to create the economic conditions for neoliberalism worldwide to lead more countries into the global free market system. Neoliberalism is defined by Hahn (2008) as follows:

[h]uman well-being can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework. The role of the state is reduced to protect private property rights through police military and legal structures and to guarantee the quality and integrity of money and proper functioning of markets. (p. 143)

Neoliberalism cannot be isolated from globalization and imperialism, Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005) describe it as a component of hegemony with which the power and wealth around the world is possessed by elite groups who in turn own transfer state-owned assets to private people and transnational corporations.

Hahn (2008) points out in his definition that the global spread of neoliberalism has been done through multiple means, including war, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the media. McChesney (2001) states that the existing commercial media system is very important to neoliberalism for “it is singularly brilliant at generating the precise sort of bogus political culture that permits business domination to proceed without using a police state or facing effective popular resistance” (p. 14). News, according to McChesney, plays an important role in shaping the ideology of neoliberalism:

“...the corporate media have the additional advantage of controlling the very news media that would be the place citizens would expect to find criticism and discussion of media policy in a free society. The track record is that the corporate media use their domination of the news media in a self-serving way, hence cementing their political leverage” (p.12).

China launched the policy of reform and opening up to the outside in 1978, which according to Harvey (2005), coincided with the world-historical turns to neoliberal solutions. However, Harvey states that neoliberalism in China has Chinese characteristics which are primarily expressed by the combination of neoliberal elements with authoritarian centralized control. In the current study, through analyzing its television programs, content, formats, structure, and programming, I aim to find how Phoenix has helped root the ideology of neo-imperialism in China, where media has been commercialized, but not really liberalized.

## **Methods**

### ***Data Collection***

The primary data of this study are drawn from Phoenix Chinese Channel, Phoenix InfoNews, and ifeng.com, the official website of Phoenix. The data are collected through reviewing and recording programs on these two channels. Also, since Program descriptions and schedules were also focuses of analysis of this study, the

pertinent information was retrieved from ifeng.com, the official website of Phoenix Corporation.

The data were collected in December 29, 2008, during the television prime hours from 7:00 pm through 12:00 am. All programs aired on Phoenix Chinese Channel and Phoenix InfoNews during this time were recorded. The programming genres of both Phoenix channels during the selected time period included news (both news reports and news commentaries), documentaries, commercials, talk shows, and TV dramas. I also drew upon the relevant data I collected on February 12, 2010, which I collected for another project.

## ***Data Analysis***

### *Analysis of programming format*

The programming genres on two channels of Phoenix during the selected time period include news (including news reports and news commentaries), documentaries, commercials, talks shows, and TV dramas.

Programming format is understood as “that set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced” (Casey et al., 2008, p. 61). TV format has been a crucial mechanism in regulating and recycling program content across different television systems worldwide. As Allen and Hill (2004) point out, the international market in television formats has exploded in recent years, as cable and satellite system have drastically increased channel capacity and hence the need for programming to fill channel schedules. Bodycombe (2002, as cited in Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007) says that a format sale is really a product sale, wherein the product is a recipe with which TV programs can be reproduced for another territory as a local program. Keane, Fung, and Moran argue that “formats” do not constitute a single object. Rather, a format is “a complex abstract and multiple entity that is typically manifest in a series of overlapping but separate forms” (p. 62). Thus, according to Allen and Hill, through the lens of TV formats and the international circulation of formats, we can investigate questions about the international circulation of ideologies.

In this study, I examine formats of Phoenix Chinese Channel and Phoenix Info News, to identify what patterns of formatting and operations Phoenix TV has developed and in turn popularized in China and what implication it has had for the Chinese TV industry and society.

### *Analysis of scheduling/programming structure*

A television schedule, as the running order in which programs are placed during a day, gives structure and meaning to blocks of programs on a given channel. A

familiarity with the schedule could facilitate a habitual viewing response in audience members, allowing broadcasters to predict who is watching and when. This predictability is crucial, as one of the core aims of scheduling is to assist broadcasters in capturing the biggest audience possible, so as to maximize advertising revenue (Casey et al., 2008), the lifeline for most TV stations worldwide.

Media scholars have shown little interest in examining television scheduling practices. However, although incomplete, research examining international television flows has recognized that scheduling practices mediate the cultural impact of foreign programming on domestic television culture (Havens, 2007). Thus, Havens defines program schedules as hybrid phenomena that call attention to the processes of cultural negotiation that contemporary scheduling entails. From the schedules of both channels, I intend to find out in some detail the variety of factors, both international and domestic, that come into play in specific scheduling decisions, paying particular attention to the conditions under which power relations among national, regional, and global ideas about scheduling differ.

### **Neoliberalism in TV Programming**

The essential purpose of neoliberalism definitely is the seek of profit (Harvey, 2005). According to Thussu (2007), neoliberal imperialism is applied to TV programming by media organizations' pursuit of high viewer ratings and the consequential advertising revenues at the cost of media's responsibilities of creating a public sphere and better informed citizens. In what follows, I analyze Phoenix TV's programming formats, scheduling, advertisements, and other strategies on the purpose of finding how neoliberalism is expressed by this major media resource in the Chinese speaking world.

