Media Power and its Control in Contemporary China: The Digital Regulatory Regime, National Identity, and Global Communication

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Abstract

In the past decade, the cultural projection of China has become increasingly important to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to the state in terms of maintaining ideological unity and social stability domestically while at the same time enhancing its soft power amid global competition. Since 2012, with the tightened regulatory framework of the state regulator, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), broadcasters have increasingly engaged in the production and promotion of national discourse, which has embodied the official ideology. At an international level, the Belt and Road Initiative (a global infrastructure strategy initiated by the Chinese government in 2013 that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe to improve regional integration) articulates with China's policy of deploying soft power to manage international relations. In analysing the shifting power dynamics of the documentary production sector, this thesis aims to capture this moment of transition in China's broadcasting policy.

This thesis takes an ethnographic approach to discuss the policy practices within China's broadcasting industry. It uses document analysis, in-depth interviews and participant observation as its main methods, to explore the gap between the contemporary policy regime and its implementation in national broadcasters and streaming services, taking into account the interplay between broadcasters, political bodies, producers and audiences. It deals with the contemporary role of Chinese national broadcasters in mediating the public discourse, the collective reimagining of China's national identity, and the newly-found policy initiative of using state media as a means of nation branding. Cases investigated include China Central Television (CCTV) Documentary, China Global Television Network (CGTN), and the Shanghai Media Group (SMG), as well as co-productions made by CCTV and international media firms, including the BBC, Discovery and the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK). During the fieldwork in China and the UK in 2019, I conducted 46 in-depth interviews with media professionals (including 36 semi-structured interviews), focusing on the challenges and possible solutions of media production and regulation.

Tensions emerge not only between the tightening of control of a top-down production framework and the growth of commercial and creative forces, but also between the rise of a national regulatory agenda and a policy goal of global engagement. Situated in an increasingly competitive, globalised cultural sphere, this thesis argues that the state, media institutions and citizens in China are renegotiating a collective national cultural identity to overcome internal conflicts and enhance social stability; in the meantime, the interplay between political, commercial and professional forces continually shapes China's policy response to global communication, which is now seeking the role of public diplomacy in state media.

To Louie,

With you I am complete

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There are new and unfolding areas of China that I barely know about, including in Chinese media and what the future might bring. But as Michel Foucault said in one of his aphorisms: 'Push outward. Always create from what you already have. Then you will know what to do.'

My gratitude, beyond words, goes to my mother, who taught me to take good care of my character in navigating the ups and downs of life; and to my dad, who showed me the determination and persistence one needs to get somewhere. Together, they helped me see the value in myself, in my upbringing, and to see the larger picture of our society amid its rapid changes. It all started there.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The unwritten rules of cultural production in China

Drawing on the latest trends in China's broadcasting sector that have reshaped our perception of the country's television industry, this chapter introduces the key themes to be addressed in this thesis: the contemporary role of Chinese national broadcasters as cultural cultivators, the collective reimagining of China's national and cultural identity, and the exercise of the soft-power initiative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in relation to the diplomatic importance of state media. Section 1 is a statement of the aspiration for this thesis, situated in the conceptual framework of media, communications and cultural politics. It examines media power and its control in both historical and contemporary contexts, analysing the shifting power dynamics in the contemporary Chinese broadcasting environment. This leads to a discussion of the Chinese government's emerging policy initiative on intervention on cultural sectors, focusing on the digital regulatory regime. Section 2 explores the 'game changers' during convergence and globalisation, and how they have shaped the government's policy thinking in recent years. It investigates the rise of commercial imperatives that challenge the political function of Chinese national broadcasters and lead to underlying ideological tensions in the public communicative space. It then traces the development of the soft-power initiative from the 1960s, and how this global orthodoxy has influenced China's global communication network in terms of its audience positioning and programming agenda. It recognises the challenges for China's state-controlled media and considers their limited communication power and uncertain responses in the international audience marketplace. Section 3 gives an account of the scope and structure of the thesis. It introduces the research design and fieldwork experience, with a focus on the adaptation of an ethnographic approach in multicultural contexts. This section also outlines the thesis' structure: the chapters are unified with an

investigation into the contested processes of production, consumption and regulation of cultural content in the contemporary Chinese broadcasting scene.

1.1 Into the politics of culture

This part positions the role and development of China's broadcasting industries within the domain of media, communications and cultural politics. It opens up the discussion of media and its control in China, beginning with an overview of the changing dynamics in the contemporary cultural production sectors. It explains why communication power is of crucial importance for China's national media institutions, with regard to the complex range of media participants who have been shaping the power relations in the communicative space. Notably, the shifting broadcasting culture has brought interventionism back on to the policy agenda and back into academic discussion. In the context of the Chinese broadcasting scene, however, it is worth noting an increasingly complex power dimension, beyond any discussion of a hegemonic broadcasting model characterised by political control.

1.1.1 Why communication power matters

This thesis is a contribution to the research on China's broadcasting policy during digitalisation and globalisation. It captures a 'cultural turn' in the contemporary Chinese broadcasting industries. The ongoing transition began with President Xi Jinping's envisioning of 'a new era with profound and complex changes' (Report from 19th CPC National Congress, *Xinhua News*, 2017, p.1). In the cultural sector, this is manifested in various changes in the power relations between the CCP administration and state media. At a national level, the president's 'Chinese dream' and 'cultural confidence' theses signal the political priority given to ideological coherence and social stability. At an international level, the Belt and Road Initiative (a global infrastructure strategy initiated by the Chinese government in 2013 that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe to improve regional integration) reveals China's policy thinking in

deploying soft power to manage international relations. This leads to questions of how media convergence and globalisation may have changed China's cultural politics and cultural policy.

As this thesis will explain, unprecedented changes driven by digitalisation and globalisation have expanded the dimensions of ideological contestations in today's global cultural scene. One cannot understand the relevance of historical arguments, and their implications for the present role of media cultivation, without a valid reassessment of the complexity of the ideological structure in China's media production culture. Here, George Gerbner's cultivation theory is repurposed for the analysis of China's broadcasting industries, attending to the tensions arising from a digital broadcasting culture in transition, as he writes: 'The public recognition of subcultural, class, generational, and ideological differences and even conflicts among scattered groups of people requires some common awareness and cultivation of the issues, styles, and points of divergence that make public contention and contest possible' (Gerbner, 1969, p.138). This highlights the formation of the mainstream ideologies through the construction and contestation of a national discourse.

Certainly, digital technologies and media convergence have drastically impacted the ways in which the audio-visual industries operate. What Gerbner argued about ideological contestations in mass communication five decades ago seems surprisingly pertinent to the contested nature of the contemporary Chinese cultural scene. In his book on Gerbner, Michael Morgan concluded, not without sentiment, that 'understanding the relationship between the stories we tell and the way we see the world, and the connection between culture policy and social power, remains just as vital and depressing as ever – if not more so' (2012, p.159). Gerbner's pursuit of 'organised diversity' (1982, p.13), with its emphasis on mediating mainstream discourse under ideological contestation in order to integrate both the media and the public into a national broadcasting network, is now a reality in China's cultural policy

agenda. This thesis has drawn on the school of media cultivation and articulates the need to re-evaluate the representation of mainstream cultural images and the role of cultivator played by national broadcasters.

With the power structure changing, both in China and globally, unforseeable ideological struggles have appeared in China's cultural production sector. Castells (2010) suggests that communication power operates across two dimensions, namely, the macro-power of the state and media corporations, and the micro-power of various organisations and agents. Whilst in the first dimension it is possible to unpack the negotiation between state and media institutions, in the second dimension one can explore the interaction between organisations and individuals. Castells chose political power as the main subject of his investigation and describes the mobilisation of intangible political power by linking together a cognitive approach and a structural analysis of the industry-derived network, the transformation of the communication system and political and social movements in wider contexts (2007; 2010). Here, I want to emphasise the second approach taken in the discussion of shifting power relations in China's contemporary Chinese media sectors in order to reveal 'the many areas where we see the old power structure being disrupted, and to a certain extent reconfigured' (Meng, 2018, p.10). The complex flow of power dynamics sets the scene for a discussion of the shifting cultural politics in media production in China.

The purpose of the thesis, ambitious enough, is to capture where lies the turning point in the vast changes that have occurred in China's public communicative space. A necessary step towards this goal is to understand the mediated cultural production processes, seeking to bring out the structure and power dynamics within China's politico-economic and socio-cultural contexts. Starting from the production of national cultural content, I have observed the gap between the policy claim and how it is actually played out across various cultural sectors. I

intend to offer more than a simple critique of the status quo of the traditional broadcasting system – an approach usually taken by those who anticipate the development of digital technologies as some sort of resolution. Essentially, this research is about the shifting power relations in China's contemporary media landscape: the politics of television production; and the battle for politico-economic power among institutions and agents, and what this means for socio-cultural values. Despite my dedication to this research project, however, it is inevitable that many of the questions I raise will remain open for discussion.

My starting point is a recognition of the gap between the present policy agenda's aims and outcomes. When we, in academic circles, talk about socio-cultural values, or the public-service attributes of national broadcasters, we often speak on behalf of the audience, who are seen either as consumers who indulge in content consumption, or as citizens eager to fight for their cultural rights. However, the key question, insistently at the heart of contemporary media politics, is: what does public service really mean for broadcasters across a variety of political and socio-cultural environments? In other words, what counts as a pertinent contribution to audience welfare, and how might this relate to civic cultural rights, national interests, and also to global engagement in wider contexts? Regarding the fierce ideological competition taking place at both domestic and international level, these questions have grown more pressing for Chinese media.

The political objective to maintain ideological coherence necessitates a policy of developing a cultivation role among national broadcasters. During President Xi Jinping's administration, the concepts of 'cultural confidence', 'national identity' and 'traditional cultural values' have become recurring themes in both media output and policy guidelines. Currently, the mediation of a collective national identity is in question. The disruptive forces of digitalisation and commercialisation have reshaped how the public consensus on traditional cultural values is

formulated within China's cultural sphere. And yet policy prescriptions may hardly be enough. In Guo's words, 'many in China found that what the Party-state presented as "the physical and psychological definitions" of the collective self became largely irrelevant, let alone acceptable' (2004, p.1). Digitalisation has accelerated a dismantling of the public's belief in collectivism. This represents a dramatic turn of the tide that has put interventionism back on the broadcasting agenda. The party, in its contemporary ideology, is now pursuing the resurgence of Chinese cultural identity and traditional values. The political bodies have drawn tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national culture, even though seeking to modify mainstream ideologies can be problematic, particularly in terms of the collective reimagining of a national cultural identity. The dilemmas of collectivism and the cultural politics of recognition are discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

At an international level, the exercise of communication power is concerned with the operation of a soft-power initiative through global engagement. Nye has examined the soft power orthodoxy that was established after the Cold War threat had abated. Intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions are framed into a soft, co-optive power that is able to influence the global political discourse and international relations (1990, p.167). In the past decades, the soft power initiative has been firmly on China's policy agenda, which seeks to use media and communications to enhance the nation's cultural and political power in the global cultural sphere. As Zhang Jian observes, 'under the new leadership headed by President Xi Jinping, Beijing has become more assertive in international affairs' (2015, p.5). Diplomatic interests drive the current broadcasting agenda toward the international audio-visual marketplace. Furthermore, the rise of a global economy leads to increasing interdependence between nations. In audio-visual sectors, an increasing transnational collaboration has forced policy makers to reflect on domestic regulatory policy. China's responses to reform of the cultural production regime are key to repositioning itself in global

politics and to its role in the international audience marketplace. This will be discussed in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

1.1.2 Framing power relations in China's cultural sectors

To start a thesis on power relations in the media with a focus on cultural content may not be the most obvious choice. However, the cultural projection of China has become increasingly important to the party and the state and China's latest cultural policy has prioritised the production of national content by underlining a cultural approach to media production. This encourages a rethinking of the resurgent question of the changing power relations in the cultural production sector and the influences on the development of public policy.

The political initiative of recentralising media power has been increasingly on China's policy agenda. The state regulator, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) seeks to enhance its administrative measures for content regulation on digital platforms in order to bring the highly commercialised digital content industries back under political control. Through legislation and administrative measures, the state intervenes in the domains of content production and digital distribution, wherein the national administrative bodies prioritise political and ideological needs. As Zhao and Lin propose (2021, p.9), the state and media corporations are now mutually constituting an 'umbrella-like' structure of media production that allows the negotiation between political control and commercialisation.

Of course, political control is but one form of media control. In the western context, the discussion of communication power centres on the varied roles that media institutions play in terms of the formation of public opinion in the communicative space. In the Chinese context, by comparison, the studies of media power often focus on the operations of state-controlled broadcasters and regulatory bodies, which work together to draw the boundaries of the dominant ideology. Certainly, the Chinese broadcasting system has been prioritised by the state

administration for intervention. Studies of China's national broadcasting system often conceptualise the power structure in the Chinese media environment as being within a hegemonic model (Guan, 2019). Within this system, media power travels one way – from the top to the bottom. This is played out by the state's control of, and interference within, the production agenda, which ensures that the official ideology is communicated from state media to both domestic and international audiences. In this analytical framework, the role of the media is limited to enhancing hegemonic rules and maintaining power within legitimacy (Zhang, 2011a, p.18). However, the presumption of a one-way broadcasting model has been increasingly challenged by the shifting power structure during the process of media convergence (Lei, 2011).

Political control has been a key subject in the debate over power relations within China's media industries, but it has by no means been the only one. Unpredictable forces of commercialisation, digitalisation and globalisation have opened up new themes of discussion on the multi-dimensional power relations during the transformation of China's broadcasting sector. Whilst this thesis attends to the historical arguments, it also draws on the complex realities of the present. It aims at unveiling the current ideological contestations of various kinds – along lines of the cultural politics of recognition, the imbalance in the cultural rights of digital citizens, media institutions' struggles between politically-oriented and market-oriented audio-visual industries, and the conflicts between nationalist views and the pursuit of global collaboration. This leads to pragmatic arguments that concern a range of media institutions and audience groups. The cultural politics of media is not only concerned with the governance of a country or area (as party politics is) but also with the principles relating to power and status in the public sphere and throughout media activities (Weber and Jia, 2007). The concepts of governance and cultural politics are interlinked and contribute to the evolution of national and global media networks, production landscapes and cultural boundaries.

However, identifying the 'game changers' at an institutional level is not an easy task. Obviously, the growth of commercial and creative powers (albeit with limited policy influences) has complicated the balancing act in shaping the production agenda. In the Chinese context, however, little is known regarding how conflicting views coexist, compete with each other, and are moderated into a mediated mainstream production culture in the communication spaces. In his study of the contemporary Chinese television industry, Keane (2015) has examined the negotiation space between professional sub-cultures and political authority and how this may challenge state-controlled production protocols and how far this is allowed to go. From the perspective of national broadcasters, their challenge lies within the tensions between political priorities and commercial competition, whereas they have found that professional autonomy does not seem to play a significant role in negotiating the policy agenda of the state media. With national broadcasters losing their centrality, arguably, China's national broadcasters have increasingly taken on the political responsibility to produce a national discourse, which coincides with the cultivation model that Gerbner et al. have put forward (1986). This thesis will further examine how negotiation spaces may exist even in a tightly controlled broadcasting system.

Throughout the thesis, I will focus on an assessment of the mediated production processes for producing national cultural content. Unlike the more obvious choice of the news production sector, an examination of the documentary sector offers an opportunity to scrutinise the complex power dimensions of the audio-visual sector. The recognition of multiple power dimensions encourages a timely discussion on shifts in contemporary policy thinking. My intention is to explore how the boundaries of legitimate policy and media practices are defined within China's present cultural production and regulatory systems. But it needs to start from recognising the fluid process in which political authority, media institutions and the audience negotiate a 'red line' between where actions are deemed problematic and where compromises

are allowed. This is achieved by observing the ways in which the cultural sectors are functioning and interacting. To this end, I will look into what is behind the curtain, so to speak, and ask questions about the uncertain or, indeed, contradictory areas in China's media policy. This is to identify the gap between cultural policy and cultural production, and to identify implications for the development of the regulatory regime and for the decisions that are implemented.

Following this agenda, this section introduces the key concepts to be addressed throughout my thesis. Contributing to the latest research on media convergence and global communication, my goal is to identify a policy shift within the Chinese broadcasting industries. This section outlines the shifting power relations between political authority, public and private media institutions, professional sub-cultures and the audience. It introduces a range of historical arguments about the mediation of cultural production since the first development of mass communication in the 19th century. These are developed in an account of the contemporary Chinese broadcasting scene in Chapter 2, before being tested by empirical evidence gathered from China's broadcasting sectors in the finding chapters.

1.2 On Chinese media's 'cultural turn'

This section introduces the context within which a shift in cultural policy was initiated. In recent years, the Chinese government has decided to promote what it terms 'cultural confidence' by highlighting the cultural aspects of media output. In seeking to address the policy impetus for a 'cultural turn', this section outlines the themes and concepts to be discussed in the findings chapters, including the shifting balance between political control, production financing and professional sub-cultures. Firstly, it offers a historical account of China's broadcasting policy since the marketisation of cultural sectors, revealing the divergent policy objectives to support and to mediate cultural production activities. Secondly, it examines the latest trends in the

international distribution of China's national cultural content, underlining the questions concerning the commercial capacity of China's cultural production in relation to the patterns of international audience reception.

1.2.1 What we (do not) talk about when we talk about Chinese TV

Its political and ideological function has been key to China's state-owned broadcasting network since its establishment. According to Zhao Yuezhi (1998), the co-existence of various one-dimensional ideological constraints that highlight political correctness with the rise of a mass communication model with increasing variety and liveliness of cultural forms shapes reforms to, and the regulation of, China's national television network. In her words, China Central Television (CCTV) has played a political role as 'the mouthpiece of the Party' (1998, p.19) since its foundation on May 1, 1958. The state-controlled broadcasting agency has taken on the responsibility for propaganda and ideological intervention. In the past half century, China's national broadcasting network has established a mass communication system with a national reach. Its programming schedule has covered a wide range of content, including news and current affairs, comprehensive education programmes, arts and cultural content, and entertainment services. The understanding of the unique public and political nature of China's national broadcasters is key to the analysis of its cultivation role (Keane, 2015, p.36). Chapter 4 will examine how China's broadcasting institutions have been shaping society, and the consensus on national culture and the cultural politics of recognition.

For a considerable time, the programming agenda of national broadcasters focused heavily and solely on political propaganda. The communicative power of China's state broadcasters was rather modest between 1958 and 1978. The under-delivery of broadcasting technology effectively restricted the scope of satellite transmission, while the limited number of television sets in common households further reduced the audience reach. The situation worsened when

the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. Until this politically and culturally disruptive phase ended in 1976, any diversity of cultural content was simply out of the question.

However, the initial stimulation of commercialisation gave rise to a market-oriented broadcasting industry. As Zhao suggests, 'although the media are still owned by the state, their economic basis has been shifted from complete reliance on state subsidies to increasing dependence on commercial revenue from advertising, sponsorships, and business operations in other areas' (1998, p.67). In 1978, China's broadcasting sectors began incorporating a commercialised programming regime. In 1980, the 10th National Broadcasting Conference announced the policy direction of 'sticking to one's own path and playing to one's strengths', which has allowed the market thinking of the broadcast sectors to operate in accordance with China's modernisation plans (Ouyang and Zhu, 2020). This policy trend encouraged the television sector's producers to engage in competition for advertising revenues and audience ratings. Moreover, commercial exercises in cultural production created more interactive and communicative content in terms of themes and narratives that attended to audience needs, in comparison to the earlier propaganda model. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping made his Southern Tour, initiating a policy agenda of far-reaching economic reforms and marketisation. This initiative further encouraged the development of a commercial production regime among China's national broadcasters and the development of cultural enterprises.

Despite the policy advocacy of commercialisation within cultural industries, questions of ideological control have been central to the discussion of media reform. The proliferation of commercialised cultural products has challenged the representation of mainstream ideologies in the media. Since the late 1970s, economic and political reforms and the cultural debate on tradition and modernity have accelerated the dismantling of the public belief in collectivism

(Guo, 2004, p.1). The conflict between political responsibilities and commercial imperatives has escalated in the digital broadcasting industry, as will be explained in Chapter 4.