### **Formats of Infotainment**

Formats are likely to be confused with television genres. Although both refer to how and in what forms content is presented, they are separate concepts. Simply speaking, formats are more specific than genres (Straubhaar, 2007). Moran (1998) defines *television format* as a set of invariable elements in a program based on which variable elements are put together to make each episode. Moran (2004) further argues that format has meaning because of what it permits, facilitates, and implies rather than what it is. Genre, on the other hand, is usually perceived to be a type or kind of programs. For example, a news program is a genre, while a news talk show is a format to present news. The genre approach in television studies is in the process of losing its relevance as an academic analysis tool given that the classification of genres has grown more and more difficult due to the proliferation of television forms and channels (Casey et al. 2008). Unlike the decreasing number

of genre studies, research on formats has attracted more academic attention in recent years as a consequence of increased format trade and imitation.

The more and more prevalent cross-border format trade and imitation could be accounted for by two concepts. Cultural discount, the devaluation of programs when received by audience in other cultures, would apply if programs are exported to other countries (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988), because viewers may not possess the necessary cultural background or knowledge to understand and enjoy international programs as much as the programs' native viewers. Usually people tend to enjoy or feel comfortable with local stars, and are more interested in local themes. Given this assumption, Straubhaar (1991), in his theory of cultural proximity, argues that people would prefer the programs in their own language and culture if given choices. Therefore, local broadcasters prefer format adapted programs over original ones. Consequently, in recent years, the global flows of television has shifted from content flows to format flows because the adaptation of formats is a convenient way to increase or diversify local and national production (Straubhaar, 2007).

Phoenix is responsible for adapting some successful TV formats from those of the US or Europe. The most salient one arguably is its infotainment format which is expressed by adoption of some of six types of infotainment categorized by Hartley (2001). They are (1) lifestyle programs, including those on cooking, gardening, house improvement, and antiques; (2) reality shows; (3) tabloid programs, such as consumer stories, celebrities, and scandals; (4) investigative programs; (5) talk shows; and (6) animal shows.

### *Talk shows as Infotainment*

As mentioned above, talk show is one of the major formats of infotainment. Thussu (2007) says that infotainment has contributed to the rise of commercialism of television news. It is disputable that it has actually caused this trend, but it is indisputable that infotainment and commercialization are closely related. Infotainment, a mix of information with entertainment, has been a growing trend in television news across the globe. Thussu identifies this trend as global infotainment and defines it as "the globalization of a US-style ratings-driven television journalism which privileges privatized soft news – about celebrities, crime, corruption and violence – and presents it as a form of spectacle, at the expense of news about political, civic and public affairs" (p. 8). Thussu argues that globalization of infotainment is detectable across the world; television news has been turning toward infotainment, that is, soft news, news about giant private corporations, news about lifestyle, and consumer journalism have grown in prevalence, at the cost of the public sphere and public journalism. Even conflict and wars are portrayed in an entertaining manner, by drawing on Hollywood story-telling style and therefore legitimizing a neo-imperial ideology predicated on the superiority of free-market democracy. Thus, Thussu says infotainment has become a global trend, and that this trend is a mask for neoliberal imperialism led



by the US.

The talk show, a type of infotainment, is the most dominant format on Phoenix. So far, among the 57 programs listed on the homepage of Phoenix TV, 23 adopt the talk show format – either in dialogue or monologue – as its major presenting means.

Talk shows, as a genre, can be subdivided into celebrity talk shows and confessional talk show, both of which originated in the United States. According to Shattuc (2001), the celebrity talk show focuses on entertainment celebrities, mostly actors and singers, but sometimes politicians, authors, and average people who catch public attention due to certain events. Since its start, the format has remained the same: the stage is decorated like a living room with a desk for the host and a couch for the guest, the host opens with a monologue, a set of interviews and performances with guests follows, and a live audience watches. The confessional talk show refers to shows in which private feelings and experiences are bared to the public. The *Oprah Winfrey* is the most famous of this type. Phoenix's signature talk shows include *A Date with Luyu: Tell Me Your Story* (*Luyu Youyue: Shuochu Nide Gushi*) and *Star face* (*Mingren Mianduimian*). These two programs are representative of confessional talk shows and celebrity talk shows, respectively.

*A Date with Luyu* is a confessional talk show and arguably is the most popular and most successful talk show on Phoenix. It was launched in 2002 as a weekly program. In 2005, due to its high popularity, it became a daily program. The show imitates several elements of format from *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, including the mission of the program, the principle of guest selections, and the atmosphere of self-disclosure. On the English website of Phoenix, *A Date with Luyu* is introduced as

Among interview programs in China, few provide personal insights into both the guest and the host. *A Date With Lu Yu* is a dynamic interview show with dynamic personalities whose backgrounds are special due to spectacular experiences or amazing achievements... Lu Yu's friendliness, wit and charm help reveal aspects that give viewers a better understanding of her guests. Developing a close rapport with them, she draws out deep-seated feelings, life objectives and not infrequently – some secrets. (ifeng.com).

*A Date with Luyu* even imitates Oprah's stage layout – on both stages, a beige sofa is set against a big screen displaying the program's logo. Also, like Oprah's show, *A Date with Luyu* is shot in front of a studio audience. In fact, the host and creator of the show, Chen Luyu has been called "China's Oprah". Other TV networks in China, such as Hunan TV, also air *A Date with Luyu* by buying broadcasting rights from Phoenix.

Another talk show program, *China A&Q* (*Wenda Shenzhen*), is different from the confessional talk shows mentioned above. *China A&Q* is a weekly program hosted

by Sally Wu, a star hostess of Phoenix and vice president of the Phoenix InfoNews Channel. Guests on this program are usually government officials with high positions, such as the minister of a department or the governor of a province. The topics discussed most often include domestic affairs pertinent to the well-being of the people and the economic development of the country. *Fengyun Dialogue (Fengyun Duihua)* is another high-end talk show, and could be considered as the “international” counterpart of *China A&Q*. The guests of *Fengyun Duihua* are usually the current or former political leaders of other countries. *China A&Q* and *Fengyun Duihua* are programs of public affairs.

In addition to these “official” talk shows listed in the category of talk show and interview programs, Phoenix also adopts the talk show format for most of their current affairs programs, and even for their news programs. Borton (2004) states that Phoenix InfoNews reports news in a new way, one modeled after Western and Japanese media such as CNN, which is new to Chinese viewers. Chan (2009) says:

As television is reconfigured in China, it is beyond doubt that models from the West and Hong Kong are often source of inspiration. When China borrows from outside, it tends to appropriate what is best suited to its interests, creating a hybrid culture in the process. Pure imitation is rare, and television culture is being Westernized, regionalized, and reinvented at the same time. Parallel to this is transborder broadcasters’ need to localize their programs (p. 35).

News-talk, pioneered by CNN, is a format that starts with the anchor’s introducing an event with a brief throw to the scene via a taped report, and then coming to a studio discussion (usually at length) about the event with one or two experts (Hartley, 2001). *News Talk (Shishi Kaijiang)* was the first program of current affairs that adopted this format. It has proven to be successful, as evidenced by the considerable size of its late night audience. Phoenix also applies this format to its coverage of big events, such as the Iraq War.

Phoenix started as an entertainment channel, with only six to seven broadcasting hours each day. When the network wanted to enter the business of news and information, it was constrained by being short of capital and experienced staff. To counteract these constraints, it originated a format wherein a hostess “talks about” news – this was the first version of *Good Morning, China*. When this show first began, its content was simply aggregated from major newspapers. Now *Good Morning, China* is a primary news magazine program with its own self-produced news content. Phoenix, however, still keeps the format of solo news-talk for a few other programs. For example, *Press Reading and Critique (You Bao Tiantian Du)* and *Wentao Pai’an*. *Press Reading and Critique* is introduced on Phoenix’s English website as “both informative and entertaining” (ifeng.com). *Wentao Pai’an* is a program of social issues that presents and discusses sensational and controversial topics.



Phoenix's reliance on the format of talk show is partly based on the fact that the genre has proven to have high infotainment values. Talk shows, when compared with other formats or genres, are also inexpensive to produce. The adoption of this inexpensive genre is obviously angled toward the network's margin of profit. Phoenix is a commercial media entity, and talk shows enable TV networks to make profit with minimum cost. Historically, Phoenix started as an entertainment channel; in order to become a source people rely on for news/current affairs and to become a primarily information supplier for the Chinese Speaking World, Phoenix figured out the strategy of drawing on and aggregating content from other media, such as newspaper and the internet. Phoenix's reliance on aggregated content partly explains the network's reliance on the format of talk shows. The pursuit of maximum profit of neoliberalism is well exemplified by Phoenix's heavy reliance on this kind of low-cost programs.

### *Infomercial and lifestyle programs*

Since 1978, when China's policy of reforming and opening up to the outside of the world was launched, consumer culture has been burgeoning in China. Television programs play a very important role in providing knowledge of new products and increasing people's desire for these products.

According to Xu (2007), the consumer-oriented programs in China can be divided into three types. The first are those providing viewers with the latest product information and market trends, and are usually designed for high-tech consumer items, newly-imported or would-be-imported luxury items, and new types of leisure services. The second type could be considered as a program of service which provides viewers with necessary knowledge to help them tell quality commodities from those of poor quality. The third type cultivates the "taste" of viewers and help them to "modernize" or "internationalize" their lives.

The *Trendy Guide (Wanquan Shishang Shouce)* is a typical case of both the first type and the third type. The program content is usually presented on the basis of brands. For example, the episode on February 12, 2010 was about automobiles. The brand names appeared in the program included Bentley, Mazda, and Opel. The commodities introduced in the *Trendy Guide* are from world-known corporations based in the United State, Europe, Japan, or Korea. The *Trendy Guide*, in the name of providing and educating the viewers with the knowledge and the latest information needed to make purchases, is actually promoting the brands that appear in the programs. In this sense, it is also a typical example of infomercial programs that present the commercial messages in the format of information. While the term "infomercial" was originally applied only to television advertising, it is now sometimes used to refer to any video presentation that presents a significant amount of information in an actual, or perceived, attempt to persuade audiences to a point of view about certain products.

Lifestyle programs, a type of consumer-oriented program according to Xu (2007), is a kind of infotainment programs with mission of teaching audiences about

cooking, gardening, and house decorating (Hartley, 2001). The *Beauty Kitchen* is a popular weekend program that teaches cooking. Although compared with the *Trendy Guide*, this program relies heavily on product placements, although it is less obvious in promoting commodities and put more stress on hands-on skills training compared with the *Trendy Guide*. Phoenix is planning to launch a channel focused on lifestyle and fashion once it is permitted to by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), the major regulator body of media in China. Assuming Phoenix's bid to launch this channel is successful, we can probably anticipate it being a showcase for West-based, world-famous brands.

The second type of consumer-oriented program in Xu's (2007) categorization – those that provide viewers with the knowledge necessary to tell good quality products from those of bad quality – are missing from Phoenix's repertoire. Additionally, it needs to be mentioned again that there are no children's programs, educational programs, or religious programs.