The mediation of the mainstream ideologies in the public sphere remains at the heart of policy thinking in China's media sectors. Schlesinger's (1991) arguments on media, state and the nation have offered an analytical perspective on how the consensual imagination of a national discourse between the media and the public is constructed. The consensus on 'the mainstream' is primarily understood as representing national values. Currently evident in China's regulatory agenda, the underlying policy initiative for digital regulation aims to enable ideological coherence and maintain social order. To maintain political control, the government has decided to tighten its regulatory grip on the audio-visual sector. In the past decade, the National People's Congress and the State Council have issued a range of legislative and administrative measures on digital regulation. In Li's words, the state has decided to support the reinvigoration of traditional culture to 'fill the ideological vacuum left by the erosion of public faith in Marxism', and 'to offer a compelling alternative to Western liberalism' (2015, pp.80-81). This initiative has been more explicitly stated in Xi's latest 'cultural confidence' thesis, where he has argued for the use of traditional culture as an approach to ideological unity. (To be further discussed in Chapter 5.)

The focus on reinventing a national cultural identity has been sharpened, and more explicitly brought out, by the contemporary policy agenda. This is exemplified by the exercise of content regulation on both traditional and digital platforms. The interventive measures to remove 'harmful content' from audio-visual products are, of course, commonly known as 'censorship'. Decisions on 'problematic' content are fundamentally concerned with national interests. For example, Article 25 of the Film Administration Regulations (State Council, 2001) states that content shall be prohibited that can be deemed as: 'Jeopardising the unification, sovereignty

and territorial integrity of the State' (2); 'inciting hatred and discrimination among ethnic groups, harming their unity, or violating their customs and habits' (4); 'disrupting public order and undermining social stability' (6); and violating 'social ethics or fine national cultural traditions' (9). This regulation has been enhanced by the establishment of legal and legislative forces. Abiding by present legislation, films must not have content that involves 'endangerment of national unity, sovereignty or territorial integrity', 'endangers national security' or 'harms national dignity, honour or interests' (National People's Congress, 2016a, Article 16.2). The present regulatory principles suggest a political imperative to draw tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national culture (which will be discussed in Chapter 5).

However, the gap between the regulatory initiatives and the uncertain outcomes becomes increasingly evident and problematic from a policy point of view. Currently, a publicly accountable and transparent decision-making process is missing from the policy agenda: the lack of accountability regarding the regulatory criteria and the lack of public visibility of how criteria are implemented are two of the most pressing issues that are beyond existing policy priorities. Notwithstanding the government's promise to improve the legislative system, the lack of regulatory transparency may lead to the intensification of tensions and disputes in the production sector and impede any effective and sustainable operation of the cultural industries. For instance, the private ways in which censorship is carried out has sparked industrial disputes, public debates and academic attention. The issuing of 'banning orders', negotiations for distributing licenses, and the mediation of editorial criteria all point to the secretive nature of the censorship department. The regulatory uncertainty worsens the division between the making of policy guidelines and how the cultural industries respond to them. Chapter 5 will further test the actual practices of the industry against present policy claims, drawing on empirical evidence regarding how censorship has played out in the cultural sectors.

The conflict between political control and commercial imperative is still central to the policy debate. The political function has been essential to China's broadcasting system since its establishment. However, digital convergence has encouraged an interactive communication model, challenging the formation of a national discourse. The rise of digital communication, on the one hand, provides opportunities for individualised cultural consumption and the growth of commercialisation and consumerism in the digital cultural industries while, on the other hand, creating multiple communicative spaces that allow the fragmentation of ideas, opinions, rationales – and ideologies. The expansion of distribution platforms and communicative spaces contributes to the transformation of what Schlesinger (2020) characterises as the 'post-public sphere', characterised by the dispersal of discourse around the mainstream, national culture. This leads to questions of the communication power of national broadcasters and forces a rethinking of the regulatory need for a sustainable mass communication model in China's contemporary broadcasting industries that is able to enhance social stability. Notably, enforcement of the ideological role has been brought back to the policy agenda. The issues concerning regulatory uncertainty will be examined in Chapter 4, followed by an investigation on the shifting power relations between China's national broadcasters, streaming services and their audiences in Chapter 5.

1.2.2 Redefining the broadcasting industry: China's soft power initiative

This thesis deals with not only internally oriented questions concerning contemporary Chinese society, culture and national identity, but also externally oriented inquiries about soft power in the context of political and cultural competition across policy fronts, whereby the cultural projection of China has become increasingly central to the policy regime of the party and state. Since 2011, President Xi Jinping has underlined the promotion of cultural confidence as a 'more fundamental, profound and sustainable power for the development of a nation' (*Xinhua News*, 2017, Section VII). The publicity function of cultural programmes and cultural industries

has been highlighted on the policy agenda. In Xi's speech to the 19th CPC National Congress, he said:

> We will improve modern systems for cultural industries and markets, explore new mechanisms for cultural production and operation, improve economic policy on the development of the cultural sector, and develop new forms of business in this sector [...] We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's cultural soft power. (*Xinhua News*, 2017, Section VII. 5)

To understand China's aspiration to build the country into a cultural superpower, one needs to first understand the context of China's economic, political and military power in the wider East Asian region. In the past few decades, China has used a 'peaceful rise' strategy, as 'its continued economic growth and domestic stability are predicated on deep integration with, and openness to, the regional and international economies' (Kang, 2007, p.5). Most recently, Xi's administration has announced a number of initiatives in the pursuit of economic development in accordance with the nation's diplomatic interests. For example, since 2012, China has jointly pursued the Belt and Road Initiative, created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and set up the Silk Road Fund (*Xinhua News*, 2017). Historical and conventional international relations frameworks describe the Belt and Road Initiative as representing a newly found ambition that drives China into global politics and positions its national image as moving away from its long-time reticence towards foreign entanglements (Narins and Agnew, 2020, p.809).

China's soft-power initiative has led to a sophisticated international broadcasting model that seeks to promote a non-confrontational national image in non-western and western countries. Some commentators explain China's active engagement with East Asian economies as an answer to the debate in America over the 'Chinese Threat'. The Chinese government has re-emphasised the concept of 'China's Peaceful Rise', as it tries to reassure regional audiences of

a ‘mutually beneficial growth leading to co-prosperity’ (D’Hooghe, 2005, p.90). Developing support for China’s official narratives in countries around the South China Sea, or along the ‘Belt and Road’, is critical to China’s core interests, including protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity (Varrall, 2020, p.7). Zhang Jian argues that the policy emphasis on regional interests in the Asia Pacific area is the manifestation of a new phase of Chinese foreign policy that aims to maintain a stable external environment to accommodate its growing economic power (2015). To that end, the expansion of an international broadcasting network targeting audiences in different regions has been put on the policy agenda. According to research on media power and order in East Asia, the effect of China’s international communication seems satisfactory to the Chinese government in the non-Western media markets in terms of audience reception of the political message of its benevolent political and cultural power expanding into the global community. In Kang’s words, ‘the East Asian states tend to share a view of China that is more benign than conventional international relations theories might predict (Kang, 2007, p.5).

However, in a wider global context, China has just learnt how to use its political power and increase its relevance within the political and cultural discourse. Since its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001, China has transformed its economy from a low-cost ‘world factory’ to a major trading and development partner with advanced technologies. But the exercise of soft power in the global cultural arena has been challenged by the regional divisions and divergent ideological structures residing in geo-politics. A common criticism of China’s contemporary cultural discourse is that, for all China’s ‘economic and military might, the country suffers from a severe shortage of soft power. According to global public opinion surveys, it enjoys a decidedly mixed international image’ (Shambaugh, 2015, p.99). In many cases, the results of China’s international broadcasting strategies have been mixed, limited by low levels of credibility and the challenges of competing with western media (Si, 2014).

Chapter 6 will further examine the issues of the market disadvantages of China's cultural outputs.

The use of soft power is a policy to which a range of non-coercive measures can be harnessed and where there is continual need for adjustment over time. Unlike in deploying hard power to resolve confrontation, ideological divisions are by no means addressed with a quick fix, especially given the complexity of global communication spaces. The soft-power initiative and diplomatic interests have put the publicity function of China's international broadcasting network into a pivotal position within current policy thinking on global communication. The government's intention has been to deploy the shared history and culture of the nation to promote an externally facing national image and to extend China's cultural influence in the global sphere. However, political bodies are unlikely to take full control of the media nor can they easily influence the communication results in the global audience marketplace. In Nye's argument:

> Soft power may appear less risky than economic or military power, but it is often hard to use, easy to lose and costly to re-establish. Soft power depends upon credibility, and when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed. Governments often underestimate the importance of pull rather than push in soft power interactions. The best propaganda is not propaganda. (2012, p.152)

Despite the rising soft-power initiative, China's media institutions are struggling to engage international audiences and build a sense of perceived trustworthiness in the competitive cultural sphere in order to exercise their communication power. Noticeably and worryingly, according to Shambaugh (2015), the growth of nationalist views tends to facilitate the weaponisation of media outlets in a perceived 'discourse war' between China and the West (p.103). An increasing trend toward nationalism, manifested in the dominance of antagonistic views in international broadcasting, is challenging the pursuit of global collaboration as part of

policy priorities and is putting a political strain on the creative process of cultural production. Theories of cultural proximity and cultural imperialism presuppose that the tastes and preferences of a particular audience group are shaped by geographic and ideological divisions. However, as Chapter 6 seeks to explain, the ongoing changes due to digitalisation and globalisation have challenged the premise that audience groups be exclusively understood on the basis of national boundaries. This concerns the repositioning of national cultural images in light of the policy goal of nation branding and the key is to find a receptive audience and develop its tastes from there.

Divergent policy initiatives and operations lead to unpredictable outcomes in the international distribution of Chinese cultural content. The contradictory nature of China's international broadcasting policy is manifested in the struggle of cultural producers caught between the imperative to deliver a national ideology and the urge to improve global audience reception. Especially in co-production cases between China's national broadcasters and international producers, the pursuit of traditional cultural images and an enthusiasm for international branding often drive cultural production in divergent editorial directions. Whereas the former initiative drives the production according to the terms of reference set by the official discourse, the latter seeks to develop spaces for alternative themes in order to produce entertaining and marketable content. Chapter 7 will discuss the recomposition of the international distribution and co-production agenda, in which the dominance of the concept of national discourse and the recognition of cultural diversity are intended to be reconciled.

In Chapter 7, I will argue that the diplomatic goal of China's national cultural production is best understood as taking place in a contested international cultural scene. So far, China's international broadcasting network has yet to build credibility in the global marketplace, which it must do before trying to exercise its ideological influences and cultivate audience tastes. An

unsatisfactory audience reception has revealed the limitations of China's cultural output. China's international broadcasting network has continuously and consistently delivered cultural content that aims to promote contemporary national images to the world. But this endeavour has been undermined by a limited commercial production capacity and restricted access to international distribution platforms. Changing geo-politics and the rise of protectionism have increased barriers for China's cultural exportation. Gillespie and Webb argue that current theories on public diplomacy 'are plagued by the simplistic assumptions about media effects on audiences, poorly conceived models of transnational communication and essentialist notions of culture' (2013, p.2). The diplomatic initiative needs to be situated within the digital broadcasting environment in transition. To understand the international audio-visual marketplace is to understand not only the commercial logic that underpins it, but also the critical role cultural policy can play as a tool to mediate some of the challenging issues facing cultural sectors.

The emphasis on a market regime leads to policy questions on the scope and limitations of China's cultural production. In Gao's words, China's commitment to a market-based production regime is merely 'rhetorical', with limited measures taken to promote market competition (2009, p.429). Moreover, a lack of policy transparency brings challenges to the commercial capacity of domestic cultural production and also increases tensions and conflict during international co-production. For instance, intensive negotiations between producers and the regulatory bodies for a Film Production License (State Council, 2001, Article 5, p.10) tend to impose administrative burdens on production. Also, the unpredictable operation of, and results of, censorship increase the financial and political risks for creative innovation and experimentation within production sectors. Furthermore, the rapidly changing policy directions of IPR legislation may increase the costs of commercial negotiations. These are practical concerns to be addressed in Chapter 7.

1.3 The scope and structure of the thesis

This section gives an account of my fieldwork in China in 2019. It explains my use of an ethnographic approach to bring out the changing dynamics in China's broadcast industries. It highlights the changes and the continuity of the ethnographic tradition of media and communication research in different socio-cultural contexts. The final part of this chapter outlines the thesis' structure. It opens the discussion on the digital regulatory regime in China's broadcasting sector, while focusing on the policy rationales for enhancing media control, promoting a collective national identity and improving the diplomatic role of national broadcasters.

1.3.1 Engaging ethnography in China's broadcasting industries

This research takes an ethnographic approach to tackling a key line of inquiry in media and communications studies: the exercise of power and its control. First and foremost, production research is about production culture and the politics of cultural industries. Ethnography, or participant observation, focuses on the mediation of the cultural production process, shaped by complex negotiations between institutions and agents. These sociological analyses serve as a corrective to the examination of cultural texts and media artefacts such as content analysis (Schlesinger, 2016). In television studies, ethnographic scholars question who sets the cultural agenda and on whose behalf, for example, by interrogating broadcasters' negotiation of audiences in shaping the programming schedule; examining the competition and cooperation between public and private sectors during cultural production; and looking at the contested ways in which interventive measures are implemented across sectors. In the contemporary Chinese broadcasting context, tensions arise between (a) political control and commercial imperatives; (b) national ideologies and global engagement; and (c) a tightened regulatory regime and its uncertain implementation. These are issues to be addressed in the research questions and throughout the thesis.

This research draws upon various cases of the cross-sectoral production of national cultural content. Observation of the production process for documentaries and documentary series has contributed to this analysis of China's broadcasting culture in transition. During two field trips in 2019, I travelled to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Suzhou and spoke to 46 participants in the public or private sectors. The participants provided generous access and insightful comments. They shared their professional experiences across the production, distribution and regulation sectors, providing resource-rich empirical evidence for my analysis. I have interviewed executive producers and managers at China Central Television (CCTV), Shanghai Media Group (SMG), Youku (a video-hosting service based in Beijing), the documentary department of Bilibili (a video-sharing website based in Shanghai) and other state-owned and independent media agencies. Admittedly, the interview process has been a discursive one with considerable challenges, particularly with regard to issues of confidentiality and sensitivity (to be discussed in Chapter 3) but, thankfully, the qualitative data I gathered from semi-structured interviews and participant observation were rich and pertinent.

The ethnographic viewpoint helps draw out any tensions during interviews. The direct observation of 'silence', for instance, reveals the gap between the written regulatory agenda and media participants' uncertainty in interpreting the policy lines as well as their fear of offending the political authorities. Whereas media institutions tend to take the official line in developing a modern, mainstream discourse in the reproduction of a legitimate national cultural identity, an open discussion about how such an identity is mediated through interplay between the political authorities, media institutions and citizens has been missing from the public discourse. Silence during conversation may imply a lack of openness or uninterest in sensitive topics, or it could also be a result of participants' anxiety about any potential violation of political red lines that are often tied to their personal or professional interests. For example, interviewees' reluctance to carry on an in-depth discussion on censorship practices has been

repeatedly observed. Further unwritten consensuses, likely to be associated with political risk, commercial confidentiality or simply cultural stigma, have also been noted (in Chapter 3). This led to questions about the opaque ways of conducting commercial negotiations, the non-transparent exercise of regulatory measures and, more problematically, the uncertain processes of policy making and delivering.

Focused on the issue of methodological specificity in cross-cultural research contexts, Shiraev and Levy (2016) have examined the process by which divergent attitudes and values of citizens and institutions are mediated into what Cui (2016) interprets as a collective social psychology characterised by social order and conformity. This ethnographic research seeks to explore the formulation of a collective socio-cultural discourse amid tensions and contentions between media participants. In doing so, it provides an opportunity to locate the dilemma in the policy toward China's audio-visual industries, given its primary aim of reconstructing China's contemporary mainstream identity and protecting social stability while at the same time holding out the promise of supporting a liberal cultural agenda to sustain economic growth. During my fieldwork experience, I noticed different language systems operating between the policy framework and professional media cultures when approaching debates around national discourse and global communication (to be discussed in Chapter 3). In the first field trip, my questions focused on the conventions and the standards of producing a contemporary national identity in the making of cultural content with national themes. The hypotheses were then tested by empirical evidence from the production, distribution and regulation sectors at central and local levels. In the second field trip, my research experience was connected to some of the wider debates in the international distribution and transnational collaboration of cultural production. I intended to draw upon divergent responses from the documentary sector to examine the current controversy surrounding the soft-power initiative, with regard to the exportation of China's cultural content.

Elements of convergence have influenced methodological thinking in institutional research. The rise of digital distribution has led to an increasingly unsettled broadcasting landscape, and this encourages the adaptation of ethnographic methods. The interplay between national broadcasters and streaming services has forced a rethinking of what participant observation means at an institutional level. The boundaries of production, distribution and consumption have become increasingly contested, which challenges the institutional perspective of participant observation. Having conducted a range of semi-structured interviews with participants in national broadcasting and in streaming services, my research involves analysing the shifting digital broadcasting culture. One needs to explore the complex interaction between media institutions and agents to arrive at an understanding of the digital production process. However, the key questions of 'ownership and control, political and other influence, social conflicts and the reproduction of consensual ideologies' (Schlesinger, 2016, p.22) are still at the heart of media and communication research. Chapter 3 will offer a methodological discussion on the adaptation of the ethnographic pedagogies during convergence.

1.3.2 Structure of the thesis

Developing from the tradition of media production research, which looks at the connection between media institutions and communication power, this thesis explores the shifting cultural politics in the contemporary Chinese broadcasting environment. By linking historical arguments on Chinese television with its regulation, this thesis aims to capture a key policy shift during a rapid transition period for China's broadcasting industries by drawing on empirical cases from the documentary production sector. The conceptual, theoretical and empirical frameworks of this thesis are unified by a recognition of the crucial importance of the contested values, actions, and ideologies of production culture.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework wherein this thesis is situated. It takes the historical debate around media power and its control as its starting point to investigate the ongoing discussion on the shifting power relations between political bodies, media institutions, and the audience in the public communicative space, and examines how the changing power structure shapes the consensus on, and causes contestation of, the representation of 'mainstream', or 'national' ideologies. Chapter 2 examines the policy struggles between a tightly regulated public broadcasting system and a market-oriented television industry, drawing on the conflict between the rise of the digital content industry and the cultivation role of public broadcasters in terms of their influence on the formulation of a national discourse. It focuses on China's current policy initiative of 'using traditional Chinese culture as an approach to upholding core socialist values' (President Xi Jinping, speech to 19th National People's Congress, *Xinhua News*, 2017, Section III.7) to evaluate the political and ideological role of broadcasters in contemporary socio-cultural contexts. Here, the analysis seeks to explain not only the internal policy goal of enhancing ideological coherence and maintaining social stability, but also the externally facing aspiration of nation branding to improve the country's global political engagement. In doing so, it considers the challenges facing China's national broadcasters and regulators, given the tensions growing between a recentralised media system and the fragmentation of digital cultural industries, and between rising nationalist views and a politico-economic need for global engagement.

Chapter 3 offers an account of the methodology. It draws on the fieldwork experience and what has come before and after it, with a particular focus on the evolving insider/outsider role of the researcher as being a former media professional who currently employs the ethnographic methods to observe the shifting industrial patterns. It also deals with the interpretation of language as well as silence related to the specificity and the complexity of political and cultural contexts in China's contemporary media industries. Primary data are gathered from semi-

structured interviews, participant observation and content analysis while empirical materials are supported by secondary data, including policy documents and legal papers. The collection of rich data contributes to my enquiries into the key areas of political control, media industrialisation during convergence, the diplomatic interests of national media in relation to nation branding and pragmatic concerns over censorship and regulatory transparency.

Chapter 4, 5, 6 and 7 are the main findings of my research. Chapter 4 examines the mechanism of control in media production, with a focus on the interplay between producers' self-censorship and the administrative measures taken by the state regulator, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). It tackles the issues of regulatory uncertainty in China's broadcasting sector. Firstly, it revisits the political impetus for enhancing media control by the establishment of a tightened digital regulatory regime. It examines the operation, and outcomes, of administrative and legislative measures by comparing the regulatory guidelines with how they are actually played out across both traditional and digital platforms. The gap between written policy guidelines and the private ways in which negotiations are conducted between media participants points to a lack of regulatory transparency. The absence of a rules-based legislative framework challenges the effective implementation of the present regulatory agenda.