### *Phoenix's Other Programs*

For their programs of social issues, Phoenix tends to utilize the investigative format, which is included in Hartley's (2001) six types of infotainment. The *Social Visibility (Shehui Nengjiadu)*, and *Correspondents' Report (Jizhe Zaibaogao)* are two cases. These programs usually feature real stories about people in conflict with irresponsible and uncaring governmental officials or police. However, any criticism focuses on local or municipal levels and does not question the higher level of provinces, regions, or the central government.

As a commercial TV network, Phoenix is aware that coverage of controversial issues attracts attention from audiences, so it has programs focusing on the wrongdoings of the lower-level of local governments – stories on which local TV stations would normally never dare to report. Phoenix never challenges high level administrative institutions such as provincial governments, let alone central government. It also avoids national issues that may offend the authority of the Communist Party, such as Falungong, the corruption of governmental officials, and the problems of high unemployment in China (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). This is perhaps the balance that Phoenix found between the Party control and the pursuit of profit.

### **Naming of Programs and Star Making Strategy**

The Star system that started in the early stage of Hollywood now is prevalently adopted in the entire field of entertainment. Phoenix arguably is the one who brought this system to the Chinese TV industry. Many of Phoenix's shows are named after their host or hostess's name. Cases of this naming strategy include *Xiaoli Eyes on China*, *A Date with Luyu*, and *Behind Headlines with Wentao*.

Xiaoli, Luyu, and Wentao are popular hosts or hostesses on the Phoenix network. They can even be said to represent Phoenix to a large extent, because when talking about the hosts, people immediately think about Phoenix. To name programs after them is a tactic of Phoenix's Star Strategy. At first, Phoenix applied the Star Strategy to Xiaoli (Sara) Wu, Dou Wentao, Chen Luyu, and Xu Gehui. Phoenix tailor-made programs to maximize on these hosts' charisma, and then named the programs after them. This strategy has been successful for Phoenix, for each of these programs has gained large audiences.

Phoenix has since continued this strategy to create shows for more hosts and hostesses. It is worth noting that when promoting their hosts and hostesses, Phoenix is keen to emphasize their global background as well as their roots in Greater China area. In this sense, their hosts and hostesses represent Phoenix itself, which seeks to cover China but does so with a more "international" ideology.

The success of the Star Strategy has been widely promoted and complimented in China as Phoenix's original creation. However, like Chan (2003) points out, Chinese audience, when given the chance to travel abroad, would find what they thought was original or creative in China is actually the norm in the West – the Star Strategy is unique in China to Phoenix, but actually originated in Hollywood and has been widely adopted in the TV industry of the United States. The most famous cases of this strategy being utilized would be the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Larry King Live*.

### **Scheduling Analysis**

Raymond Williams (1974) proposes the term *flow* to describe how TV channels or networks hold their audience from program to program, or from one segment of a program to the next. By flow, Williams means television programs are not separate textual units. They are designed to be a sequence of textual elements that include programs and advertisements, as well as images and feelings the audience hopefully receive. Williams says, "This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form" (p. 86). The business point of flow is to maintain audience attention toward a given channel in a competitive television environment. Thus, flow encompasses planned program schedules, which are designed to hold on to audiences and, at the same time, by competitive scheduling practices, to discourage those audiences from visiting other channels, especially if those channels belong to a different corporate parent.

The business implication of flow scheduling is obvious. Scheduling acts as a bridge between audiences and advertisers: "scheduling delivers programmers to audiences when they are most likely to want to watch them; and audiences to advertisers in the composition that makes their advertising most likely to be

effective” (Ellis, 2000, p. 29). Therefore, a wisely planned schedule could help broadcasters make benefit by attracting the right audience at the right time. However, scheduling is not all decided by the broadcasters. Sometimes, scheduling decisions are limited by government regulations that mandate when they have to show some programs and when they can show other programs. For example, every TV network in mainland China, no matter if it is provincial or local, is required to dedicate their 7:00-7:35 pm time slot to the *Network News (Xinwen Lianbo)*<sup>1</sup> of China Central Television. This obligation, however, does not apply to Phoenix, because it is not owned by the government.

Ellis (2000) argues that there is a cultural force embedded in TV scheduling. First, the schedule “provides the balance for genres” (p. 33) and levels of cost across a channel; that is, the schedule provide advertisers with differently-priced access to audiences. Second, scheduling also counteracts competition in a national market. Third, scheduling provides the future with a reference of the past activities and present hopes. For a comprehensive channel that shows multiple genres of programming, scheduling is a central position in the creative process, for it intersects with channel brand identity. Also, the sum total of schedules defines the characteristics of a national broadcasting market. To see this from the international perspective, “the character of the national scheduling battle constitutes a formidable site of resistance and resilience in the face of many globalizing tendencies that might be down upon it” (Ellis, 2000, p. 36). The cultural significance of an imported program will likely alter if put in a different time slot. Imported programs are becoming more and more rare on Chinese TV, for improved technology has made production of original programming easier and less expensive. But analysis of schedules can still disclose the social, economic, and cultural implications of TV networks. In what follows, I analyze the scheduling strategies of Phoenix, as well as the social and economic implications of those strategies.