Chapter 5 is a critique of how the cultural politics of media production and regulation has shifted in China's digital broadcasting industries and shapes the contemporary policy thinking at both national and international levels. It reflects on the ongoing dynamics of convergence in terms of its influence on both the content production sector and on the regulators, mapping out the shifting power relations between national broadcasters, streaming services and the audience. It then examines a policy shift toward the recentralisation of media regulation, related to the interplay between political control, the commercial imperative and the moral policing of

content. Finally, it looks into the rise of commercialisation in the media environment, with regard to the terms of negotiations on intellectual property rights (IPR) and the measurement of audience traffic as digital currency.

Chapter 6 explores the reimagination of a Chinese national identity through the mediation of cultural images and the attempt to internationalise China's cultural production. Here, the concept of reimagination is a collective process of 'imagining', anew, a Chinese identity that aims at overcoming ideological conflicts and maintaining social stability. This chapter seeks out the latest cases of cultural production from CGTN Documentary, with a focus on the international distribution of traditional cultural content. It underlines a conflict between promoting a collective identity and protecting the vitality of ideological contestations in the competitive international cultural sphere, which leads to questions about an 'inclusive' programming schedule in the pursuit of policy. Drawing on the emerging global communication initiative to promote China's soft power and improve its cultural projection globally, this chapter examines the contradictions between domestic and international cultural policy, bringing out the dilemma of national broadcasters in terms of enhancing the diplomatic role for nation branding.

Chapter 7 investigates the expansion of global distribution platforms for China's national cultural content. It examines recent co-production cases between China Central Television (CCTV) and its affiliate production institutions, and international media enterprises including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), National Geographic and Discovery. Here, it tries to connect China's ongoing international co-production regime with the wider issues of production politics in the global audio-visual marketplace. Comparing producers' views and actions, this chapter looks at the conflicts and compromises being made during the co-production process involving China's national broadcasters and international production

agencies, with regard to negotiations on editorial directions, IPR ownership, distribution rights and profits. It is followed by an assessment of the scope and limits of the international documentary festival in terms of its effectiveness as a global marketplace. It tackles the issues of policy constraints and market disadvantages of China's local production. Throughout the analysis, it focuses on the fiercely private ways of commercial negotiations, in approaching the problem of imbalanced privileges and ideological divisions.

The concluding chapter revisits the current struggles of China's cultural policy in the interconnected, competitive communicative space. In the introduction, this thesis seeks to explore how best to analyse the politico-economic and socio-cultural aim of China's broadcasting industries during digital globalisation. The conclusion focuses on two key aspects of the policy goals in mediating a collective cultural identity: to overcome ideological tensions and maintain social stability domestically, and to promote a national discourse globally to support the role of public diplomacy in state media. It places the examination of the politics of cultural production within the contestations over political control and commercial imperatives, party politics and civil cultural rights, national interests and global engagement. It argues that tensions emerge not only from a top-down production system whereby political intervention is increasingly on the agenda and commercial forces continue to expand in the digital audio-visual markets, but also from the government's response to regulation that underlines national interests while at the same time seeking to improve global influences and increase cultural trade.

Chapter 2 Conformity and contestation in cultural production

This chapter examines how national broadcasters and the regulators in China seek control of ideological coherence domestically and test their role in nation branding globally amid a broadcasting culture negotiating digitalisation and globalisation. It begins with an introduction to the discursive power of factual content and how media power and its control is exercised through negotiation between media institutions and agents in their interactions in the contemporary Chinese media spaces, where their collective imagining of a national discourse has been a means to reconcile competing elements of an ideological struggle. Section 2 examines the policy rationales and the outcomes of the digital regulatory regime under President Xi Jinping's 'cultural confidence' thesis that has been firmly on the policy agenda of the CCP since 2016. It focuses on the tension between the recentralisation of political power and the continuing growth of commercial forces, which is situated within the contested digital broadcasting culture. Section 3 reviews the political impetus toward the reinvention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012) in recomposing a contemporary national identity, associated with the policy's objective of enhancing ideological coherence and social stability, during the uncertain era of digital fragmentation, by the use of media power. It also questions how a mainstream cultural identity has been represented in cultural content, and whether this has shaped a public consensus around a national discourse. Section 4 reviews the interplay between China's policy aspiration for global engagement, in line with its soft-power initiative, and the protection of national interests that shape the framework of international cultural policy. It illustrates the tensions between the political imperative to enhance national cultural power through global communication, the commercial and socio-cultural need for transnational collaboration, and practical challenges that include a limited capacity for commercial production and a lack of international audience trust, which impedes the perception of legitimacy for China's international broadcasting network in the global cultural market.

2.1 Media power and its control in China

This thesis focuses on the production and regulation of factual content/documentaries with national themes in contemporary China, to explore the moment of transition in China's broadcasting policy since 2012, whereby national values are highlighted in cultural policy to achieve ideological coherence internally and enhance soft power externally. In exploring film genres and aesthetics, Plantinga defines documentaries by categorising the use of rhetoric and representation in non-fictional films (2015, p.105) – a characterisation that is much indebted to John Grierson's notion of the 'creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson and Hardy, 1966, p.13). For his part, Corner (2002) discusses the forms and functions of factual television when reconstructing socio-cultural elements reflected in televised content. Documentary, in his words, 'points essentially to a project of political and cultural modernism, predicated on quite specific contexts of mediation and of public and private experience' (2002, p.267).

Whilst cultural scholars often recognise the operation of factual content in reinterpreting and recreating complex realities to compose ideological messages, some film scholars, such as Ponech (2021) insist on clarifying the boundaries between non-fiction and cinematic artwork in terms of authorial intentions and actions taken behind cinematic representations (pp.1-2). Ponech tries to incorporate authors' objectives into part of the external reality of filmmaking to justify the impartiality of non-fictions, yet his scepticism about the objectivity of documentaries reaffirms the ideological power and social influence of factual narration.

In the debate about the nature of documentaries as a film genre, however, Carroll (2008) acknowledges the power of documentaries in constructing a narrative of complex realities, which leads to the exercise of ideological influences in shaping the cultural discourse in the public domain. The idea of narration's power is key to discussion of how the production and distribution of factual content plays its part in the recomposition of mainstream discourse. As

Van Dijk (2011) maintains in his conceptual analysis of discourse and ideology, 'what is being (de-)emphasised by these discursive means is of course ideologically relevant' (p.399). In China, the consensual formation of a mainstream identity is officially seen as contributing to ideological unity and social stability; and the current policy response to ideological fragmentation is to promote a consistent national discourse and curtail the potential for contestation. In analysing the rationales and outcomes of shifts in policy in the contemporary Chinese media environment, this thesis seeks to understand the relationship between cultural production and regulation, amid the interactions of media, society and the state in the public sphere.

This thesis interprets the areas of media control as two-fold: first, the media industry itself, within which it seeks to exert power through policy intervention, for instance, censorship; and second, the power of media to influence society. Radical theorists view power as a key factor in the ability of privileged actors to exercise control over 'the other' (Kumar, 2008; Herman and Chomsky, 2010; Van Dijk, 2011; Freedman, 2014), whilst the perspective of cultural politics understands the exercise of power as a means of negotiation through interactions between institutions and agents – a consensual 'power to' as opposed to 'power over' others (Foucault, 1971; Scannell et al., 1992; Guan, 2019; Zeng and Sparks, 2019). The recognition of media power as a concept that is constantly contested is key to any discussion of culture and power concerned with the transmission and reception of values and meanings in shaping societal behaviours (Scannell et al., 1992).

As Zhao (2008) argues, the state's policy response to digital fragmentation has been an increasing regulatory initiative to tighten its political control over digital media industries. According to Keane (2013), China's political authorities have sought to reinforce centralised control over national media in the cause of national and political security, given the intensity

of the global competition over cultural power since digitalisation. A recent example is the recentralisation of the regulatory bodies for film and television while another notable move in this regard is the restructuring of the Central Publicity Department. The CCP's leadership announced that the Central Publicity Department was taking over the roles of managing and supervising the production and distribution of films, conducting censorship exercises, and coordinating international co-production projects (*Xinhua News*, 2018).

Policy thinking on intervention also influences the measures taken in platform and content regulation. In 2016, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) announced the policy initiative of applying the same regulatory guidelines to both online and offline content (National People's Congress, 2016a: 1). Article 20 stipulates that '[f]ilms that have not obtained a film release permit must not be distributed or screened, must not be transmitted through the internet, telecommunications networks, radio and television networks or other information networks; and must not be made into audio-visual products' (National People's Congress, 2016a). The changes were effected through a politically controlled media system that offers certain space for negotiation, although currently the negotiating spaces for commercial and creative forces are closing fast.

It has been a global trend that digital convergence has impacted on how state power can be effectively exercised in the public communicative space through national media institutions (Hodkinson, 2016). Castells describes the increasing communication power of digital citizens in a networked society as the rise of 'mass self-communication', which provides opportunities for the convergence of mass media and the expansion of horizontal communication networks (2007, p.238). Established since the industrial age, the mass communication model is operated through a one-to-many method, whereby information travels one way. However, digital communication works in a many-to-many model: one that encourages interactivity and

audience participation. This challenges centralised media power in influencing public opinion and in shaping the mainstream ideology. To some extent, the growth of a bottom-up media consumption model has enabled what Napoli calls 'audience autonomy' in terms of the control over 'when, where, and how they consume the media', and also their increasing power to influence the production schedule and become content producers in their own right (2011, p.84). But, from a regulatory perspective, the expansion of the power of digital participants to influence the public discourse can also be problematic when it incites ideological conflicts and challenges social stability. In his examination of digital platforms and national politics in Indonesia, Tapsell (2017) explains how an empowerment of digital citizenship that challenges the entrenched elite power structure has, in effect, led to the formation of an antagonistic digital communication culture that feeds into an oligarchic control of media.

The top-down and bottom-up processes in media production, consumption and distribution take distinct approaches in framing the role of national media institutions: whilst the former underscores the broadcasters' role as cultivators (Gerbner et al., 1982; Morgan, 2012) in guiding the public discourse and governing the public sphere, the latter emphasises the active choices of individual participants in selecting cultural products as well as informing opinion about products. In China, party media hegemony has maintained control and domination through a centralised regulation system, while media participants including content providers and the audience, try to communicate changes in the digital media environment using a bottom-up approach. Since media governance seeks to valorise national interests as well as citizens' cultural rights, the regulatory regime has located a need to balance the coherence of a national discourse with the extent of ideological contestation in broadcasting activities.

Digitalisation sparks a new search for how to best analyse the relationship between the state and the media, as well as between national media and citizens and how these interactions shape

the form of political communication in a competitive media space. Since the last decade, the tensions arising from the changing shape of the digital public sphere have gained visibility in studies of media and political communication in China (Esarey and Xiao, 2011; Lei, 2011; Chin, 2012). Production research invokes questions about media ownership and control, public consensus on mainstream ideologies, and the governance of digital media networks. Studies of media and convergence should not deny the historical relevance of a mass communication model when concentrating on technical potentialities (Garnham, 2005). The structure and infrastructure of a nation's media are bound up with its basic political and social systems and are shaped by changing social relations and new ideological struggles. Despite the contentions of the digital revolution, the focus on media governance remains at the heart of policy debate around a national broadcasting system. To illustrate, Cornwall explains the changing relations between media institutions and digital audience as follows:

> From differences in the framing of needs as demands for rights, to changes in the way in which citizens regard the process of governance and their own competence as participants in it, small changes offer the prospect of greater effect. People who have never had anything to do with the processes of rule are being brought into areas of governance and are learning more about how they work, providing lessons that may stand them in good stead in other arenas. (2017, p.9)

Focusing on new struggles and experiments in cultural rights, power and citizen participation in a variety of nationally specific contexts, including the US, South Africa and Brazil, Cornwall's (2017) study engages with questions about representation, inclusion and political efficacy in terms of citizen and institution participation in the public sphere. In China, although non-governmental participants are involved in the public debate regarding political and socio-cultural affairs, the hegemonic political system of media governance has limited the extent to which they are able to negotiate policy changes. As Chin (2012) argues, China's national broadcasting policy has prioristised the pragmatic ends of securing social stability and

cohesion over individual cultural rights. Of course, with the prevalence of digital production and consumption, audience access to information has become increasingly dispersed and the centrality of national broadcasters has been challenged. This, in turn, challenges the role of national media institutions in mediating public discourse amid ideological contestations through what Gerbner et al. describe as 'the cultivation of shared conceptions of reality among otherwise diverse publics' (1986, p.19).

2.2 The digital regulatory regime

Whilst the rise of digital distribution has challenged the centrality of national broadcasters in mediating a national discourse through ideological tensions, the political initiative to recentralise communication power has increasingly been on the cultural policy agenda of the CCP and interventionism has become a feature of China's current cultural policy regime. This section reviews the historical debate over different models of media regulation and governance, situated in the context of an interconnected digital media environment. It examines the present debate on a centralised regulation model, considering how the tensions and conflicts arising from digitalisation and commercialisation are shaping the current regulatory need.

2.2.1 'Tight' versus 'loose' regulatory regimes

Despite the digital media culture being in transition, the questions over the regulatory regime remain about 'what kinds of state policy interventions are made and on whose behalf' (Tapsell, 2017, p.136). In this thesis, a tight regulatory regime emphasises abidance by political rules and social orders with a low tolerance of transgressive behaviours against ideological 'red lines', in contrast to a loose regime that allows flexibility in negotiating and carrying out regulatory practices. During Xi's administration, China's audio-visual sector has witnessed a constrained media environment characterised by a reduced negotiating space for political

bodies and media institutions. The political impetus to enhance media control has sought to redefine the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable for cultural production.

The Chinese broadcasting industry is a unique case for probing the ways in which the commercialisation of media industries has impacted on power relations. The struggle between public ownership of media institutions and the competitive forces from the commercial market is not dissimilar to Debrett's (2009) analysis of the dilemma facing public broadcasters in English-speaking countries. In Debrett's words, 'as they reconfigure themselves as media content companies, public service broadcasters enter new territory with regard to their audience, their content, their relations with producers and their status in the marketplace, invoking more exacting requirements for governance and accountability, and new commercial enemies' (2009, p.807). However, the political need for ideological control figures prominently in China's media regulation regime, which distinguishes the service remit of its national broadcasting system from the state-funded television networks in English-speaking countries, including the UK, the US and Australia.

Keane highlights the conflict between commercialisation of China's cultural sector and a political system that views culture as a public resource (2013, p.2). Media scholars across the world have been debating the political and ideological power of media that is in contradiction to the economic values attached to the concept of cultural/creative industries. Whilst some believe that the creative industries were an alternative to the more political and highly regulated cultural industries (Garnham, 2005; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005; Hong, 2014), others have reservations about the industrialisation of culture and its influence on ideological security (Zhang, 2011a; Tapsell, 2017; Meng, 2018). A socio-cultural inquiry into the contemporary digital regulatory regime begins with an examination of the hegemonic process of television production and consumption, established during the interplay between complex and sometimes

contradictory politico-economic initiatives. Extensive academic attention has been focused on the tensions between a state-controlled broadcasting system and the expansion of commercial media corporations during the course of marketisation. Intellectual debates on the organisation and operation of Chinese media centre on the balancing act between political control and the commercial imperative, which is seen as the main policy driver for reform of the cultural system (Zhang, 2011b). As in Hong's observation:

> Driven by state policies as well as decentralised market dynamics, corporate expansion as a movement is much more grandiose than the rebuilding of public service units. However, state intervention in the name of public service has proved indispensable for the headlong corporate reform in commercially successful sectors. (2014, pp.617-8)

Political intervention in cultural industries is associated with the regulation of market forces. Although China has never launched economic reforms with an ideological commitment to neoliberalism, as Zhao writes, 'the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics, have in many ways characterised China's post-1989 accelerated transition from a planned economy to a market economy' (2008, p.6). The influence of neoliberal ideas has sparked the search for an overarching lesson about the co-existence of state governmentality with economic development in China. The key principles of neoliberalism involve the loosening of government control, the application of market solutions to public goods, and the reiteration of greater 'freedom' for the private sector to drive innovation (Cunningham, 1996; Hendy 2013; Dean, 2014; Hodkinson, 2016). Despite technological innovation, the balancing act between the inherently antithetical political control and commercial imperative is still at the core of policy thinking. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 will explain the dilemma between tightening the political grip and unleashing market power in China's digital broadcasting scene.

The rise of digital media, associated with the marketisation movement in the cultural sector, has led to a search for a recalibration of state power versus economic growth. Considering the increasing commercial and ideological competition in the digital arena, the trend for neoliberal policies entails the risk of dismantling the public-service media system. The ideological commitment to neoliberalism, which is associated with deregulation and free-market policies, has gained certain visibility in the UK since the 1980s and has prevailed in developed countries (Dean, 2014). The dilemma between the policy of intervention and deregulation lies in what Cunningham describes as the choice between a tightly controlled state-run or heavily regulated broadcasting system and market-driven systems more concerned with the commercial mechanisms of maximising audiences and advertising revenue (1996, p.29). In Hodkinson's words, digitalisation and media convergence have 'offered the perfect partner for neo-liberal voices because, by bringing spectrum scarcity to an end, they created the technical possibility for an open marketplace' (2016, p.153). The interactive digital consumption model, characterised by the proliferation of entertainment content, poses new challenges for national broadcasters and the regulators in fitting the model developed for broadcasting to the internet.

An interventionist policy framework, by contrast, questions the media industry's reliance on market solutions for allocating goods and services and resorts to a regulated public broadcasting system that reinforces the power of state institutions. Taking the UK's public service broadcasting system as an example, as Moran has explained (2001), despite the shifting institutional regulation in both the public and private sectors, the regulatory state has developed from an earlier form of intervention to put more weight on self-regulation and social regulation. In the contemporary Chinese broadcasting industries, the emphasis on enhancing self-censorship and platform regulation is increasingly on the policy agenda. The rise of the regulatory state is driven by the political imperative to arrive at a certain level of ideological

coherence and maintain social order in addressing the potential conflict between political stability and divergent political, commercial, and socio-cultural needs in the digital era.

As Meng suggests, central cultural bodies endeavour to contain the 'antithetical relationship between the authoritarian state and market-oriented media', but conflicts continue to arise between the state's aim of controlling communication and the combined force of commercial media and digital technology (2018, p.25). In China, the marketisation of public media institutions began in the 1980s. As a policy intervention, the cultural system of reform with a focus on commercialisation came to prominence during the 1990s. But it was not until 2002 when the division between public service institutions and commercial enterprises was first made clear. The 16th Party Congress used the term 'public cultural undertakings' to distinguish national media from commercial cultural enterprises (*China Daily*, 2002). The CCP emphasised the need for market reform and encouraged a mixed-ownership model, which provides opportunities for the growth of market forces. Even national broadcasters were encouraged to follow the market's signals. This resulted in the proliferation of entertainment products in the audio-visual industries. However, market principles are at odds with a top-down broadcasting model. Commercialisation challenges the concentration of media power in a hegemonic system and its control over ideological influences in the digital broadcasting sector. Changes brought about by digitalisation and marketisation have put the political function of national media under strain. To retain ideological coherence and enhance social stability, government bodies seek to exercise ideological control of the national media, which is very often seen as an expedient to accommodate the antithetical power of political authoritarianism to the market economy. In Zhang Xiaoling's words:

> They [the government] explicitly set the political boundary for the media industry and help to sustain the propaganda and mouthpiece role of Chinese media, against the background of

the fast-developing market economy in China, which is constantly pulling all sectors of Chinese society, including the media, to the opposite direction. (2011a, p.197)

In Zhang's analysis, national broadcasters are seen as instruments to sustain ideological unity, amid inherent tensions in the contemporary regulatory regime, between the opposing dynamics of political control and market economy. As discussed, the digital production and consumption model that has led to a shift in the power dynamics in hegemonic state-society relations, serves as the premise for discussing ideological representations. In what is to follow, this thesis seeks to unpack the changing role of media regulation and to take into account the insights of media politics in exploring the process of cultural production and regulation, focusing on the negotiation between media institutions and agents.