Phoenix, as a medium launched by private investment and based in a non-mainland China area, is not officially restricted by the Chinese government’s scheduling regulations. For example, it does not have to carry the CCTV’s *Network News* at 7:00 pm. In fact, the Phoenix Chinese Channel put *Phoenix Theatre*, a program airing TV dramas, at the 7:00 pm timeslot, the first hour of prime time. This scheduling choice was meant to cater to the masses and increase advertising revenue (Zhao, 2008). Due to the increasing popularity of Korean TV drama in China, most TV dramas showed on Phoenix are imported from South Korea, although, the import of programs of other genres and from other countries have been rare in recent years. The Phoenix InfoNews channel carries *China News Live*,

---

<sup>1</sup>So far there is no uniform translation of Xinwen Lianbo. China Central Television does not offer an official English translation for the title of this program, either. “Xinwen” is the Chinese word for “news,” and Lianbo means every station with the Chinese Television network broadcasts it simultaneously. Thus, I translate it as “Network News”. Other translations include News Bulletin (Dong & Shi, 2007), Evening News (Hong, Lu & Zou, 2009), News Report (Pugsley & Gao, 2007), and News Broadcast (Zhao, 1999).

its exclusive news magazine program, at 7:00 pm, in direct competition with *Network News*. Except for a half hour TV drama on Phoenix's Chinese Channel, Phoenix's channels' prime time slots are primarily scheduled for news, information, and current affairs programs. On weekdays on the Chinese Channel, the news comment and discussion programs are scheduled right after Phoenix Theatre. Phoenix groups these programs under the theme of Fenghuang Guantianxia, which translates to "Phoenix Views the World." The time slot before *The Asia Journal*, the primary news magazine program at 9:00 pm, is the *Trendy Guide*, the Infomercial program promoting modern lifestyle with commodities by the world-famous brand names. This weekday program is scheduled at 8:35 pm. *From Phoenix to the World (Fenghuang Quanzhi Lianxian)*, a news program stressing global coverage, is placed at 10:30 pm to cater late-night audiences. In addition to *China News Live* at 7:00 pm, Phoenix's InfoNews channel also airs the following news programs: *Phoenix Focus News (Fenghuang Jiaodian Xinwen)* at 8:00 pm; *Vane of Stock Markets (Gushi Fengxiangbiao)*, a program presenting and anticipating the trend of major stock markets in the world, at 8:30 pm; *The Chief Editor's Time (Zongbianji Shijian)*, a daily comment and discussion program, at 10:00 pm; and *Discussion of Today's News (Xinwen Jinritan)*, another news comment and discussion program, at 10:30 pm.

As Ellis (2000) states, "[t]he schedule is the locus of power in television, the mechanism whereby demographic speculations are tuned into a viewing experience. And it is more than that as well, for any schedule contains the distillation of the past history of a channel, of national broadcasting as a whole, and of the particular habits of national life" (p. 26). Phoenix places news and current programs at evening and late-night, because its target audience generally prefers to watch these shows during the evening. Stacking news and current affairs programs together is helpful to sweep the audience from one program to the next, similar program. This stacking, "flow" strategy is a useful technique to encourage audiences to stay on a single channel. Additionally, Phoenix offers short programs lasting from two to five minutes, such as *Phoenix Express (Fenghuang Kuaibao)*, a two-minute news bulletin scheduled at 8:00 pm, 10:00 pm and 11:00 pm to debrief the audience the headline news of the day, and *Flying China (Tengfei Zhongguo)*, a single-person talk show program on the development of New China. Phoenix adopts these short programs to bridge the major and popular programs, and to keep audience's interest throughout the scheduled programming.

Phoenix has also created several successful morning programs. In 1998, Phoenix launched a morning news program called *Good Morning, China*, in which the hostess Chen Luyu (also the hostess of *A Date with Luyu*) talked about news the show's producers aggregated from major newspapers. This program eventually became a "real" news program with self-produced news content, and also proved that television news could also be successful during the morning. Although in Western countries such as the United States, television stations started round-the-clock broadcasting as early as when TV screens were still black and white



(Williams, 1974), no morning shows were offered in China before 1998. Because of this, the Chinese consider morning news programs as another innovation developed by Phoenix, and Phoenix promotes relevant channels and programs as evidence of its *innovation*.

The purpose of this study is not to prove if Phoenix is responsible for the innovation of morning news programs. What matters more for the mission of this study is what Havens (2007) points out: “as news scheduling innovation develop, they can profoundly alter a nation’s or a region’s acquisition profile” (p. 221). The Economic Channel of China Central Television, inspired by Phoenix’s *Good Morning, China*, launched its own morning news program *The First Moment (Diyi Shijian)*, which has also been successful in gaining a high viewership.

## Advertisements

Most television networks do not list commercials in their schedules. In other words, they do not consider commercials as programs, and probably neither do audiences. However, Raymond Williams’ (1974) categorization of television programs includes commercials and publicity. Woods (2004) similarly includes advertisements as a category of television programs. Advertisements try to make products known to audiences and encourage those audiences to eventually buy the products. They are aired in time spots that are usually calculated with seconds – rather than minutes or hours – and are usually grouped together in segments. Fiske (1987) points out TV commercials are not only about products, but also images of desire and pleasure that can overwhelm the product they are attracted to. In the general evolution of advertising during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a shift from focusing on the specific features of products, in terms of how useful they are to potential customers, to focusing on the ways in which ownership of the products will enhance customers’ sense of self-worth, identity, attractiveness to others, and lifestyle. Williams (1980) argues similarly “that the material object being sold is never enough” (p. 185). In addition to selling products, advertisements also aim at deferral of reference with the products, meaning they conjure up a sense of the world through “magical inducement and satisfactions” (p. 185). Thussu (2007) argues that commercials usher in associations of Western modernity related to the range of products and services that are shown and the corporations that produce them. Thus, since commercials occupy air time, have direct economic influence on the media’s survival and development, and possess social and cultural impacts, any project investigating a television network cannot be comprehensive without also examining commercials.

Raymond Williams (1974) places a channel’s promotion and preview of its own programs into a category named publicity, different from commercials. In this project, however, publicity is perceived to be on par with commercials, because the purpose of publicity is to attract audiences, and in turn to attract revenue. Thus, for a commercial TV network like Phoenix, although its publicity does not make



revenue directly, its ultimate goal is not different from that of commercials.

As in the rest of the world, the survival and expansion of television and other media in modern-day China would not be possible without advertising revenue. Driven by the fast growth of China's economy and strong domestic consuming power, China's advertising industry is keeping a fast tempo. It did not start until 1979. The advertising market size of China in 2010 totaled RMB 343.7 billion (approximately USD 50 billion) (Research in China, 2011). Thussu (2007) points out that television is one of the fastest growing advertising media globally, especially with the proliferation television channels across the world and the growing acceptance across the globe of new digital and mobile delivery means. Therefore, advertisements promoting transnational corporations are omnipresent on television screens worldwide – although most of these are, of course, adapted to local languages and cultures.

### *Regular Advertisements*

“Regular” advertising refers to the advertisements that air between TV programs, as well as those that interrupt TV programs. The major news programs of Phoenix share a similar structure to TV news magazine; that is, each program is made up of several segments. For example, *The Asia Journal* has eight segments of “Headlines”, “Comments on Current Affairs”, “International News”, “Financial News”, “Cross Taiwan Strait”, “Focus on Hong Kong and Macau”, “Science and Technology” and “Glance at the World.”

This segmentation of news programming allows for a variety of news stories to be presented in a clear and organized way, and, perhaps more importantly, this structure creates advertising opportunities during the program. For example, between two segments of *The Asia Journal*, there are two minutes of commercials. Thus, ten to twelve minutes of the forty-five-minute program are occupied by commercials. *Good Morning, China* has a similar structure, and includes between ten and twelve minutes of commercials within a one hour program. *China News Live* has a slightly different structure, in that it contains only two commercial breaks, but also has an equivalent number of commercials.

During the five-hour prime time programming block from 7:00 pm to 12:00 am on December 29, 2008, the time for regular commercials between and within programs was 50 minutes on Phoenix Chinese Channel and 55 minutes on InfoNews Channel. This means that nearly one-fifth of all content on these channels on that date was made up entirely of commercials and self-promotion.

### *Sponsorship*

Many programs on the Phoenix networks feature title sponsorship, meaning corporations have agreed to financially support the programs in exchange for their

name getting attached to the name of a designated program. There are two kinds of title sponsors. One is Solo Sponsor, which means a sponsor is the exclusive sponsor of the program. For example, *Good Morning, China (Fenghuang Zaobanche)*'s current full official title is *Baisha Fenghuang Zaobanche*. Baisha is a brand name of tobacco made by Hunan Tobacco Corporation. *Shishi Kaijiang (News Talk)*, a current affairs commentary program, at present is officially named *Honghe Shishi Kaijiang*. Honghe is another brand name of tobacco made by Yunnan Honghe Group. Phoenix also applies this sponsorship to segments within programs. For example, "Sanyi Focus on Hong Kong and Macau" and "Meide Comments on Current Affairs" are both segments on *The Asia Journal*.

The other form of title sponsorship is Associated Sponsor, wherein two companies sponsor a program jointly. For example, *From Phoenix to the World* is jointly sponsored by Shuangxi Culture and Communication Co. Ltd. and Fenglu Aluminum Industry. To date, all programs on Phoenix are title sponsored. This strategy is very useful for Phoenix, for title sponsorship brings revenue to the network but does not occupy air time.

Other formats of sponsorship Phoenix adopts include sponsor tags which "run right after the sponsored program. They run at different times of the day and throughout the week prior to the broadcast. The sponsor tags feature client's logo on screen for a maximum of five seconds with a voice-over in Mandarin that specifies the sponsor's name" (ifeng.com). Another similar strategy is the use of opening and closing credit titles, which appear at the beginning/closing of a program. These feature a client's logo for a maximum of five seconds with a voice-over. For example: "XX (Program Name) is brought to you by XX (the name of the sponsored company) (ifeng.com). Alternatively, during breaks between programs and regular commercials, there are break bumpers that appear before commercials to form a smooth transition between the program and the advertising break. If sponsored, these break bumpers feature a client's logo for approximately three seconds, but no voice-overs (ifeng.com).

The above strategies are not new in Western TV industry. Phoenix TV has been eager to apply them. In this sense, Phoenix TV, embrace the advertisement, the magic system of capitalism (Williams, 1974) for survival and prosperity.

### *Clients*

According to Xu (2007), many in the middle class in China distinguish themselves from the masses by identifying with international consumer trends and youth culture. Thus, international investors have increasingly looked to this segment of the Chinese population because of its purchasing power and its growing interest in cars, tourism, education, and entertainment. This is especially important for Phoenix, whose advertising clients are in the fields of alcohol, tobacco, automobiles, jewelry, banks and financial products, food and other life products,

electronic appliances, medicine, power and heavy mechanics, culture and communication, and tourism.