2.2.2 The changing role of media regulation

Over the past decade, fundamental changes have taken place in China's society, shaping the perceptions of the country's television industry. Digital convergence due to technological innovation leads to questions about the role of national broadcasting systems in continuously cultivating a mainstream discourse following official lines developed from the CCP's contemporary ideologies. In the meantime, new and unfolding areas in the global audio-visual marketplace lead to a rewriting of how national media institutions can exercise their communication power through television networks to improve the country's cultural projection globally, while contestations between Chinese and international media participants escalate during the intensification of cultural wars in the contested communicative space.

In China, cultural policy has both economic and socio-cultural objectives while the political responsibilities in cultural production are increasingly emphasised through a more centralised regulatory model. The political aim of ideological coherence and social stability has informed cultural policy in China's digital cultural industries (Meng, 2018). Yang (2014) has observed

a revival of ideological focus in contemporary regulatory thinking that seeks to combine government-driven enforcement of party ideology with the mobilisation of laws, as well as civil society organisations and individual internet participants. This approach, situated in the media landscape where digital platforms challenge the perceived trustworthiness of national broadcasters' cultural output, underscores the political desire to use televised content to facilitate the construction of a mainstream discourse via the absorption of divergent ideological current (Gerbner et al., 1986, p.8). But how does a centralised broadcasting model regulate the dispersal of ideological dimensions in a contested cultural scene, and what kind of policy adaptations are necessary for a digitalised, globally interconnected media landscape? This is the problem I seek to address in this thesis, in which I focus on how media power and its control is played out through complex negotiations between media participants in cultural production.

The idea that a certain level of ideological coherence is essential for the sustainability of the public sphere has been widely accepted in China's policy regime. This is especially relevant in an increasingly competitive global audio-visual marketplace that allows the co-existence of a national discourse and the dispersal of individual value systems in the public sphere. As discussed, the policy thinking on media regulation is primarily concerned with the complex nature of media institutions: in Iosifidis' words, 'the media are located in civil society but operate in the marketplace, and meanwhile are linked to state institutions' (2011, p.13). In recent years, tensions between political culture and commercial logic have been negotiated in the formulation of a mainstream media culture in China's cultural industries, while at the same time professional and consumer sub-cultures are seeking to expand the boundaries of what can be publicly represented as mainstream. Beyond the dichotomy of a state-controlled media system versus the market-oriented cultural industries, which dominates the policy framing in English-speaking countries, the ideological struggle facing China's contemporary cultural industries entail more complex dynamics. They include tensions found in the recentralisation

of media power against the need for individual expression in the public space; the political imperative to enhance social order amid the vitality of contestations; and rising nationalist views despite the urge for global collaboration.

The Chinese government has increasingly realised the limitation of a de-centralised national broadcasting system in maintaining ideological order in the public sphere. Whilst the plurality of voices in the digital space seems greater than in traditional broadcasting, unregulated content distribution may risk consequences including the overflow of misinformation and citizens' mistrust of public media. This is particularly important during global cultural trends whereby increasing ideological division has undermined the authority of national media. The spread of fake news and hate speech on social media are typical examples of this trend (D'Ancona, 2017). Tapsell's study articulates some of the consequences of Indonesia loosening its media regulations in the course of its digital revolution, including the concentration of media power in the hands of oligarchs who 'use mainstream industrial media to push their individual political agendas' (2017, p.25). The prominence of a loose regulatory framework increases the complexity of ideological conflict in the public sphere and entails higher risks for the growth of antagonistic views that incite the wars of opposing ideals and ideas through which groups use their strategic influence to promote their interests in the public domain.

Recently, the argument for regulation and control of the media has again appeared in policy discussions around the world, representing a countervailing trend among prominent cultural industry movements. In his analysis of the policy practices taken up by the EU and the UK audio-visual industries, Schlesinger (2017) interrogates the dominance of the market-oriented creative economy in policy discussions and argues for a rethinking of the interventive measures taken to regulate digital cultural spaces. Interrogating alternative definitions of cultural industries of different models of cultural production, Throsby (2008) argues that policy makers

should not interpret cultural policy as a sell-out to neoliberal economics, but rather see the political purpose of media regulation as an obligation to deliver on the artistic and socio-cultural values of the creative industries and fit these non-market values into the macroeconomy. The cultural industry policy concerns, associated with the evolution of the communication networks, share the common ground that culture can be produced, consumed and commodified (Throsby, 1994). The socio-cultural argument for government intervention in television production worldwide precedes the regulatory thinking of commercial broadcasting systems and has become increasingly relevant to the digital cultural sectors.

Given the complex ideological dynamics in contemporary Chinese society, however, the regulatory thinking on media power and its control is not only about regulating the increasing forces of commercialisation and consumerism, but also to deal with issues of ideological fragmentation in competitive communicative spaces, both at home and abroad. As in Gerbner's long-neglected argument (1986), the cultivation function of televised content is to modify mainstream images in the media to achieve a certain extent of conformity amid the contestation of divergent value systems. Gerbner's model was developed in US society when the television network with a national reach was able to exercise its ideological power over a mass audience, yet this approach is surprisingly pertinent to the contemporary Chinese media industries, where the consensual formulation of a mainstream discourse remains a policy pursuit and the regulation of media production seeks to mediate the ways in which ideological contestations are played out in the public sphere. But tensions have become more explicit between China's domestic cultural policy and the rise of the soft-power initiative that is associated with its growing political aspiration to use national media as an instrument for nation branding (to be discussed in Chapter 6 and 7). Chin (2017) argues that the local diversity of cultural politics and the complex interactions between local, national and global media play a key part in shaping China's media policy. Considering the ideological struggles at local, national, and

international levels, the regulatory regime needs to be situated in the interconnected, competitive, global cultural sphere.

2.3 The politics of national identity

This section examines the shifting cultural politics in the production of national cultural content, with a focus on the role of national broadcasters in mediating a national cultural identity. It begins with a critique of the cultural confidence thesis developed since 2016, which draws tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national culture and enjoins national media to cultivate ideological conformity in the contested public sphere. It examines how the present policy intervention seeks to manage the tensions between political control and market imperatives while dealing with social conflicts emerging in the public communicative space. It tackles the notion of cultural 'inclusiveness' as questionable, considering its mediation of cultural production and cultural symbols, and investigates the representations of mainstream cultural images with regard to the current discourse around the cultural approach towards national unity.

2.3.1 National cultural identity: The glue that holds 'us' together

In the past decade, the proliferation of national cultural content in China exemplifies a political attempt to influence and maintain a collective cultural identity, in accordance with the values of a contemporary national discourse. In an increasingly competitive cultural sphere, the state, media institutions and audiences in China are renegotiating a collective national cultural identity to overcome ideological tensions and enhance social stability. Yet, despite the seeming centrality of national storytelling, an understanding of its complex and dynamic role within the power dimensions of media production remains rather limited. Contemporary Chinese cultural policy tends to use traditional culture as an approach to promoting national unity. In President Xi Jinping's words:

> At present, the situation in the ideological area is very complex, and the task to consolidate the ideological and cultural battlefield, and safeguarding national cultural security, have become ever more pressing; against the background of ideological dynamism, the clash of ideas and the merging of culture, many problems exist in the area of literature and art, including distorted values, impetuousness and vulgarity, the supremacy of entertainment, and over-marketisation. (Speech to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 2015, I.2)

Advocating to bring traditional culture back on to the production agenda is tied in with maintaining ideological unity. As Hobsbawm and Ranger argue (2012), although the instilling of 'traditions' tends to imply continuity with the past, this can be constructed by a set of deliberate decisions that focus on inculcating values and norms of behaviours. A modern invention of what Li (2015) describes as 'new Confucianism' (p.78) is an example of the ideological doctrines taken to reconnect China's past civilisation with the present social order. According to Li, the resurgence of Confucian discourses in the public domain started in 1980s is an approach advocated by socio-cultural scholars to deal with the pressure for social and political change (2015, p,80). Although Li makes no reference to a thematic analysis of national discourse, his approach to the collective consumption of mediated communication has been underlined by media and culture scholars. In her analysis of narrative construction of national identity through audio-visual products in the case of contemporary Danish cinema, Hjort argues that 'themes of nation are topical, rather than perennial, and involve a process of marking and flagging that distinguishes them from instances of banal nationalism' (2000, p.301).

The contemporary composition of China's cultural narrative refers to the shared traditions and cultural heritage that existed long before any state-party/party-state debate. Developed from the European context in the first half of the 18th century, Leerssen describes the concept of romantic nationalism as 'the celebration of the nation (defined by its language, history, and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalisation of

that expression in ways of raising the political consciousness' (2013, p.9). President Xi Jinping's cultural confidence statement has prompted discussions on contemporary cultural identity in the media. Cao wrote in the *Global Times*, an affiliate newspaper under the *People's Daily*, that Xi urges artists and writers to 'create excellent works to inspire the nation with greater confidence in Chinese culture' (2016). Xie wrote in *South China Morning Post* (a Hong Kong-based English-language newspaper owned by Alibaba Group) that the president 'puts culture [and] heritage at heart of his Chinese dream' (2020). This seemingly depoliticised view of culture is about finding a contemporary resonance with ancient Chinese history and civilisation and, therefore, carefully avoids the ideological divisions found in the public sphere. This shows policy attempts at 'nation-building and creating a sense of solidarity based on national unity' (Gorfinkel, 2018, p.213).

The recomposition of a national identity seeks to retain the centrality of the national media in a contested digital cultural scene. As Castells wrote, 'while coercion is an essential form of exercising power, persuasion is an even more decisive practice to influence people's behaviour' (2010, p.83). A top-down national broadcasting system, having once conquered the national market, is now having difficulties using its powers of persuasion to influence the value system of citizens in order to better integrate them into the established social order. The digital content market has impacted on the outcomes of intra-national propaganda in terms of communication effects. This has led to a policy rethink on new ways to exercise political control over media institutions and to sustain the ideological influence of national media in line with the official national discourse. The policy of using traditional culture as an approach offers an opportunity to put together a contemporary cultural narrative that has mass appeal (Friedman, 1992; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). The goal of promoting cultural content, an alternative to propagandistic content, is to improve 'unsatisfactory' audience engagement in the official national discourse.

The collective cultural identity being constructed focuses on, and glorifies, a particular range of cultural productions with the underlying motive being a kind of conservative restoration. The national media's goal of achieving the greatest communication power demands that 'most of its messages follow conventional social morality' (Gerbner et al., 1986, p.8). The national cultural discourse is made up of the rhetoric and assumptions of national culture, civilisation and the nation in order to enhance a shared awareness of unity. Schlesinger's (1991) foundational narratives on media, state and the nation include a rationale for the reimagining of a collective cultural identity: in analysing a construct of the European identity that obscures the reality of contending identities within the European cultural space, he underlines tensions between an imposed singular identity, the critique of its assumptions and the policy governance of actual diversity. According to Morley and Robins (2002), the European broadcasting agenda has a cultural dimension, closely attached to improving mutual knowledge among European peoples and increasing their consciousness of a common identity (p.3). The restructuring of cultural spaces, however, which are characterised by global networks and an international arena where information flows, has reconfigured how policy makers, academics and the public understand community identities and cultural boundaries in new forms of regional and local activity (Morley and Robins, 2002).

The discussion on forming a contemporary Chinese national identity has sparked new sorts of debate over the mainstream cultural images of cultural output. Tensions arise between the collective reimagining of an inclusive identity shared by 'a people' and the divergent socio-cultural formations that challenge the belief in homogeneity. Gellner (1987) has underlined the inherent contradiction between what he calls 'advanced agrarian-based civilisation' and 'growth-oriented industrial society': whereas the former deploys great cultural diversity to mark out politico-economic situations, the latter is strongly impelled towards cultural homogeneity, with continuous modification of political and cultural boundaries (p.18). In

examining the mechanisms of media regulation and control, Chapter 5 will explore the boundaries around which cultural images are deemed as 'mainstream' and which are marginalised in current media production. Currently, policy makers link national values to the representation of mainstream culture, contributing to political initiatives for maintaining ideological coherence. China's public service law lists the policy goals as:

> strengthening the development of the public cultural service system, enriching the spiritual and cultural life of the people, passing on the excellent traditional Chinese culture, advocating the socialist core values, boosting cultural confidence, promoting the prosperity and development of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, and improving the civilisation and quality of the whole nation. (National People's Congress, 2016b)

The legal definition of public cultural services in China is concerned with ideological consistency and social stability. This, again, is in conformity with the ideas of cultivation theory of reconstructing the mainstream by putting together collective values (Gerbner et al., 1982). The mediation of national values in China's digital cultural scene illuminates moments in the history of cultivation thinking, when mainstream ideologies were needed to enhance social security. Gerbner's theory of media as the cultural cultivator, to which Morgan refers as the pursuit of 'organised diversity' (2012), is developed from an era of military conflict and social instability. The intensity of contemporary cultural conflicts, whether in China's domestic public sphere or the global cultural space, makes the policy pursuit of a coherent national discourse particularly resonant at the present time. The policy emphasis of 'a relative commonality of outlooks and values' (Gerbner, 1982, p.104) indicates the resurgence of a dominant mainstream current that counters ideological fragmentation. The formation of a legitimate national discourse is achieved by the promotion of a collective cultural identity in the contemporary cultural narrative.

Questions around the ideological function of a national discourse are not new, but the resurgence of a collective national identity developed from Chinese ancient history and civilisation is a distinctive trend in China's contemporary media environment. Whilst media institutions have adopted the cultural approach in mediating the national discourse, it is worth contemplating how a collective identity and individual identities are reconciled and close ranks in forming a national discourse. The process of mediation is determined by the institutional structure of Chinese media and is driven by rapidly shifting power dynamics in digital media culture, both domestically and globally.

2.3.2 The politics of recognition

In his analysis of political discourse and national identity in Scotland, Leith suggests that 'in making distinctions, boundaries are created that indicate difference, boundaries which are, at some level of realisation, exclusive' (2012, p.70). Recently, China's national media have adopted the concept of 'an inclusive national broadcasting system' representing a national audience, as an alternative to the previously dominant notion of 'the mainstream'. This reaffirms the media priority to contain ideological tensions and enhance ideological conformity during uncertain times, but also leads to questions about the inclusion/exclusion of multiple cultural images, and about what can be publicly represented as national.

This thesis interprets the discourse around the politics of recognition as being continually negotiated by a range of political, commercial, and socio-cultural forces in the public communicative space, rather than as a fixed concept either within the dichotomy of repression/resistance or in equilibrium. Luhmann (2000) maintains that the 'operational constructivism' of mass media is based on producers' mediation of the representation of cultural texts linked with reality, in order to modify the divisions of the plurality of social subjects. The use of cultural images in public media influences the audience's recognition of a

cultural identity. In the UK and in European media contexts, for instance, the emphasis has been on 'the need for recognition of, and sensitivity towards, cultural difference' (Morley and Robins, 2002, p.179). In comparison, the discourse around identity and recognition in the contemporary Chinese media focuses on depictions of national pride, unity and social progress of the nation (Gorfinkel, 2018). The different approaches taken in the construction of audience perceptions of contemporary society reveal a struggle to negotiate the priorities of different social groups. As in Schlesinger's words, the public consensus on national culture is not a given:

> The national culture is a repository, *inter alia*, of classificatory systems. It allows 'us' to define ourselves against 'them' understood as those beyond the boundaries of the nation. It may also reproduce distinctions between 'us' and 'them' at the intra-national level, in line with the internal structure of social divisions and relations of power and domination. (1991, p.174)

The perception of 'us versus them' is fundamentally about the privileges and struggles of divergent social groups and their values as depicted in the public media. Contestations between 'central' and 'peripheral' cultural groups have long been key to discussion about their struggles and demands for recognition, which are linked to the need to be included in the political agenda, and the reaffirmation of individual and group identities in the public discourse (Taylor, 1994). The policy claim of inclusiveness is merely a normative goal, as participation in mediated cultural production has always been contested. In fact, media advocacy of an inclusive production agenda is essentially concerned with the ways in which cultural divisions are captured in audio-visual content. Media firms play an important role in constructing a national identity by making choices about 'which elements to include as part of the definition of "us" and which to exclude as representative of some "other"' (Gorfinkel, 2018, p.1). The mediation of cultural symbols focuses on 'who gets to participate in mediated communication, how they represent themselves or are being represented, and how such participation and representation feeds back into inclusions or exclusions in the lifeworld' (Meng, 2018, p.16).

Meng observes that China's national media have intended to 'plaster over the ideological disjunction' and to contain challenges to national ideologies in the digital era (2018, p.180). Contemporary cultural policy in China seems to have drawn tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national culture. By promoting a national cultural identity, national media production has been avoiding the depiction of social conflicts and political struggles among the complex composition of ethnic and socio-cultural groups of a nation (Meng, 2018). The policy decision to focus on ideological cohesion reflected in an 'inclusive' broadcasting agenda serves the political initiative to recentralise media power (which will be discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). The current mainstream media discourse is seen as a replication of the official discourse around collective memory and cultural history and, therefore, avoids the illustration of tensions and divisions among social groups (Chin, 2017). The current policy of the national broadcasting agenda has been criticised for imposing a confirmatory narrative of unity and harmony but which seems intended to marginalise alternatives in the public space, rather than facilitate vital, ongoing, ideological contestations along lines of class, gender, region, ethnicity, and so forth (Freedman, 2014).

In dealing with the conflict between a national ideology and the complexities of divergent social values and ideologies, the newly invented, inclusive, media agenda aims at increasing the visibility of the official discourse in line with party ideologies and to prioritise political interests (Zhao, 2008; Zhang, 2011a). The outcome, so the argument goes, is that media cultivation shapes how the national culture is composed in the public discourse (Gerbner et al., 1986), devaluating or excluding some group identities while privileging others (Livingstone, 2005). British cultural studies have demonstrated 'how culture came to constitute distinct forms of identity and group membership' (Kellner, 2011, p.8). In Kellner's words:

> For cultural studies, media culture provides the materials for constructing views of the world, behaviour and even identities. Those who uncritically follow the dictates of media culture

tend to ‘mainstream’ themselves, conforming to the dominant fashion, values, and behaviour. (2011, p.8)

This shows the effects of the collective imagination on the national discourse, which is co-created by media institutions, political bodies and ‘the public’. At the same time, however, the consensus around mainstream ideologies is continually contested. Shifting power dynamics in the digital communicative space, for instance, driven by commercial interests and creative autonomy, constantly unsettle established parameters in the hegemonic production system. In their analysis of the cases of self-regulation in television production, Zeng and Sparks contend that, despite the central control exercised by the state regulator, there is room for negotiations and bargaining between producers and officials of political bodies, especially local government (2019, p.65). The creation of a national cultural image is, therefore, often a result of a compromise between the political leadership, the media institutions and public opinion.

2.4 Nation branding and global communication

This section focuses on the international distribution of China’s cultural products in respect of its policy goal of nation branding. It begins with an analysis on the emerging initiative to promote China’s national cultural content into the international marketplace, in exploring the relations between a re-centralised cultural production agenda, and the diplomatic role of China’s international broadcasting network. It reviews the contemporary debate around soft power and examines escalating tensions between the protection of national interests and the commercial and socio-cultural need for global collaboration.

2.4.1 The cultural approach to nation branding

Located in the global cultural marketplace, Anholt (2010) reminded us that entry into the metaphorical concept of ‘nation branding’ means stepping into the key assumptions that lie behind the competition between contending power forces in the cultural domain (p.1). This

view underlines the fundamental importance of states' intervention in mediating the 'public opinion' at an international level, especially in facilitating what Fan called 'nation image management': a process by which a nation's images are created and monitored 'in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience' (2010, p.101). China's contemporary policy initiative of recomposing a national identity is concerned with not only the cultivation of a national audience to overcome ideological conflict, but also with the increasing diplomatic impetus to use state media as a means for nation branding. The ongoing debate around 'soft power' and nation building amid the changing geo-political environment have, again, linked media power with public diplomacy. As the rise of streaming services has substantially internationalised available cultural products and services, the development of China's international broadcasting agenda in relation to the country's soft power initiative is best understood as taking place in a globally competitive context.