*The Asia Journal* featured automobile advertisements from Volvo, Mercedes-Benz, and Audi. Most of the financial products Phoenix promotes are credit cards. Phoenix also encourages tourism, with advertisements for cities such as Kunming and Dalian. Tobacco advertisement is banned in China, so Phoenix never crosses the line by airing tobacco advertisements. However, more than one program on Phoenix's networks is "title sponsored" by tobacco companies. Examples are *Baisha Fenghuang Zaoban Che (Good Morning China)* and *Honghe Shishi Kaijiang (News Talk)*. Both Baisha and Honghe are brand names of tobacco in China. Other title sponsored programs include *Huiyuan Juice Weather Forecast*. Huiyuan juice is a brand in China owned by Coca-Cola.

Thussu (2007) argues that a "Western", especially "Anglo-American stamp is very visible on global advertising conglomerates" (p. 56). Given that their plethora of affiliates and subsidiaries around the world, these advertisers have spread the neoliberal agenda by localizing their advertisements using national language and cultural codes. However, compared with what "nationality" the advertised commodities are, the ideology embedded in advertisements arguably matters more. According to Carter and Steiner (2004), the commercial nature of media products provides a systematic way for images of the "modern lifestyle" to circulate among viewers, creating "mirrors of reality" (p. 20). Through television, the symbolic values of consumer items, especially those available only to a few, become regenerated, highlighted, and magnified.

## Discussion

This study is focused on the programming strategies of Phoenix TV in the theoretical framework of media (Boyd-Barrett, 1977, 1998) and neoliberal imperialism (Thussu, 2007). Thussu proposes the term neoliberal imperialism. He argues that the United States has endeavored to create the economic conditions for neoliberal imperialism worldwide to lead more countries into the global free market system. Television plays an important role in shaping the ideology of neo-imperialism, which emphasizes media privatization, commercialization and liberalization. In this study, through analyzing its television programs, content, formats, structure, and programming, I find how Phoenix has helped root the ideology of "US- managed" neo-imperialism in China, where media has been commercialized, but not really liberalized. Also, through the analysis of programming strategies of Phoenix TV, I do see how Phoenix weights these conflicts in a paradoxical environment: Phoenix relies on the content and format of infotainment and its emphasis on the "global and international" – and it offers no educational or children's programs. Moreover, the programming strategies of Phoenix arguably entails that the government's tight control of the media to an extent has helped the

spread of neoliberal imperialism in the media industry in China.

Phoenix has successfully balanced comprehensive news coverage of China with not criticizing the central government (Dong & Shi, 2007). On June 16, 2009, the World Brand Lab issued *The 500 Most Valuable Brands of 2009 in China*. Phoenix was ranked 38 among these 500 brands, marking the sixth time for Phoenix to be included in such a list. And now Phoenix is a standard in Chinese TV industry, against which the competition is compared. In the Chinese TV industry, Phoenix serves as a standard of success.

Phoenix's programming strategies cannot be conceived completely out of its own choice. China's government's tight control of the media arguably is partly responsible. Tunstall's (2008) metaphor for the media in China is "Capitalist-Communist Media Stir-Fry" because "while China has become in many commercial areas more capitalist than the capitalists, communism remains an important force. In China, we see media that are aggressively capitalist in their pursuit of audiences and advertising while continuing to be Marxist and communist in terms of ideology and control" (p. 191). China's government has restrictions on non-state media organizations' journalistic activities. For example, only Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV) News Channel have the right to live air visits of leaders of other countries. Under these circumstances, Phoenix TV, as well as other TV networks in China more or less are pushed to find programming strategies that can entertain the audience without offending China's government. In this sense, China's government tight control of media can be considered as a power to promote neoliberal imperialism in China, instead of a protection or resistance

### **Limitation and Suggestions for Further Studies**

Arguably the major limitation of this project is its limited data. The primary data of is from the 5-hour-prime-time programs of Phoenix's two channels. The data from more extended period of time probably will more strongly endorse the argument and conclusion. Other data about the scheduling, program descriptions, and program missions are from ifeng.com, the official website of Phoenix TV Corporation. Maybe to draw upon the pertinent information from other sources will lead to more eloquent argument.

To further this study to the next level, in addition to building up the argument on the basis of enhanced data, arguably we also should seek to find out what implications these characteristics of Phoenix's programming strategies carry for audiences, society, and the television industry of the Chinese-speaking world. Probably we can find answers to these questions through the comparison of programming strategies of Phoenix TV and those of other leading TV networks in China.