Nye coined the concept of soft power as the ability of a country to affect others, using its resources of culture, values, and policies to obtain outcomes in its interest through attraction rather than coercion (2008). The diplomatic role of national media is associated with the nation's soft-power initiative, which seeks to use co-optive power to replace the military force (hard power) in the protection of national interests (Nye, 1990). Developed during the post-World War II era, the smart power strategy using media as a means for public diplomacy has found new life in the competition for cultural and political power in an interconnected global cultural sphere. Nye's conception of soft power is bound up with persuasion and diplomacy:

> If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change. If it can support institutions that make other states wish to channel or limit their activities in ways the dominant state prefers, it may be spared the costly exercise of coercive or hard power. (Nye, 1990, p.167)

Since the 21st century, the pursuit of soft power has been more overt in China's foreign policy. The combination of cultural production and the soft-power initiative first appeared in the policy agenda in 2007 (17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China). *China Daily*, the official newspaper, summarised the policy goal as aiming to 'enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests' (2007, p.1). Subsequently, the State Council put forward policy measures to 'encourage cultural enterprises under various ownerships to engage in the foreign cultural trade business' (2014); and to 'support the key content' with national themes (listed in the National Cultural Export Key Projects Catalogue). The policy emphasis on a cultural approach has prompted industry interest in integrating the commercial production practices with nation branding. The global expansion of China's international media network is an example of the growing need for cultural exportation. As Meng has noted:

> CCTV now has over 70 foreign bureaux, broadcasting to 171 countries and regions in six UN official languages. China Radio International (CRI), the world's second-largest radio station after the BBC, broadcasts in 64 languages from 32 foreign bureaux, reaching 90 radio stations worldwide. In April 2009, the People's Daily Press Group launched an English version of *Global Times*, and in February 2013 a US edition was added to the portfolio. (2018, p.42)

For East Asian countries, the policy endeavours of developing cultural power can be seen as attempting to challenge the imbalanced way in which cultural influences are transferred in the global cultural sphere, which tends to enable the ideological dominance of political superpowers (Straubhaar, 1991, p.43). In the 1970s, Varis examined how audience size is measured in cultural consumption activities based on quantitative data generated from market research of television viewers, and his research revealed the extent of the US dominance in international cultural goods trade (1984). Taking a qualitative approach, Liebes and Katz's research (1986) on the international audience reception of the US television products

underscores audience selectivity in terms of how viewers may engage themselves with, or distance themselves from, the media flow. The national acceptance of, and tastes in, foreign television content differ significantly from one place to another. Despite the increasing connectivity of digital platforms, the tendency toward a concentration of big-exporting countries continues to grow in international television production, distribution, and consumption in the global cultural sphere.

The exportation of Asian cultural products challenges the entrenched notions of the 'culturally proximate' reading and seeks to influence the watching habits of English-speaking communication (Mirrlees, 2013). Television content can be assessed as 'customary', depending on 'the common rules that a group uses for judging appropriate and inappropriate values, attitudes, and behaviours' (Mirrlees, 2013, p.9). A large body of literature has adopted the cultural discount argument to explain the questions of international audience tastes, cultural preferences and media consumption patterns from particular cultural-linguistic audience groups (Wang, 2008; Fu, 2013; Gillespie and Webb; 2013; Gorfinkel, 2018). The mediation of cultural symbols must overcome linguistic barriers and the cultural specificity that defines audience tastes for cultural products (Fu, 2013). According to Keane et al., 'while the Western global program may be the vehicle of transfer, the important dynamic occurs within East Asian regional cultures where modification is based on cultural compatibility factors' (2007, p.8).

Yecies et al. (2016) have examined how East Asian media flows transform through a variety of contemporary international collaborations, before integrating themselves with the global audio-visual networks to exercise their impact on the interconnected cultural spaces. The cross-border consumption of Japanese and Korean cultural products in East Asia showcases a phenomenon of how culturally specific content may travel in the global cultural marketplace and integrate with local culture (Lee, 2011). For example, Japan's 'pop-culture diplomacy'

seeks to use a one-way projection of national culture to engage cross-border dialogue, in order to soften anti-Japan perceptions in the post-war era, particularly in Southeast Asia (Iwabuchi, 2015). In the case of the Korean Wave, as Han (2017) explains, based on his work in the audio-visual market of Latin America, Korean drama has transformed into a popular cultural form in the international cultural sphere via digital networks, initially branded as a subculture, and this gradually results in its accommodation in the mainstream current in the integrated global audio-visual marketplace.

The international promotion of national cultural content usually involves the simplification and popularising of cultural symbols in order to highlight cultural compatibility. To arrive at an intended outcome of cultural influences beyond their own territory, national broadcasters are desperate to forge 'a global conversation' in the transnational communication space (Tong and Mackay, 2013, p.230). Currently, the Chinese broadcasting network's solution to the cultural dilemma is to put together universally understood cultural symbols to create a 'non-threatening and non-confrontational' national image (Zhang, 2011b, p.72). However, tensions arise between the political need for nation branding and the limited effects of the ongoing narrative around traditional cultural symbols that the media are trying to sell.

The effects of nation branding are limited by a lack of commercial production capacity of China's broadcasting industry, which is associated with increasing political constraints on the editorial orientations. In comparison to entertainment content produced by Japan and Korea, Peng and Keane (2019) describe the limited potential for popularisation of China's traditional cultural symbols as the critical shortcoming in the exercise of soft power. Zhang (2011b) suggests that China's government leaders have designed CCTV overseas platforms as a foreign propaganda instrument with the goal of enhancing the country's global influence. The political constraints and restrictive ideological orientations have put strains on the programming agenda

of the international broadcasting agency, and the pressure for the broadcasters increases when foreign audience begin to question the credibility of a state-led, global, government-controlled broadcasting network. In Wang's words:

> China shows great interest in public diplomacy and has clearly set its sights on learning how to promote Chinese soft power and express itself positively to the world. Ironically, the world, for its part, has now broadened its concern over the rise of China to focus on its mounting soft, as well as hard, power. (2008, p.258)

The political restrictions and market limitations of China's international broadcasting network mark a notable shift in the institutions' approach toward national storytelling and the techniques of integrating the traditional cultural symbols in international production. China's international broadcasting institutions try to take detours to avoid ideological confrontations in the global cultural sphere, in terms of how the diplomatic initiatives are interpreted in the cultural production agenda (Zhang, 2011b). Melissen (2011) argues that Asian countries put more weight on cultural relations in the conception of soft power, as the shared values are highlighted in association with multilateral approaches and regional roles – a view which evolves from Nye's (1990) account of soft power as focusing on attraction and persuasion. In Melissen's words, soft power 'fits East Asia like a glove' (2011, p. 249), which means that although Asian countries tend to frame the notion of soft power as part of their public diplomacy initiatives, they rarely resort to the power of persuasion in managing international relations and dealing with potential collisions. The challenges facing China's international broadcasting network entail the complex and sometimes contradictory needs of political assertion, commercial collaboration and creative engagement. This thesis explores how China's international broadcasting network seeks to transfer national themes into the international audio-visual marketplace, considering the gap between China's domestic production capacity and the consumption patterns of international audience.

2.4.2 Broadcasting policy beyond national boundaries

As Morley and Robins maintain, the changing role of media production in building national identities can been seen as 'a reflection of the forces of globalisation that are overcoming national boundaries, undermining national states, and, it is said, creating a new kind of global civil society' (2002, p. 184). The process of negotiating cultural boundaries, according to Lipschutz (1992), 'represents an ongoing project of civil society to reconstruct, re-imagine, or re-map world politics' (p.391) and, therefore, it is best to be understood in a networked, competitive global cultural sphere. However, interactions between the political and commercial forces in shaping international broadcasting policies reveal the dilemma between pursuing an essentially interest-driven government practice and the promise of moving beyond the national interest to support a greater good through dialogue and cultural collaboration (Ang et al., 2015). For the Chinese government and media institutions, improving the country's cultural projection in a global arena is crucial, while the tensions caused by the political imperative of nation branding and the pragmatic constraints in the international cultural sphere remain pressing issues for its international broadcasting policy.

The idea of communicating a national identity to the world is central to any discussion about media production and regulation taking place in the contested global cultural sphere. The renegotiation of group identities in the global communicative space is played out among continuing interaction between different ethnicities, nationalities, religions and beliefs. Almost four decades ago, in the context of a modernised 'western' world, Habachi (1983) argued that any discussion of cultural values should focus on man and his culture comprised of complex social relations, rather than defining human civilisation through technological innovation. The struggles over values, social norms and ideologies are not to be dismissed as 'an irrelevant absurdity over against the weight of science and its technological extrapolations' (Habachi, 1983, p.37). Essentially, the (re)production of a group identity is achieved through drawing

(emphasising) ideological boundaries. Castells (2010) has attributed the intensification of tensions between national institutions and a mass audience to the rise of an interactive communication model that has allowed citizens more decisive participation in political communication. The shift from an institutionally led public sphere to fragmented communication spaces means new methods to analyse the current condition of China's cultural industries and the policy approach to ideological unity. In China's public domain, as Esarey and Xiao (2011) argue, digital technologies allow the media to challenge the established mainstream ideologies and shape the ongoing discourse around the society's recognition of culture and its values, although the power of media institutions and digital citizens in initiating socio-political movements has been curtailed by an increasingly restrictive regulatory model.

Since 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been advocating for an inclusive agenda focused on cultural diversity among conflicts of national and ideological interests. Its Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) states that '[t]he cultural wealth of the world is its diversity in dialogue', and the United Nations agency writes diversity, pluralism and inclusiveness into part of its ethos (UNESCO, 2002, p.62). Here, UNESCO's argument for cultural diversity reveals an institutional approach to addressing the challenge of accounting for the protection of national sovereignty and the underlying contestations of cultural values when dealing with issues of cultural exchanges between social groups and communities in a globally interconnected public sphere. Traditional iterations of cultural diversity enable us to compare how the regulatory rules are evolving in response to new technology and changing public perceptions of the contemporary ideological struggles.

According to Habermas, the state adopts either a defensive or a cosmopolitan rhetoric to meet the need for self-legitimation in terms of its capacity for action and the stability of

collective identities (2018 [2002]). The cosmopolitan view Habermas held is developed from his earlier studies on post-war German society, in which he sought a reaffirmation of a legitimate collective identity that transcended national borders during the course of social reproduction (1996). However, this view has been criticised for its claim that the dismantling of national boundaries in cultural production and regulation may override the limitations of nation-state boundaries. Focused on a sociological paradigm, Beck (2011) argues that the universalist option of a world without borders is barely the solution to global inequality – unless it succeeded in reconciling the conflict between imagined national communities and the preservation of national sovereignty to their very core. The study of media globalisation, according to Waisbord, 'assumes the centrality of the global processes and downplays local and national developments that are marginally linked to world trends' (2013, p.133). Given the intensity of international competition for political and cultural power, Flew et al. contend that a transnational regulatory model is problematic in its representation of the general public of a nation and that 'states retain a central role in the growth and institutionalisation of global governance' (2016, p.10).

The current struggles of regulating the national broadcasting system are to be understood in the context of a networked, contested global public sphere (Iosifidis, 2011; Schlesinger, 2020). Habermas's later work (2008) on networks and the public sphere integrates the reproduction of communicative actions into the replication of communicative spaces, through a mediated process in what Beck (2006) describes as a 'reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions' (p.3). In examining the constitutive process of a transnational communication network, Habermas (2008) portrays the public sphere as an interrelated system that potentially transcends geo-political boundaries, and as shifting from local and national communities to a co-presence with global participation that are linked by digital communication platforms. The ideal of an open national regulatory regime is one

that allows media connectivity and citizen engagement to negotiate an inclusive national identity, although the struggles between the ideal of national unity and actual ideological divergences may reduce the public space for the full engagement of citizens in political communication (Schlesinger, 2020).

The imagination of homogeneity is problematic without recognising the continuing negotiation between divergent political and cultural groups beyond national boundaries. In Ang et al.'s words, '[n]ation-states are still the primary actors in the international political arena, but their sovereign status has been steadily eroded by globalising forces which have heightened the transnational – and often disjunctive – flows of people, products, media, technology and money' (2015, p.371). With a focus on the relations between political configuration of nation states and the conception of intra-national and transnational public spheres (in the EU context), Fossum and Schlesinger (2007) question the limitation of a federal conception of the public sphere that presupposes a collective approach to national discourse but instead tends to provoke nationalist opposition among states. Despite 'a cosmopolitan temptation' toward an overlapping public communicative space, Schlesinger (2007, p.422) criticises how entrenched power dimensions among EU institutions have tied the public communication agenda closer to a mediated political discourse surrounding citizenship, collective identity and constitutional patriotism.

Much recent debate has associated the rise of nationalist ideologies with the retreat of globalisation. The resurgence of nationalist ideologies during the past decade has sparked a rethinking on the limitations of the present global discourse. Wodak critiques a position based on cultural and linguistic nationalism, in which domestic, foreign, and party politics unite in order to defend national interests (2009). As Wodak writes, 'in spite of an ever more connected and globalised world – more borders and walls are being constructed to define nation-states

and protect them from dangers, both alleged and real' (2017, p.403). The interpretation of cultural diplomacy as part of cultural relations (Melissen, 2011) reflects the eminent capacity of national governments to represent and define the scope of national interest (Ang et al., 2015). A divisive narrative portrays the contemporary global cultural sphere as permeated by modern great-power rivalry, which is associated with national cultural policies in their most aggressive form (Brands, 2018). The exaggeration of ideological divisions across the political spectrum may incite intense cultural wars and contribute to what Dean (2014) sees as 'an identifiable but heterogeneous militant movement seeking to influence and appropriate the powers of national and international organisations' (p.160).

The contemporary challenges of mediating ideological conflict in the global, cultural arena need to be reconciled in an integrated media regulation model that deals with the contradictions of multicultural values and national strategic interests. The balance of relationships between nations, national media institutions and citizens is sought within the rapidly shifting national, cultural policies in international broadcasting and cultural diplomacy. Struggles over global communication reside in a model that constructs ideological conflict, and in how best to analyse the tensions between the policy aim of nation building and the divergent needs of the global cultural marketplace.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 took as its starting point a historical discussion on how media power and its control plays out through constant negotiations between the state, media institutions and the public. It has highlighted the debates around the classic mass communication model and the disruptive effects posed by digital broadcasting culture, with a focus on the diminishing centrality of national media and the expansive dimensions of ideological conflict at national and international levels. This opens up to discuss debates over a tightly regulated public media

system and a market-oriented audio-visual industry. Whilst a neoliberal approach associated with the growth of cultural industries has taken a new form in the digital marketplace, interventionism is increasingly on China's policy agenda. This thesis situates the evolving policy discourse around the digital regulatory regime within the interplay between political control, commercial imperatives, and creative interests in the changing media landscape.

This chapter has examined the collective reimagining of a contemporary national discourse concerning China's culture and the projection of its national identity, as well as examining the policy initiative of nation branding in the context of global competition for political and cultural power. At an intra-national level, the recomposition of a collective identity integrates China's traditional culture with contemporary national storytelling, seeking to represent not only the perceived mainstream audience, but also the nation and its civilisation. This thesis takes the mediation of political and socio-cultural identities as questionable, with regard to collectivist views of the 'public' and the 'mainstream' that avoid depictions of the struggles between national media, state power, economic growth and citizen cultural rights. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 will demonstrate how the changing representation of a national discourse is associated with the recentralisation of media power and contributes to the political imperative of ideological coherence and social stability.

In examining the current policy shift toward nation branding, this chapter has explored the rationales and the outcomes of China's soft-power initiative in dealing with the tensions between national projection, cultural relations and global engagement. Since the cultural projection of China has become increasingly important to the party and the state, China's international broadcasting policy has sought to balance the strategic interests of public diplomacy and the commercial needs of the global audience market in order to achieve a certain extent of perceived legitimacy. In locating the contested global cultural sphere, this chapter has

reviewed the ongoing debate around a cosmopolitan view of global communication and the resurgence of a national regulation agenda. It argues that the struggles between nation branding and the continuing pursuit of global collaboration are to be analysed in the digitalised and transnational cultural arena through the exercise of redrawing cultural boundaries amid ideological conflicts and compromises between nation-states, media institutions and the audience. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 will explore the current national imageries, manifest in China's international broadcasting agenda, in relation to the pragmatic constraints of limited commercial production capacity and international audience needs.

Chapter 3
Methodology: The insider-outsider in production research

This chapter examines the methodology of the research, focused on my experience of undertaking production research in the shifting policy environment in China. It reflects on the fieldwork conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Suzhou in 2019, and considers how the role of the researcher has been negotiated throughout the project. Section 1 situates the ethnographic tradition in the context of a contested broadcasting industry in the course of digital globalisation, where tensions begin to emerge between the hegemony found in China's broadcasting system and in the diversity of views, actions and ideologies found in the cultural production sector. This section explores the value of an ethnographic approach to investigate the complex politico-economic and socio-cultural power at play in China's audio-visual industries. It explains the research design and methods used in collecting primary and secondary data, including semi-structured and open-ended interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Section 2 is a reflection on how to mitigate the effects of the role of a researcher who is, simultaneously, an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. It not only recognises the benefits of the researcher's former experiences as a content and platform manager of Chinese nationality, it also demonstrates the tensions between this insider position and the critical distance required in approaching material for a productive conceptual analysis. It leads to a re-evaluation of some of the norms that were taken uncritically as representing the 'mainstream' in current broadcasting. Situated in the globally interconnected cultural space, it also draws on the multilingual and multicultural contexts that invite new methodological thinking, especially with regard to the cross-cultural question of how to interpret not only language, but also silence.

3.1 Practising ethnography during convergence

This section revisits the scope and the aim of this research – an exploration of the changing power dimensions in a media environment shaped by the discourse of digital convergence and global communication. It highlights the need to situate the tradition of production research in the context of digital globalisation. It then introduces research methods for data collection and explains how this research has been designed to address the diversity of values and ideologies in the contemporary Chinese cultural scene.

3.1.1 Exploring the power dimensions

This ethnographic research project began in October 2018 and has been carried out in China and the UK. In analysing the shifting power dynamics of the documentary production sectors, it aims to capture the moment of a policy transition in China's contemporary broadcasting industry. Before taking on this doctoral project, I worked as an account executive in the Publicis Groupe (a multinational marketing and communications company; senior member of the American Association of Advertising Agencies) and my job responsibilities involved the management of media products and commercial clients across analogue and digital platforms. Throughout interactions with a range of production companies, broadcasters, government bodies, advertisers and audiences, I was intrigued by the conflicts and contestations emerging from the changing landscape of production, distribution and regulation in the digital content industries. The earlier industry experience gave me the opportunity to understand the complex negotiation process between the producers with national broadcasters and streaming services. My networking resources and empirical knowledge also contributed to the quality of data that became available in the fieldwork, especially regarding the divergent actions and views found in professional sub-cultures.

To understand the fluidity of a production culture at a particular time, an ethnographic perspective looks into production practices and the values, actions, and discourses generated

from written and unwritten communications by creative workers. This research project seeks to explicate the power dimension of contemporary cultural industries while revealing the gap between policy agenda and its actual performance. It explores the present formation of the conflicts shaped by diverse rules and ideological sub-systems developed from all sorts of institutional politics. An ethnographic approach allows the attainment of the conceptual distance needed to give a full picture of the shifting power dimensions of China's contemporary broadcasting industry. This qualitative research uses participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews, and document analysis as its main research methods for data collection. This empirical evidence will be integrated with theoretical and analytical materials to produce what Paterson et al. describe as 'a picture of the production culture: its common languages, practices, and frameworks for understanding' (2016, p.11).

Despite momentous changes in the digitalised and globalised media landscape, questions of politics, power and ownership remain at the heart of the cultural industries (Schlesinger, 2016). Whilst the researcher has been involved in China's media production sectors for a decade, this PhD project represents a first step toward the professional use of ethnographic research. This thesis deals with the challenges emerging from the complex power relations within China's broadcasting industries, which are characterised by their co-existence with a centralised model of political control and by the flexible, uncertain, culture of 'room for negotiation'. The concept of politics used here is about more than understanding political rhetoric in the public sphere – a concept foregrounded in the research agenda of political communication – it also concerns the present formation of the communicative space and the shifting power structure within that space. This consensual imagination in the public sphere allows the interplay of public and private negotiations, whereby they can influence public debate.