## Bibliography

- Allen, R. C. & Hill, A. (2004). *The Television studies reader*. London: Routledge.
- Borton, J. (2004, Dec. 9). Phoenix TV Spreads its Wings in China, Asia Times Online. Retrieved July 7, 2007, from <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FL09Ad01.html>
- Boyd-Barrett, O. (1977). Media imperialism: Towards an international framework for an analysis of media system. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Mass communication and society* (pp. 116-135). London: Edward Arnold.
- Boyd-Barrett, O. (1998). Media imperialism reformulated. In D. K. Thussu (Ed.), *Electronic empires: Global media and local resistance* (pp.157-156). London: Arnold.
- Boyd-Barrett, O. & Xie, S. (2008) Al-Jazeera, Phoenix Satellite Television and the Return of the State: Case studies in market liberalization, public sphere and media imperialism. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 1-20. Retrieved from [ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/download/200/134](http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/download/200/134)
- Carter, C, & Steiner, L. (2004). Mapping the contested terrain of medial and gender research. In C. Carter & L. Steiner (Eds.). *Critical reading: Media and gender* (pp. 11-35). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Casey, B., Casey, N., Clvert, B., French, L, & Lewis, J. (2008). *Television studies: The key concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Chan, J. M. (2003). Administrative boundaries and media marketization: A comparative analysis of the newspaper , TV and Internet markets in China. In C. C. Lee (Ed.), *Chinese media, global contexts* (pp. 159-176 ). London: Routledge.
- Chan, J. M. (2009). Toward television regionalization in Greater China and beyond. In Y. Zhu & C. Berry (Eds.). *TV China* (pp. 15-39). Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Dong, S. G., & Shi, A. (2007). Chinese news in transition: Facing the challenge of the global competition. In D. K. Thussu (Ed.), *Media on the move: Global flow and contra-flow* (pp. 182-198). London: Routledge.
- Ellis, J. (2000). Scheduling: The last creative act in television? *Media, Culture & Society*, 22 (1), 25-38. doi: 10.1177/016344300022001002
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hahn, N. S. C. (2008). Neoliberal imperialism and pan-African resistance. *Journal of World-System Research*, XIII (2), 142-178. Retrieved from <http://jwsr.ucr.edu/archive/vol13/Hahn-vol13n2.pdf>
- Hartley, J. (2001). The infotainment debate. In G. Greeber, T. Miller, & J. Tulloch (Eds.) *The genre book* (pp. 118-123). London, UK: British Film Institute.
- Harvens, T. (2007). The Hybrid Grid: Globalization, Cultural Power, and Hungarian Television Schedules. *Media, Culture & Society*, 29, 219-239. doi: 10.1177/0163443707074254.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hong, J., Lu, Y., & Zou, W. (2009). CCTV in the reform years : A new model for China's television? In Y. Zhu & C. Berry (Eds.) *TV China* (pp. 40-55). Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hoskins, Colin, & Mirus Rolf. (1988). Reasons for the U.S. dominance of the international trade in television programmes. *Media, Culture and Society*, 10, 499-515.
- Keane, M., Fung, A., & Moran, A. (2007). *New television, globalization, and the East Asian cultural imagination*. Hong Kong University Press.
- McChesney, R. (2001). Global media, neoliberalism & imperialism. *International Socialist Review*, Aug/Sep, Retrieved from [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/McChesney/GlobalMedia\\_Neoliberalism.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/McChesney/GlobalMedia_Neoliberalism.html)
- Moran, A. (1998). *Copycat television: Globalization, program formats and cultural identity*. University of Luton Press.
- Moran, A. (2004). Television format in the world/the world of television format. In A. Moran and M. Keane (Eds.), *Television across Asia: Television industry, programme formats and*



- globalization* (pp. 1-8). London: Routledge.
- Pugsley, P. C., & Gao, J. (2007). Emerging power of influence: The rise of the anchor in Chinese television. *The International Communication Gazette*, 69(5), 451-466. doi: 10.1177/1748048507080870
- Research in China (2011). China Advertising Industry Report, 2010-2011. Retrieved from <http://www.researchinchina.com/Htmls/Report/2011/6165.html>
- Saad-Filho, A. & Johnston, D. (2005). Introduction. In A. Filho & D. Johnston (Eds.), *Neoliberalism: A critical reader* (pp. 1-16). London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Schiller, H. (1969). *Mass communication and American empire*. New York: Augustus M. Kelley.
- Shattuc, J. (2001). The celebrity talk show. In G. Greeber, T. Miller, & J. Tulloch (Eds.) *The television genre book* (pp. 81-84). London, UK: British Film Institute.
- Straubhaar, J. (1991). Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies of Mass Communications*, 8, 39-59. doi: 10.1177/0016549205052231.
- Straubhaar, J. (2007). *World Television from global to local*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Thussu, D. K. (2007). *News as entrainment: The rise of global infotainment*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Tunstall, J. (2007). *The media were American: U.S. mass media in decline*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. (1974). *Television: Technology and cultural form*. London, UK: Fontana.
- Williams, R. (1980). *Problem in materialism and culture*. London: Verso.
- Woods, B. (2004). A world in retreat: The reconfiguration of hybridity in 20th-century New Zealand television. *Media, Culture, & Society*, 26(1), 45-62. doi: 10.1177/0163443704039709.
- Xu, J. H. (2007). Brand-new lifestyle: Consumer-Oriented Programmes on Chinese television. *Media, Culture & Society*, 29(3), 363-376. doi: 10.1177/0163443707076180.
- Zhao, B. (1999). Mouthpiece or Money-spinner: The double life of Chinese Television in the late 1990. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(3), 291-305. doi: 10.1177/136787799900200301
- Zhao, Y. (2001). Transnational capital, the Chinese state, and China's communication industries in a fractured society. *Javnost: The Public*, 10(4), 53-74. Retrieved from <http://www.javnost-thepublic.org>
- Zhao, Y. (2008). *Communication in China: Political economy, power, and conflict*. Lanham, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

**Author** Before Dr. Shuang Xie entered into a Ph.D. program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), she worked as an editor for International news at China Central Television (CCTV), the national TV network based in Beijing, China for two years from 2003 to 2005. She earned a Ph.D. in Media Studies in 2010. Since then, she has been teaching at Northern Michigan University. She has actively engaged in research on international media, with a focus on China and from the perspective of political economy. She has published in multiple journals including *The Chinese Journal of Communication*, *The International Journal of Communication*, and *The Journal of Communication Studies*.

Email: [sxie@nmu.edu](mailto:sxie@nmu.edu)