Again, the ethnographic tradition highlighted here needs to be situated in the context of an interconnected digital cultural sphere. Drawing on the shifting power relations in China's broadcasting industries during the process of convergence, this thesis aims to test mass communication theories in the new conditions arising in China's broadcasting industries. A movement for digital ethnography has grown from the study of news production. The proposal of a 'second wave' of media ethnography (Cottle, 2000, p.19) has tried to draw a distinction between the traditional and the more contemporary investigations of media sociology, taking into account the significant developments in both research topics and conceptual frameworks. Certainly, digital transformation in the broadcasting industries has radically altered the politico-economic and socio-cultural contexts in which discussions on power relations between media participants are situated. Insofar as ideological contestation and the mediation process remain at the core of public media, however, the debate around privileges and divisions in production research is still key to the understanding of cultural policy around creativity, communication and cultural values.

The emphasis on cross-sectoral experiences is not a deviation from what Slaatta describes as 'a sense of unity across the division of labour between researchers focusing on production, content and reception' (2016, p.95). Instead, the ethnographic approach is ideal for finding blind spots within the cultural sectors, with a view to approaching the full picture of interconnected power dimensions. Taking the ethnographic approach, this research considers the shifting balance between national broadcasters, streaming services, the audience and the regulators in China's cultural production sectors, in order to analyse the challenges facing cultural producers and the policy dilemmas around in implementing a rules-based regulatory regime.

In China, the new conditions for media production, distribution and consumption have challenged the construction of a hegemonic media system. The digital communication model takes the shape of a top-down media production structure that allows constant negotiation between a variety of forces (Zhang, 2011a), whilst the national broadcasting system has been increasingly displaced from its centrality. From a methodological point of view, fragmentation in the digital sector requires a rethinking of the scope of fieldwork and of the key questions regarding media production and regulation to be addressed in the research questions and interviews. For instance, one can no longer ignore the approach taken in the audience marketplace by streaming services in the discussion of public broadcasting networks. An investigation of how national broadcasters and streaming services see the present challenges differently, and canvass their solutions in various ways, may be useful to reveal the tensions between political, commercial and creative forces in the digital broadcasting scene.

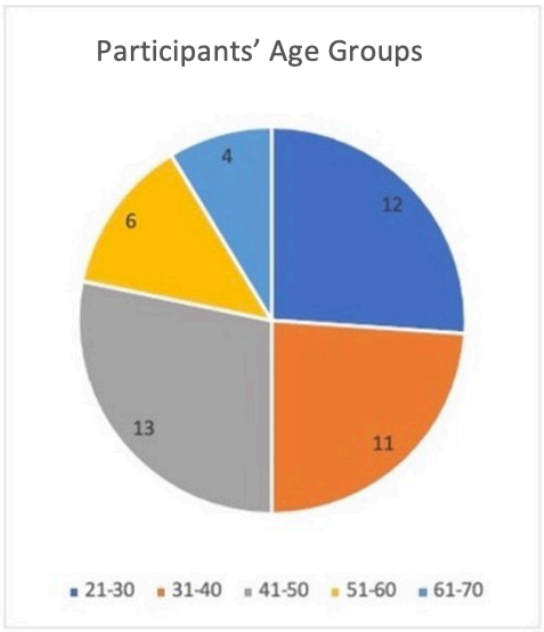
At the beginning of this PhD project, research on production, as a methodological framework developed from sociology and social studies, had just started to gain visibility in studies on media and communication in China's intellectual space. The recognition of changing political patterns as part of the main influence on cultural policy agenda has been absent in an otherwise diverse range of research on television production and convergence. The rarity of research into the cultural politics of media in China, as this thesis suggests, is due to uncertainty in the policy framing and implementation, associated with a range of production cultures manifest in the public and private negotiation of power. This means that it is impossible to develop an overarching model that applies equally to central and local, traditional and digital broadcasting networks, owing to a rapidly shifting political and socio-cultural climate, difficulty in gaining industrial access and, of course, the issues of political sensitivity. In Keane's analysis of the formulation of China's broadcasting policy, he has identified 'a different mode of political participation in which the balance shifts towards interpretation of

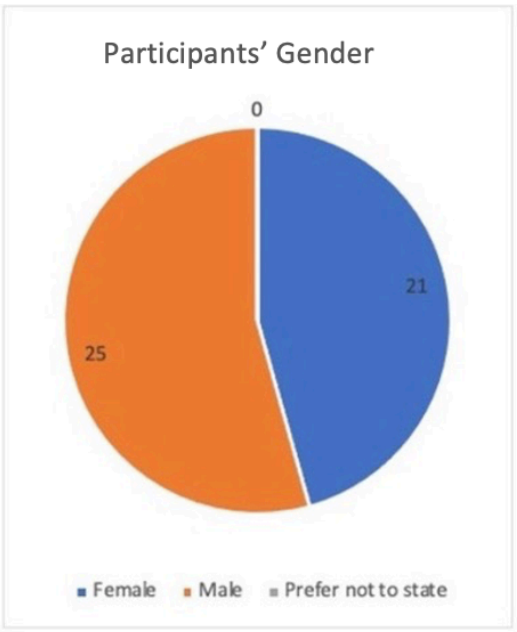
policy' (2001, p.783). The values of ethnographic studies are not about making overarching arguments regarding the established power structure but, rather, they are about investigating changes and movements, through what Goodall describes as 'the historical, methodological, and theoretical arguments, debates, and dialogues that have shaped the rhetorical and narrative commonplaces' in scholarly and professional literatures (2000, p.15).

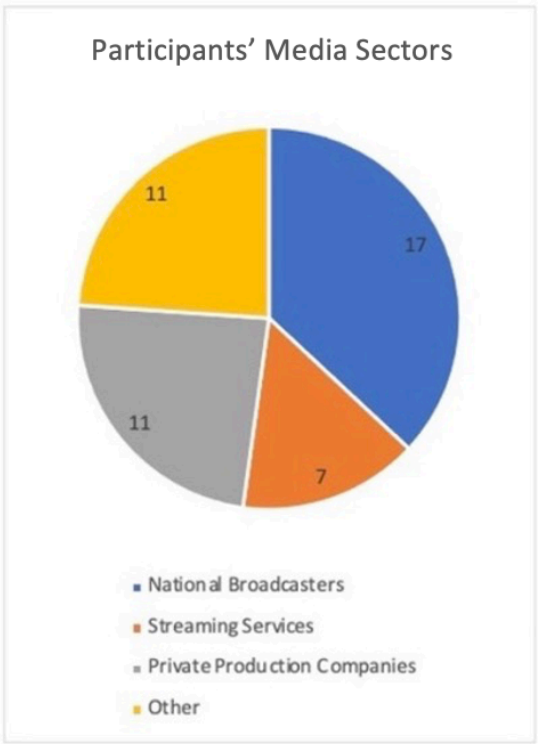
3.1.2 Constructing diversity in data collection

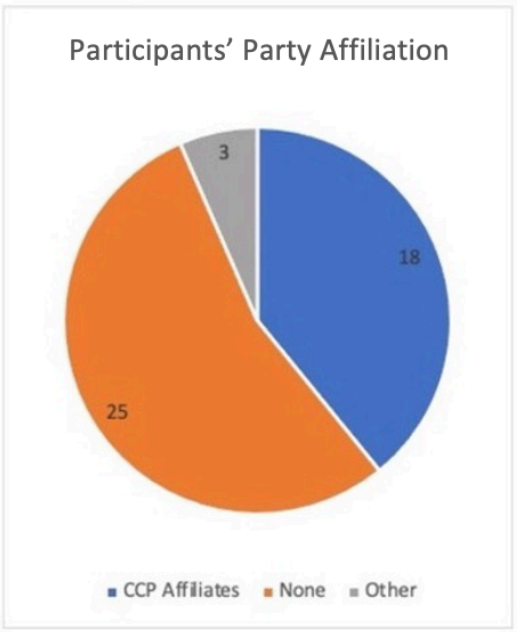
During fieldwork in China and the UK in 2019, 46 semi-structured and unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with cultural producers about the ongoing challenges facing China's broadcasting sector and different solutions taken by media institutions. The sample includes 30 interviewees who took part in semi-structured interviews and 16 more informal interviews. A diverse sample was used, with a balance between gender, type of platform and experience (Figure 1). In the first field trip, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with 16 participants in Shanghai and Suzhou. The participants were documentary directors, producers, and distributors equipped with a high degree of knowledge and experiences of the industry with national broadcasters, streaming services and production companies. In the second field trip, I conducted 14 one-to-one interviews with major documentary directors, managers of production companies and decision makers at public broadcasters. In addition to the formal semi-structured interviews, I approached the participants with the aim of discussing specific topics and framed successive questions according to the informants' previous response. In-depth qualitative interviews carried out in the second field trip covered a number of key lines with empirical evidence in extensive detail. The participants offered valuable insights into the ongoing challenges and different solutions being sought in China's cultural sector, while also bringing out the complexity of power relations in the industry.

Figure 1: Participants' Demographics









In this project, the data collection process aims to explore tensions between a professional culture in transition, the predominant political and commercial thinking within the industry, and new challenges brought about by digital globalisation. The research takes on empirical case studies of national broadcasting networks, including China Central Television (CCTV) Documentary, China Global Television Network (CGTN), and Shanghai Media Group (SMG)

production projects – focused tightly on the recomposition of a national discourse in the digital broadcasting environment. A variety of qualitative data composed of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis reveal the ways in which privileges and struggles are negotiated and reconstructed in an interconnected, competitive digital cultural sphere. The emphasis on diversity regarding participants' age, gender, professional status and political position contributed to achieving a data set that demonstrates the variety and complexity of views, values and actions in China's changing media landscape. The volume of qualitative data generated from the fieldwork, supported by revealing empirical examples provided by participants, as well as by direct observation in interviews, helps in critically analysing the conflict between media participants' positions and the dilemmas facing China's broadcasting industries in the era of digital globalisation.

The key methods used in the data collection process were as follows:

- **Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow 'the conversational quality' (Munnik, 2016, p.154) that illustrates the complexity of power dynamics. In examining the ongoing policy shift in China, the focus on in-depth discussions of the understanding within the industry of the key challenges it faces, both from a politico-economic and socio-cultural perspective, offers critical insights into the analysis of the broadcasting culture in transition. To make the most of media producers' experiences and for the conversations to be relevant, I spent considerable time and effort on desk-familiarising myself with the professional achievements of my interviewees. Before going into interviews, I studied their work in TV production and prepared interview notes accordingly. Individual notes were made in order to link interview questions to the interviewee's background, work experience and main productions. This helped to clarify some contextual questions in light of the participant's key roles and job

responsibilities and facilitated an in-depth interview process. Whilst facilitating a degree of openness in the interview, the notes also helped to allow a discourse of depth and quality during interviews. Interview questions were tailored to each director, producer and distributor. The understanding of the participants and their production cultures also improved their confidence in my research practices.

An interview guide was designed to help facilitate qualitative conversation rather than restrict it. The interview guide (Appendix III) sets out interview questions in four sections. Section A provides a set of warm-up questions that leads to discussion of participants' background and experiences in documentary making. It allows information about their demographic status, including educational attainment, job title, party affiliation and the media sector they work in. Sections B, C and D focus on the three major areas identified in the initial research proposal. Section B takes the form of discussion around traditional cultures and national identity in the context of international co-production and the global distribution of Chinese cultural content. Section C addresses tensions between the agendas of public and private production, with a particular focus on the ongoing reform of Chinese national broadcasting. Section D highlights the implications of policy intervention, with regard to the changing policy regimes of public funding and content regulation. The open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews allows space for participants to express diverse opinions, attitudes and behaviour, as they have 'a great deal of leeway in how to reply' (Bryman, 2012, p.470). Based on the interview guide, a variety of direct, probing and specifying questions were to be raised accordingly, depending on participants' responses in interviews.

I continually monitored the interview process, its positive outcomes, emerging issues and recurring themes and topics, which were recorded in fieldwork reports. Extended discussions on media, culture and society led to a number of key questions – for example, the challenges

and strategies of Chinese national broadcasters, the negotiation and execution of the trade in IPR (intellectual property rights) among media organisations and institutions, and the impact on factual content production of government funding and content regulation. Important themes and topics were highlighted concerning the political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of the cultural industry. These include national identity versus cultural globalisation, commercialisation and identifying attributes of public service and their implications for policy intervention.

- **Document analysis**

The collection and critical analysis of policy documents, along with the qualitative data from fieldwork interviews and participant observation, may help to reveal a process of interaction between cultural policy and the industries. As my research focuses on the contemporary Chinese audio-visual sector, analysis of published policy papers provided an overview of the transformation of China's cultural industries and illustrated emerging trends in the intersection of cultural production and politico-economic reform of public institutions. Careful reading of public and in-house policy papers added meaning to what was said or left unsaid by participants regarding, for example, the mechanism of content censorship and platform regulation. In the study of the transnational distribution of China's cultural products, document analysis has played a significant part in examining shifting policy trends related to IPR issues and new rules established for international co-production. In addition to the policy paper currently in force, the investigation of archival documentation, including legislation, administrative regulations and departmental rules, offered a historical account of cultural policy and revealed a rapidly shifting policy trend over the past decade.

The policy documents covered in this research illustrate the contradictory political and commercial needs growing within the industry, through a process of reassessing and

questioning various assumptions about the structure of the contemporary Chinese broadcasting industry. The majority of policy documents included in this research were public documents issued by government officials, for example, legislative and administrative papers issued by the State Council, the Supreme People's Court, and the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) – the state regulator for the broadcasting sector. Sources include laws and regulations, departmental rules and judicial interpretations, local regulations and local government rules, group provisions and industry provisions promulgated by government bodies and legal authorities, which were accessed through official government websites. Some of the legislation, regulations and government reports on cultural sectors have been translated into English by law firms whereas others are published only in Mandarin (quotes in Mandarin are translated into English when presented in the thesis). The review of legal documents shaped specific areas of inquiry, including into the development of the online content regulatory regime and IPR legislation. In addition to policy documents, this research also looked at financial reports of production cases. For instance, the annual financial reports of iQIYI, the streaming service, which is available in the public domain, illustrate the changing pattern of corporate incomes and revenue streams. This quantitative data can be seen as a supplement to the analysis of qualitative data, demonstrating industry trends.

- **GZDOC Film Festival and case study**

In December 2019, I attended Guangzhou International Film Festival (GZDOC) as part of my fieldwork designation. There, I focused on the positioning of the documentary industry in an interconnected, competitive global cultural sphere. Knowing my interest in documentaries, my thesis supervisors recommended the festival as an opportunity to broaden my ethnographic experience. As a result, exchanges with industry figures not only contributed to interview opportunities with key participants, but also helped develop my questions about international

co-production and sales of Chinese product. The resultant collection of data was beyond expectation and allowed questions to be asked concerning the internationalisation of China's cultural production and the challenges facing China's global communication aims in relation to the embedded political initiative of nation branding.

My ethnographic experiences at the festival also offered the opportunity for micro-level case studies that integrate empirical evidence with conceptual analysis. In Slaatta's words, 'the linear thinking in early models has been repudiated, but ideas of connectivity are underlying most media research' (2016, p.95). Here he points to new and emerging areas in production research that deal with the conflicts and interactions of media participants in the international audio-visual market. Using a field analytical approach, I looked at co-production cases between CCTV and international media agencies, including the BBC, Discovery and the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK). I also investigated the programming agenda of CGTN from an institutional perspective. The case studies on international co-production projects from the festival, supported by empirical evidence drawn from interviews and participant observation, contribute to an analysis of tensions and contentions within the international audio-visual marketplace, for instance, between national and international production companies, audiences and government bodies.

The complexity of interaction of media participants involved in co-production, how they interact both in the public space and privately, reflects challenges in using the festival as a model to analyse the shifting power dimensions in media spaces. A difficult question in dealing with co-production cases is whether the international broadcasting scene represents a total reinvention of the industry's landscape or is simply an extension of the national broadcasting system in China. The notion of the receptive audience, for instance, is completely different from what we have been imagining about China's domestic audience. Certainly, one cannot

discuss the changing negotiating space without considering the top-down broadcasting model in China, but the contentions between politico-economic and socio-cultural forces taking place in the international production environment have shaped the interpretive lens of the country's global communication agenda. Focusing on the gap between China's domestic production environment and the need for cultural exportation, this thesis explores the challenges and opportunities facing China's national broadcasting sector in light of the various political, commercial and professional initiatives.

3.2 The insider-outsider: Observing the industry

This section reflects on the researcher's identity as being simultaneously an ethnographic observer and a former content producer. The dynamic insider-outsider role of the researcher shapes the process of gaining industry access, engaging participants' trust and renegotiating the critical stance. In reflecting on the methodological challenges posed by the rapidly shifting media landscape, this section offers an account of the measures taken in conducting ethnographic research during the process of digital globalisation, focused on the negotiation of research contexts in relation to the researcher's critical position.

3.2.1 Managing the insider/outsider's position

In their discussion of the transformation, methods and politics of production research, Paterson et al. (2016) underline the value of ethnographic studies in employing the researcher's personal experiences as an asset to develop the conversation, but they also draw on concerns over keeping a critical distance in conducting social studies in media sub-cultures with which there are personal connections. This researcher's identity as a former media professional would inevitably influence the level of critical scrutiny needed to interrogate assumptions regarding production activities (Munnik, 2016, p.154) and policies that aim to legitimise or regulate some of the dominant practices within the industry. As happens in ethnographic research, my

perception of my own identity as a researcher changed – from seeing myself as an insider to recognising the fluid insider/outsider role of being both a participant and also an observer of the industry.

During my two field trips in China, the television networks and production companies gave me generous access over a short period of time allowing immersive participant observation and interview opportunities. It took some time before I understood the relationship between researchers and the cultural industries as one characterised by constant change and progress. A researcher's identity is not static, but 'subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation through interaction between researcher and research participants as the research process proceeds' (Cui, 2015, p.356). In her reflective article, Ke Cui, a Chinese sociologist, points to the weight of interpersonal relationships in China's social culture being significant (2015), which increases the difficulties in researching individuals' accounts and their connections with other industry participants across media networks. The renegotiation of the researcher's position is certainly shared with other loci, but the sensitivity and ambiguity entailed in addressing socio-cultural and political relations make it difficult to question the current policy regime and articulate any critique of cultural politics in China's media sector.

According to Bruun, media production studies, especially when qualitative interview methods are deployed, may engage with elite informants that are 'professional media content producers with a direct access to the public sphere' (2016, p.133). The process of gaining access to 'exclusive informants' (often interpreted as 'cultural elites') is usually challenging, and elite interviews, when access is granted, can be fickle and unstable (Bruun, 2016). Reflecting on my interview process, it is not uncommon that media professionals, especially those who work with national broadcasters, tend to view researchers as intruders. The limited access to production sectors inevitably increases entry barriers for 'outsiders' such as, for instance,

media researchers who are less familiar with the norms and practices of production subcultures and therefore, inevitably, networking and personal connections play an important role for ethnographic researchers in gaining access.

My previous experiences as a media content producer have been useful for gaining access to the production sector and for recruiting participants. Moreover, my industry knowledge and experiences provided me with the language of media professionals. In preparing for field work, I evaluated my former industry contacts, sizing up the scope of the sample to which I have access. Prior to my first field trip, I lined up 35 potential interviewees, based on predictions of their accessibility and informativeness. I shortlisted 15 producers who specialise in the production and distribution of national documentary content. The list contains directors, producers and distributors within the documentary sector in China, with a balance of age, gender, educational status, work experience, and sectors. In the meantime, I also listed the institutions invested in making traditional cultural content. These include national broadcasters of various reach – central (CCTV), provincial (SMG), and local (Suzhou Television Station) – and major streaming services, including Youku, iQIYI, Tencent and Bilibili. The emphasis on the diversity of participants supported the research aim of illustrating socio-cultural tensions in the digital media landscape. It also helped map out the transformation of television culture in China, especially with regard to the shifting balance between national broadcasters and streaming services during digital convergence.

Chance, admittedly, played a role in the recruitment of my participants. I started off by interviewing what Mayer calls ‘workers below the line’ (2011) before trying to get access to executive producers and managers of media institutions that are seen as representing higher authority levels. Between March 16 and April 6, 2019, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews with 16 interviewees. I began with open-ended interviews with junior producers who have had

experiences similar to those of early-career media professionals such as myself. As stated earlier in this chapter, my previous experience as an account executive in a media corporation was helpful in exploring the range of public/private, government/industry, producer/audience relations. The initial interviews led to further opportunities to speak with senior producers and higher-level executives. For example, through a connection with the marketing director of Tencent, I got the opportunity to interview Wang, an executive producer with SMG, who has a shared interest in cultural content with national themes. His experience working in national broadcasters and his work in China's arts, culture and drama made him an important contributor to my empirical research. For another, thanks to one of my previous industry contacts, Han, SMG's co-founder, I got access to Youku's Vice Chief Executive, Gan. This 'snowballing' method, using the industry's networks, expanded interview opportunities to include elite figures who added depth to my data collection. Reflecting on the process of how the sample group was recruited, my former industry contacts can be seen as intermediaries between myself, as researcher, and new participants in my research, including executive producers and managers. The effectiveness of this private communication reaffirmed the highly 'networked' nature of the industry.

I attribute the successful recruitment of a variety of participants to my knowledge of China's media culture. Whilst interpersonal skills may contribute to establishing initial contact, the professional knowledge gained from my work experiences has been critical to maintaining the trust of participants. Due to similar situations being experienced with the industry's culture, I have a shared knowledge of the language system with my participants – not only in the linguistic sense (although Mandarin is essential to effective communication in China) but also in terms of having familiarity with the cultural politics of the professional circle. My background in the industry facilitated the interview process, whereby the researcher needs to engage with participants and guide them through the conversation. My first field trip

contributed greatly to the consistency of the qualitative data I collected, which can be attributed to a good understanding of socio-cultural norms in China, as well as to knowing the professional language of the Chinese broadcasting industries.

3.2.2 Renegotiating the researcher's locus

However, the researcher's role needs to be re-negotiated through what Schlesinger has described as a process of 'captivation and disengagement' (1981, p.353). As Schlesinger suggests, it is typical for ethnographic researchers to become highly immersed in corporate ideology, before they manage to gradually retreat from the process (1981, p.353). In retrospect, maintaining a critical stance was a challenge for me in regard to the fieldwork, because of my dual role as a researcher and as a former media professional. My previous knowledge of the industry also created an inevitable observational bias toward its professional subcultures inasmuch as I tended to regard the values, actions and concerns shared by cultural workers as self-evident. This affected my conceptualising framework for considering how the dynamics around these values and actions operated and evolved. Moreover, my cultural, educational and professional background made it difficult for me to be detached from the production industries' values and arrive at the critical distance necessary for conceptual analysis of the empirical data. Some key lines had already emerged from my fieldwork observation, but it was not until the later phase of data analysis that I realised the implications of these elements. For example, participants' preference for certain expressions and, very often, for silence, suggested the private ways in which negotiations are carried out across cultural sectors. For instance, a number of interviewees preferred the use of vague descriptions in attending to a discussion they consider politically sensitive. This is mostly evident in conversations about the ways in which censorship is negotiated between the production sector and the regulator, and where alternative phrases such as 'content regulation practices' are carefully used instead of 'media censorship'.

In my methodological thinking, I highlighted the need to bring out the changing power dimension of China's national broadcasting system, which not only deals with the complex needs of its domestic audience, but also tries to attend to the agenda of global cultural networks amid intense competition. To reveal the digital broadcasting culture in transition, observation of research participants from national broadcasters of diverse reach was essential for a reliable assessment of the changes and consistency of the hegemonic broadcasting model and for how they are coping with the challenges related to international distribution. To this end, I decided to carry out a second field trip, where I encountered the co-production team from CCTV and BBC Studios.

Renegotiation of the researcher's position regarding the institutional, theoretical and methodological context is not to be considered an inconsistency of approach to the ethnographic method. Instead, the development of a critical approach is to be examined through a reflective perspective – the status of negotiation informs the analytical object and, therefore, contributes to research results. The second fieldwork trip focused on external-oriented aspects of China's media industries and seeks to analyse tensions and contentions in the international audio-visual marketplace in relation to the policy initiative of nation branding. As discussed, issues related to national identity, public service broadcasting, and media power cannot only be located in the broadcasting environment within national borders but, rather, they are to be examined in an interconnected communicative space characterised by transnational cultural production and cross-border media flows. The cultural specificity of China's cultural industries and the international relevance of cultural production are to be reconciled in a globalised, multi-cultural research context. This researcher's locus during the second fieldwork influenced how methodological challenges and solutions are understood in an internationalised media landscape.

My second field trip was between December 6, 2019, and January 21, 2020. The data from this trip comprises much more dynamic ethnographic experience in terms of the range of sectoral evidence gathered from participant observation and semi-structured interviews. My research schedule's timing was extremely fortunate – I completed my second field trip in Guangzhou and Beijing immediately before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Traveling was still feasible at that time, and face-to-face communication was still regarded as the norm for sociological research. I managed to carry out a number of one-to-one conversations with major documentary directors, producers and distributors about the changes and challenges, and the practical consequences of the reforms of cultural policy. These included the specifics of IPR trades and the development of the online regulatory regime. When speaking to the leading producers and delegates from production companies, I recognised some common concerns about the downward economic trend in the cultural sector since 2018. I looked at their different approaches taken to ease the pressure, in terms of the commercial strategies of national broadcasters (e.g., CCTV and SMG), streaming services (Youku, iQIYI, Tencent and Bilibili) and international production companies (BBC, Discovery, and NHK). These opportunities for research contributed to much more nuanced patterns in my ensuing analysis, for instance, on the theme of IPR trades in the content marketplace and the issues of the online regulatory regime.

3.3 Production research in international media contexts

Drawing on the experiences of conducting ethnography in multicultural and multi-lingual contexts, where transcribing and transcription were involved, this section tackles the cross-cultural question of how to interpret not only the utterances, but also the silence. It also examines the methodological problems and potential solutions in dealing with the tensions between the political and socio-cultural specifics of the research destination and the critical

decision to internationalise the research context in order to reveal the complex nature of media politics during the process of digital globalisation.

3.3.1 Interpreting the silence

The socio-cultural argument suggests that collective, cultural values in China have shaped a social psychology that prefers conformity to confrontation. The preference for silence over verbal confrontation can be attributed to what Hall and Ames describe as 'a language of deference' (1995, p.228). The dominant features of 'Chinese traditions', expressed in the form of Confucian norms, exist in a complex set of cultural values. These values encourage the common belief in shared social doctrines and drive social members to avoid what does not conform to the collective cultural identity. The tendency to avoid direct confrontation is not new in China's cultural politics. The sociological urge to question, to confront and to escalate certain issues is at odds with 'appropriate behaviours' in China's traditional social etiquette. This can be attributed to what Ke Cui describes as 'the influence of the relation-oriented nature of Chinese culture' (2015, p.356).

The question of interpretation concerns not only the explanation of a source language, but also the implications of silence in different situations. Participants' cautious choices of their words and expressions reaffirmed compliance with the official political discourse characterised by social stability and ideological unity. Producers' preference for silence at times during conversation is not uncommon in my fieldwork experience. The recurring reticence on specific topics was particularly evident with producers who work for national broadcasters compared to those in commercial production sectors. I have come across many instances where participants seemed to feel under stress when confronted with questions about censorship and regulatory uncertainty. Usually, they would make a defensive gesture with facial expressions or body language as if such topics were some sort of taboo; or they would intentionally or

unintentionally move from the awkward subject to something more casual. Related to an earlier point of negotiating the insider-outsider's research position, it is understandable that questions pointing to politically sensitive issues may cause media professionals' anxiety and distress. Although I did not see my research questions as being offensive or provocative, I did get a certain amount of unexpected feedback, indicating that the issues should be discussed privately rather than in the public sphere. This could be a result of their professional knowledge of the 'red lines', however uncertain, encountered in media production, and of the unpredictable political climate that affects their own professional interests.

As Dennis Kurzon notes, 'unintentional silence is psychological in nature, usually occurring because of personal inhibitions on the part of the addressee. Intentional silence, on the other hand, is a deliberate attempt by the addressee not to be cooperative with the addresser' (1995, p.55). Drawing on his empirical experiences of judicial interrogation, Kurzon's argument offers a socio-pragmatic perspective on understanding the various impulses behind participants' use of silence during face-to-face conversations. In my empirical studies, the frequent encountering of silence during semi-structured interviews led to inquiries into this socio-political phenomenon, including the uncertain boundaries of political sensitivity and the social psychology embedded in Chinese culture. This concerns the formation of the opaque nature of political and industrial negotiations in China's communicative space (which will be discussed in the findings chapters).

It is a matter of repeated observation that silence occurs most frequently during the discussion of topics that are seen as politically sensitive. Certainly, 'misjudging someone's use of silence can take place in many contexts and on many levels' (Jaworski, 1992, p.6). An interviewee's communication style and the interview environment may influence the result of the conversation. However, I noticed that participants were less willing to talk about certain

topics, including the exercise of censorship and communication methods between central regulatory bodies and the production sector. Media participants seem to intentionally refrain from making political comments in the public domain. In contrast, many were surprisingly open to discussing budgets and profits, which are topics usually associated with commercial confidentiality (although these conversations were mostly off-the-record). The observation of a link between silence and politically sensitive topics suggests an uncertain atmosphere in the contemporary regulatory regime. As a senior member of SMG said: 'The fluctuation of the political climate means that the boundaries of what is deemed as "sensitive" is constantly changing' (Interview, I-14, March 30, 2019)[1]. In my later chapters, I will argue that regulatory uncertainty undermines the legitimacy of a rules-based policy regime. The common knowledge of what is politically acceptable is actually missing from current policy writings. As many interviewees have suggested, the policy guidelines on the appropriate editorial line are very often vague and subject to individual interpretation.

The methodological concerns over issues of sensitivity are not new to the study of cultural politics of Chinese media. In the work of Carlson et al. (2010) on the methodologies of contemporary Chinese socio-political research, they highlight the challenges of measuring, monitoring and assessing the diverse and complex data resulting from China's socio-political

[1] As the following section will explain, where issues of sensitivity may be a concern, interviewees and contributors are anonymised and assigned a number with, as a prefix, I (for interviews), as in 'I1'. For clarity and consistency, I will give the participant's job title, organisation and interview date, where relevant. The type of the interview method is indicated in Appendix IV, as per its status of a semi-structured interview or an unstructured/in-depth interview.

transformation. They have argued for the need to collect systematic data in China that are comparable to data compiled by international agencies (Carlson et al., 2010, p.6). It is true that the uncertain boundaries, due to political sensitivity, have been an issue in configuring consistent sets of data that are able to represent shifting cultural politics, although the transformation of the digital regulatory regime has sought to redraw the boundaries around what can be appropriately represented as national culture in media production. As my research has an empirical starting-point, I have had to make practical decisions concerning the use of politically sensitive or commercially confidential information. This also concerns the issue of research integrity: the lack of policy transparency challenges the publication of primary data gathered from fieldwork, as per decisions on politically sensitive discussions. To address the issues of the uncertain 'red line', I decided to preserve the anonymity of my participants – their wellbeing and interests must be safeguarded.

In line with the University of Glasgow's guidelines for research, participants were given the option to make part or all of their contribution anonymously, in order to protect their interests as well as those of their organisations and institutions. Any material that was noted as off-the-record, or confidential, would be treated as such. The consent form (Appendix II) includes a data protection statement and confirmation of participants' consent to being interviewed. Any source that was not in the public domain was used in accordance with legislation and regulations in both the UK and China.

3.3.2 Multicultural/multilingual ethnography

The cross-cultural question of how to position the insider-outsider role is important, although rarely raised, despite being very much a part of the international research experience. The rarity of my opportunity in the context of global communication in retreat makes it worth reflecting upon. In their account of the specific methodological approaches developed during the process

of communication transformation, Paterson et al. touched on issues around production research in non-anglophone areas (2016). The methodological challenges in dealing with the relationships between ethnographic researchers and their observations of cultural production in multilingual and multicultural contexts are shared by an increasing number of international researchers who engage in cross-cultural research activities. Yet little has been written regarding methodological approaches to the interpretation of divergent linguistic sources when transcribing and translating lexical materials. This section explores a process whereby I implement multicultural ethnography in the examination of cultural activities at an international film festival and in co-production cases.

My previous work experience in a transnational media agency contributes to identifying and refining the focus of multicultural/multilingual ethnographic work to explore the diverse forces in an interconnected global cultural sphere. Ethnographic work can only represent the reality from a particular perspective, as opposed to an all-encompassing viewpoint (Goodall, 2000, p.22). Admittedly, my focus on multilinguistic studies of ethnography is associated with the multilingual resources from my work experience with international producers and media clients. An observation from the workplace is that despite the producers' initiatives for sustainable cultural exchanges through mutually profitable collaboration, tensions and disputes arise from divergent institutional cultures and individual value systems that are increasingly fragmented. I gathered that the gap between Chinese and international producers in understanding media professionality had been an issue that affects commercial and cultural activities. This is how I began to set up a transnational framework for this research project.

Previous work conducted in linguistically and culturally diverse research contexts has addressed the plural and complex nature of individual and group repertories in relation to a range of communicative resources employed by participants as they act and interact in real-life

and institutional contexts (Martin-Jones et al., 2016, p.190). Being an insider/outsider to China's cultural industries clearly helps in the understanding of research contexts, as does being Chinese. Depending on the preferences of participants, in-depth interviews were conducted in both Mandarin and English. Mandarin interviews were mostly carried out with producers at China's national broadcasters and streaming services. When evaluating the methodological framework of multicultural ethnographies, I take up the viewpoint of insider/outsider within the research and national contexts – and this lens shifts. I presented the research questions to the interviewees, of both Chinese and non-Chinese nationality, by describing the research interest in global communication and by giving background information about the conceptual framing. Then we discussed the challenges and potential solutions being canvassed based on empirical cases so they could provide sectoral evidence to support or challenge my initial assumptions.

The multilingual ethnographic framework involves transcription and translation from Mandarin to English. There are numerous words, phrases, and language choices exclusively related to China's politico-economical and socio-cultural contexts that need to be carefully placed in a theoretical framework. The critical concept of translation concerns linguistic practices, but also questions how aspirations, ideologies, practices and discourses are invented in a particular societal setting. For instance, 'red-headed documents' – official regulatory papers usually with a read heading, produced by government bodies with high authorities – refer to more than just a form of bureaucratic instrument, but a culture of non-transparent practices in media regulation. The understanding of this particular concept relates to the analysis of the mechanism of censorship in China's shifting digital broadcasting landscape, which I will discuss in Chapter 4. To take on the knotty issue of translating and transcribing key norms and concepts, I focused on the dynamic relationship between language choices and the political and cultural climate at the time of interviews, so as to explore the power forces

that lie behind the discursive data. This also contributes to the diversity of views and values represented in this research and reduces the tendency to marginalise certain participants' voices.

The interpretation of language in multi-lingual research contexts poses challenges for cross-cultural researchers in reframing the empirical materials to make sure there is full consistency in the presentation of the data set, as well as in the analytical approach taken in dealing with these materials. The need to balance analysis with description is a difficult task in the construction of a theoretical framework that is able to stand in its own right. The choices of terms and terminologies, which are very often full of historical connotations, may affect the ways in which researchers build up their analytical framework. Suzina has questioned the use of English as 'the *lingua franca* in academia' (2021), with a focus on the dominance of the language in an increasingly internationalised academic agenda. Certainly, the dominance of one language may confine the scope of research in various cultural contexts when framing an argument. But Suzina has also pointed to the question of how to translate some of the specific socio-cultural norms into the 'western' literature framework (2021, p.175). This has been accepted as legitimate research practice for contemporary international academic studies. Inevitably, the translation process reduces the nuance of many expressions that are linked with certain theoretical approaches developed from particular socio-cultural contexts. However, the question is whether the process of interpreting and translating may undermine the legitimacy of empirical research, or actually bring new dynamics into the frame.

The exercise of translating and transcribing the qualitative data is fundamentally concerned with the analytical task of drawing out the links between knowledge, ideology and discourse and a range of empirical evidence. Considering the complexity of the data gathered from the fieldwork, it is crucial to locate them in the formation of ideological consensus and its contestations within China's contemporary media context. To distinguish the participants'

initiatives and positions taken in the conversations is to identify the gap between 'what they say' and 'what they mean': interpreting what is said within a certain socio-cultural context requires the researcher to listen closely and sometimes to read between the lines. This is particularly evident in case studies related to international co-production and the film festival and involve media agencies from various nations. When working on transcribing and translating my interview data, I was conscious of managing descriptive details along with trying to encapsulate the main intention of participants' speech, given the 'asymmetric social relation' (Bruun, 2016, p.139) between researcher and informant that is constantly being negotiated. So far as possible, to identify the participant's purpose in addition to their lexical choices, analysis of the views, values and ideologies elicited from the qualitative data shaped the writer's conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework, with a clear focus on the globalised cultural sphere.

Conclusion: Networks and divisions

The aim of this chapter has been to provide an account of my fieldwork, conducted in the course of this PhD project on the changing climate around China's broadcasting policy. The reflection on the methodological approach taken in this research project has built on the debate around the ethnographic tradition during the transformation of media and communication studies in an increasingly interconnected, competitive global cultural sphere. Despite the non-transparent nature of socio-political discourses in China's media production sector, the data set generated from interviews, participant observation and documents were analysed through the participants' attitudes, views and ideologies indicated in interactions with the researcher and were supported by written transcriptions from semi-structured and open-ended, in-depth interviews. The ambiguity of political and socio-cultural concepts is expressed in different language systems deployed in local, national and international settings, and is an example of how media professionals make sense of their values, ethics and actions. As previously noted, the

interpretation of silence is an important part of comprehending an interviewee's real intentions under challenging circumstances.

The previous sections have indicated the networked nature of China's television sector, characterised by the blurred boundary between the public and private sectors in the process of media commercialisation. In retrospect, my fieldwork observations identified a prolonged struggle between the public and private sectors and I found a diversity of institutional cultures through a comparison of national broadcasters and streaming services. Whereas the emphasis on order and control among national broadcasters suggests the dominance of political power, dynamic commercial interchanges seem to be driven by the logic of the market. This shapes the present broadcasting system along with the co-existence of a tightly controlled national broadcasting system and a lightly regulated commercial sector. Chapter 5 will examine the complex and often contradictory imperatives of political control and commercial freedom that affect current policy thinking on the digital regulatory regime.

The methodological challenges shaped the design of my original research. By moving to conceptual analysis of the international content marketplace, some of the tensions were articulated in a broader context. A key observation made at GZDOC was of the attempt to internationalise China's cultural industries and sell Chinese cultural products in the global marketplace. Although nuances among patterns will inevitably increase the difficulty of data analysis, I believe including fieldwork that brings out a constructed diversity of sources is of particular importance to the development of production research in a digital context. As little is known about contemporary cultural politics in China's media production, my ethnographic work also seeks to provide additional opportunities to understand the conformity among, and contrasts between, China's domestic broadcast environment and the dynamic international audio-visual landscape.

Chapter 4
The digital regulation system: Focusing on what you can control

China's present cultural policy envisions a top-down digital regulatory system and Chapter 4 investigates the mechanisms of media control the government uses and how censorship is exercised in the broadcast sector. It begins with an analysis of the political initiative behind the recentralisation of regulatory power while recognising the current challenges for traditional broadcasters and regulators in negotiating the ideological boundaries in full transparency. First, it interrogates the present resolutions of the regulators aimed at enhancing digital regulatory measures and creating a level playing field for public and private media sectors – focused on how the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), the state regulator, has decided to enhance the administrative measures for content regulation on digital platforms in order to bring the highly commercialised digital content landscape back under its control. In questioning tensions found in the regulatory objectives between maintaining the ideological coherence of media production and protecting the market economy, this chapter reveals how national administrative bodies prioritise political and ideological needs in dealing with regulatory uncertainty across digital media platforms.

In what is to follow, I look at the current exercises of censorship across digital platforms and the challenges facing regulators and national broadcasters. Section 2 draws on empirical cases from within the documentary production sector and examines the policy claim of applying the same regulatory guidelines to both digital and traditional platforms. The actual practices within the production industry are characterised by self-censorship by media institutions, administrative measures of the regulators and constant negotiations between the two parties. This section reveals the shifting negotiating space in the interplay between centralised regulatory power and self-censorship practices. Section 3 investigates the non-

negotiable ‘red line’ that, whilst representing the limit of ideological correctness, also presents difficulties in regulating ideological boundaries, given that hard decisions must be made by the broadcasters and the regulators over which kinds of diversity are to be regarded as problematic according to the official discourse. It argues that a lack of regulatory transparency increases uncertainty for cultural producers and regulators alike as they try to reach a consensus on editorial orientation, and also challenges the efficacy of regulatory measures. Section 4 reveals the policy dilemma between cultivating ideological unity on the one hand and protecting cultural diversity on the other – a problem that has become more explicit in the top-down media system amid the turbulence of digitalisation. The chapter evaluates national broadcasters’ responses to the tightened regulatory measures and examines how they mitigate tensions between the need to fulfil an inclusive cultural agenda and tighter boundaries drawn around presenting a mainstream, national image. In pursuing the role of media cultivator (Gerbner et al., 1986), as Chapter 2 explains, national broadcasters are struggling to balance commercial imperatives with the political and moral policing of content in the digital environment.

4.1 The digital regulatory regime

This section begins with questions about the current policy initiative to enhance regulatory measures for digital platforms, taking into account the growing market power of streaming services. It investigates the NRTA’s claim of adopting the same regulatory guidelines for online and offline content. It identifies the policy objective of creating a publicly acceptable discourse that aims to represent the mainstream and overcome ideological tensions. However, the sheer diversity of platforms and content entails great uncertainty in the effective implementation of regulatory guidelines. This uncertainty is deepened by the boundaries being unclear around what can be publicly shown within the mainstream ideology, as regulatory practices rely heavily on context and interpretation.

4.1.1 Regulating the digital platforms

In 2016, the NRTA made the policy claim of implementing the same regulatory guidelines for both online and offline audio-visual content. Since the restructuring of the NRTA, the state's cultural administrations have been navigating new regulatory territory in China's audio-visual industry. Political control over the media production sector is exercised by government bodies through interventive measures in audio-visual production, whilst the expansion of distribution via streaming has also affected the regulatory measures. Under such circumstances, the effective implementation of the digital regulatory agenda has become the current imperative of China's cultural policy. Many producers and distributors feel the tightened regulatory grip on online platforms has led to increasing restrictions on commercial production and on the digital distribution sector, particularly in terms of monitoring ideologies in cultural production. However, producers' reservations about establishing ideological correctness suggests there remain uncertainties within regulatory practices.

The emphasis on audience choice, which grows in the changing digital landscape, has been a counterpower to television networks dominated by political control. The competition between national broadcasters and streaming services for audience traffic has brought increasing uncertainty for the implementation of content regulation across digital platforms. Content regulation is the most commonly used method of digital regulation. However, without regulatory guidelines to set out clear requirements, cultural content with national themes competes with entertainment video clips – including both user-generated content (UGC) and professional user-generated content (PUGC) – for audiences' attention. For example, a former director with Shanghai Education Channel said that the unfiltered availability of UGC on digital channels, such as 'wedding ceremonies or dogs fighting', suggests the difficulty for regulators to come up with a policy that applies to all sorts of content and is actionable and effective (Interview, I-14, 30 March 2019). Audiences are able to consume both high-quality

documentaries and entertaining UGC as they please. The distribution of content of varied scale and scope encourages active choices in audience consumption. This, again, encourages a commercial strategy among content providers and influences the negotiation of the leading discourse in what Habermas describes as 'the space of a culturally stimulating milieu' (2008, p.3).

Many producers and distributors have noticed a trend moving from a non-interventive digital marketplace towards one that features heavy regulation. The tension between the commercial imperative and political policing of the production agenda drives the transition of regulatory practice. Regulators' impulse to step in and get involved in the decision-making process is a result of the digital content industry's growing public impact. The communication power of the digital arena has grown so fast that political authorities now recognise that it needs to be regulated. An executive producer in Youku commented on what is forcing the change in policy, saying:

> In the past, digital streaming services were not a big thing. In China, if it were not a big thing, the authorities would rather leave it alone. But, you see, [with] the number of users of digital streaming services, it makes sense that content regulation becomes rather strict across the online platforms, including animation, film, factual content, et cetera ... this applies equally to Bilibili, Youku, iQIYI and any other digital distribution channels. (Interview, I-7, 23 March 2019)

Whilst the NRTA's legal framework for online regulation is still in progress, digital content providers have followed a light-touch, self-regulatory regime, with streaming services demonstrating a high degree of openness and flexibility in their content selection. Producers who work for streaming services suggest that they are willing to take big risks on their content compared to the conservative practices of national broadcasters. The private sector tends to prioritise storytelling in its cultural content over any consideration of the ideologies conveyed

in narratives (Interview, I-7, 23 March 2019). Distributors follow a self-regulatory practice as a gesture of compliance. They may shelve programmes deemed 'too controversial' in terms of the ideology in the narrative and, occasionally, regulators gave an administrative order to remove certain clips, such as when they have identified content as transgressing political red lines. But, in most cases, producers with streaming services have retained a liberal stance, creating and distributing a large variety of eye-catching audio-visual products and prioritising gaining audiences' attention. This fundamentally differs from national broadcasters, who take a cautious approach to the regulatory guidelines and avoid any politically controversial interpretation of their outputs (Interview, I-29, a producer in SMG, 21 December 2019).

But, with the increasing influence of digital content on the audience marketplace and the convergence of traditional and digital broadcasting channels, the differences between online and offline regulatory regimes are gradually diminishing. Administrative intervention to help reconcile disputes between public and private sectors and to overcome ideological differences across the audio-visual landscape is on the agenda. Given the government's increasing advocacy of a tightened regulatory regime for the online audio-visual sector, digital platforms have begun to approach the ideological aspect of policy with much more care than before.

Since 2010, the NRTA has pursued a more restrictive regulatory policy among digital platforms, mainly by means of administrative measures. These involve banning orders on specific visual elements, such as dreadlocks or tattoos (defined as the representation of 'vulgar' culture) and the removal of problematic content when severe infringements are confirmed. The mechanism of control and regulation in digital distribution involve the task of drawing boundaries around political correctness through a negotiation between the production sector, political bodies and the audience, although the line between appropriateness and transgression is missing from the policy prescription and, therefore, the decisions of cases of infringement

are subject to the broadcasters' interpretation of policy papers, judgement from the regulator and, questionably, the recommendations of administrations and individuals that represent the political authority.

In 2017, the NRTA decided to call off Youku's factual show, *Where are we going, dad?*, an entertaining reality show that focuses on the daily interactions between celebrities and their children. According to a senior producer at Youku, despite the pilot already getting more than one billion audience viewings, the regulator issued a banning order to cancel the show due to concerns over children's health and safety, as the policy makers suggested that 'it was inappropriate to associate images of young children with extravagant lifestyles, even if they are from celebrity families' (Interview, I-7, 23 March 2019). This shows the increasing regulatory force being brought to bear on what the regulator has termed 'consumerism' in audio-visual content (NRTA, 2019, Article 4). Producers with streaming services maintain that the NRTA has now linked the depiction of extravagant lifestyles with harmful social effects that may trigger interventive measures. The trend of implementing a more restrictive online regulatory regime has become more explicit in the policy agenda. Since the amendment to the legislation covering online platforms in 2019, the NRTA has stated that any factual content showing young people with luxurious lifestyles is considered to be violating audience welfare and should not get permission to be aired (Article: 9.9; Article 10).

In terms of deterring 'harmful' social effects, however, the certainty of administrative intervention is more important than its severity. The government's response to the critical questions regarding the regulatory model in the upcoming policy agenda is likely to be the development of a far-reaching legislative plan. Since 2016, the NRTA has announced that the content regulation of digital platforms will follow the same criteria as with traditional broadcasters. This signals the policy of applying the same regulatory principles to both

traditional and digital distribution platforms being brought out into the public discourse (NRTA, 2016). Thereafter, the NRTA published a legislative work plan aiming at providing clear regulatory guidelines for digital platforms in terms of ideological directions (2020c). However, as the regulatory regime still focuses heavily on intervening on ideological grounds, regulatory uncertainty remains an issue.

4.1.2 Managing the ideological bottom-line

In President Xi Jinping's words, China has embraced 'unprecedented transition since the last century' (*Xinhua News*, 2017). This reveals the sense of economic and political uncertainty that influences policy thinking within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the government. New technologies, market forces and the creativity of producers combine to disseminate diverse content that challenges the 'integrated discourses' that represent the national ideology. As one interviewee, a producer and scholar, said: 'The old sense of reality is falling apart, and a new sense of reality is to be invented to rebuild the mainstream ideologies (Interview, I-34, 28 December 2019). This situation sets the scene for the resurgence of a policy orthodoxy to establish a contemporary national narrative within the public discourse. The regulatory measures aim at drawing tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as China's national narrative, which, fundamentally, means managing the ideological line and the editorial line in cultural production.

The protection of mainstream ideologies is well within the NRTA's digital regulatory remit, which is focused on mediating the level of political acceptability of the media discourse. Negotiation over the regulatory bottom line is, fundamentally, ideological. Many producers agree that 'the ideological direction is increasingly emphasised for digital distribution now' (Interview, I-7, 23 March 2019). For production practices, this line usually means 'delivering the politically acceptable value system' in line with national policy and ideologies. As a former

senior documentary producer for SMG reveals, any depiction of the Dalai Lama, for instance, was strictly forbidden in cultural content, as it is seen as transgressive because the highlighting of religious disputes challenges the legitimacy of the official discourse (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). The head of a media company specialising in cultural content interpreted the 'red line' as following the general principles of national policy guidelines. In his words, 'the audio-visual content distributed on public screens shall not demonstrate ideologies that contradict the pursuit of national objectives' (Interview, I-5, 21 March 2019). The subtlety in managing the editorial red line pertains to the political objective of maintaining ideological unity, associated with the depiction or removal of certain cultural images. A common consensus amongst the government, the regulatory bodies and the cultural production sectors is that decisions on 'the ideological bottom line' are key to the implementation of the regulatory agenda. Noticeably, digital content regulations have begun to address the ideological aspects of audio-visual content.

National broadcasters previously followed an established three-tier regulatory regime, where context played a major part in the interpretation of ideology. But regulatory uncertainty is apparent with regard to the interpretation of mainstream ideologies. The industry has been complaining that regulators, and their unclear red line that regulates commercial practice, are struggling to keep up with new areas that need policy clarification. Moreover, there are other issues – such as the broadcasting sector usually bearing more restrictive ideological scrutiny during major national and political events. As noted, the tension between the commercial imperative and government's imperative to gain control of emergent media brings about considerable fluctuations in China's regulatory environment. This leads to an ongoing balancing act between intense political intervention and the resilience of the commercial imperative. Fluctuation in regulatory measures increases insecurity in the cultural production sector. As a senior producer in Shanghai Educational Channel put it:

> The control over digital content distribution fluctuated dramatically in recent years. The sheer volume of content makes it extremely difficult for the government to effect digital regulation. In a certain period, for example, during the 'two sessions' meeting [the annual plenary sessions of the People's Congress and the committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference] the regulatory pressure was visibly increased, and the distributors became cautious and sensible in their content selection, whereas this would all loosen up after the politically sensitive period, because the craving for commercial revenues conquers again. (Interview, I-14, 30 March 2019)

The emphasis on the media context challenges the legitimacy of the present regulatory guidelines when being implemented across the digital platforms. Many producers expressed concerns over the unclear written policy regarding the difficulty in addressing its regulatory requirements. Furthermore, a proliferation of genres and styles in content leads to disputes over the interpretation of the regulatory guidelines. The increasing autonomy of digital content providers also expands the negotiating power of producers and digital platforms in the process of self-regulation and administrative intervention, which challenges the regulatory structure and, again, increases regulatory uncertainty. The complexity has caused confusion and anxiety among many in the industry. As a former producer at CCTV suggests:

> We are in an era of policy changes in terms of online regulation. With the existing orders focusing on individual decision making, you can't argue with the regulation from senior management level, because of the lack of specific regulatory guidelines which are applicable within the cultural industry. There are so many possible interpretations of a single line identified in the paper orders. The 'one-size-fits-all' policy regime makes it difficult for execution in practice. (Interview, I-3, 16 March 2019)

Still, the present digital regulatory guidelines do not explain the issues of mainstream ideology in full transparency. Senior producers describe making decisions according to the proper editorial lines as a process that 'can only be said to be unsayable' (Interview, I-14, 30 March 2019; Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). This means that the administrative regulatory

measures are still highly contextual. The heavy focus on context is not new in the regulatory culture of the national media system (Weber and Jia, 2007; Tai, 2014). Senior producers who have decades of experience with traditional broadcasters are familiar with what is acceptable in word choice and narratives, and the use of pictures concerning political interests. However, digital producers find it difficult to reach agreement on the understanding of 'the appropriate ideologies' in line with political guidelines. They advocate more clarity in the present regulatory guidelines for easier implementation. Quoting from a cultural producer in SMG:

> If the explanation is too wide, the execution would certainly be very subjective. I'd rather read the specific details on the regulatory criteria ... such as 'you cannot create a fairy character based on the animal'. This would work better than a simple statement of 'superstitious ideologies are forbidden', which encourages so many different interpretations. (Interview, I-4, 20 March 2019)

According to the interviewees, present legislation only requires a platform to take down problematic content, if the regulator draws attention to it at all. Tai suggests that China's censorship practices are moving from restricting unfavourable content that transgresses the red lines to what he describes as 'conditional public opinion guidance' (2014, p.186). Despite the policy endeavor of implementing a rules-based legislative system, however, much of the motivation and practices of media censorship remains opaque to the public and the media regulation system is strong but fragmented (Xiao, 2013; Tai, 2014). A regulatory system with consistency and clarity should not only represent a moral and policing ideal, but also an accessible tool to protect the interests of producers, distributors and the regulator. At the time of writing, the negotiation between political forces, national broadcasters, streaming services and production companies remains a matter of contestation.

4.2 Centralised regulatory power and self-censorship

The Chinese government has decided to establish a centralised digital regulatory framework to regain media control and recalibrate the shifting power relations between the public and private sectors. This section examines how the central regulator has claimed more power by applying a restrictive regulatory system to digital platforms. It also questions the efficacy of applying the same censorship measures to both traditional and digital broadcasters, with a focus on the problems of self-censorship and regulatory uncertainty.

4.2.1 Self-censorship and regulatory uncertainty

It is worth noting how self-censorship has played an important part in ideological mediation. 'Three-tier self-regulation', a concept widely accepted by broadcasting professionals, means that the content is to be checked by at least three examiners, including one from the executive level, before it is allowed to be aired on the public screen. This is the self-censorship approach generally taken by Chinese media firms before the content is aired.

Most producers take interventive measures during the creative process. A producer at SMG suggested that they had to make adjustments in sensitive areas such as religion, depending on the latest editorial guidelines (Interview, I-4, 25 March 2019). For instance, while making a documentary about Chinese painting, she changed one of the lines in the script from 'the lotus is the Buddha's seat' to 'the lotus represents peace, tranquillity and harmony', in order to avoid any mention of Buddhism (Interview, I-4, 20 March 2019). This was done because the portrait of religious themes and subjects could easily be associated with controversial issues around ethnicity and territorial disputes around Tibet that may risk undermining the cohesion of the established, official discourse. Most producers with national broadcasters think it unnecessary to 'walk on the edge' and take the risk of crossing the red line that marks politically sensitive areas. But new and emerging digital companies may stumble, due to a lack of experience in

making these decisions about the fine line between what is appropriate and what is transgressive.

Currently, self-censorship remains the most prevalent regulatory method for traditional and digital cultural bodies. As a senior producer at SMG said: 'Chinese documentaries are regulated by broadcasting institutions, and the distributors are responsible for the signing-off of the release of certain content, which has put media professionals under enormous political pressure' (Interview, I-14, 30 March 2019). For both national broadcasters and digital content providers, the majority of censorship is done within the organisation. Until now, self-censorship has been the commonly accepted approach, within national broadcasters and streaming services, when carrying out regulatory work. As previously discussed, the consensus on the mainstream ideology of a particular time is achieved by negotiation between institutions and agents within a top-down media system. In effect, the release of particular cultural products is a result of the collective decisions of distributors and executive managers. This is supposed to minimise the bias resulting from individual preferences and tastes. However, given the highly contextual nature of decision-making practices, this approach entails huge regulatory uncertainty.

Content regulation is the key measure for digital regulation. The bottom line for content regulation is preventing transgressions of government policy and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) guidelines, which are seen as representing national interests. The 'correct' value system, in a senior producer's words, is 'inexplicable but to be learnt' (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). Most producers agree that the subtlety of where the editorial line lies is acquired, rather than learnt. Lack of knowledge of politically sensitive areas may result in infringements of the red line which may trigger administrative measures. Take, as an example, a broadcasting slip-up in a wild-life documentary imported from Discovery. In it, a map depicting the China-India border was one recognised by the Indian government but not the Chinese government. The

footage was removed for the next date of airing the documentary (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). The decision to remove the problematic footage was made due to the 'correct' display of China's territory being a politically and militarily sensitive issue as there are tensions along the border. Many producers agree that audio-visual materials that involve political or military elements are the most difficult to handle. This was seen as a case of a severe violation by the authority as it concerned the issue of national interests.

The lack of administrative transparency increases uncertainty during the self-regulation process. Officially, the regulatory guidelines are delivered in what media professionals call 'red-headed-documents' sent from central to local level (as Chapter 3 has briefly explained, these regulatory papers are usually presented with a red heading that represents the immediate decisions coming from political authorities). Media professionals refer to the 'red-headed documents' as records of censorship for professional and governmental internal use only. It is not a legislative document but, rather, a regulatory paper produced by a variety of government bodies and departments. Red-headed documents are communicated at various levels within the power organs, agencies and institutions and may have confidentiality requirements. As administrative documents for exercising interventive measures, these in-house papers are usually unavailable in the public domain and are unknown to the public. According to a producer at CCTV, these documents are drafted by various government bodies, in light of state policy and the NRTA's regulatory guidelines, before they are directly passed to the head of the production team; but 'they are so unpredictable and often depend on the personal preference of the leadership' (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019). 'The written paper was very vague,' a former producer at CCTV says. 'Every Monday, people from the central government will visit the production room and have a regular meeting to brief the latest editorial requirements' (Interview, I-3, 16 March 2019). Limited access to red-headed documents has led to criticism

of the excessively secretive nature of the regulatory mechanism for the government's and the regulator's supervision and control of the production process.

As Xiao argues, the vagueness of censorship rules is associated with the opaque nature of government bodies in conducting administrative measures (2013). The lack of a clear set of written rules allows space for interpretation and motivates the production sector to discern the commitment of the censor. Roberts describes China's digital censorship system as a porous one that is 'frequently circumvented by savvy Internet users, accidentally evaded by citizens wasting time on the web, and rarely enforced with punishment' (2018, p.2). Not only digital media consumers, but also producers can route around the censorship guidelines in negotiating the cultural production process. It is nothing new that fluctuations of the political climate influence the editorial line in China's broadcast sector. The obscurity of the written policy guidelines increases the challenges for producers to avoid the risk of being exposed to ideological criticism. As a former producer and director in CCTV suggests:

> The regulatory standard was largely influenced by the time and location of the broadcasting activities, and the decision maker who was about to sign off the release of certain content. [...] You do not always get the red-headed documents for what is or is not allowed to air. In many cases, it is the in-house meetings where these decisions are made, and you are told what to do by your line managers. (Interview, I-22, 24 December 2019)

This comment reveals an implicit consensus around individual interpretation of the regulatory guidelines, rooted within the politics of national broadcasting institutions. It also tackles the unpredictability of off-the-record orders from the political authority. The unwritten regulatory principles tend to accommodate the vested interests of powerful groups or individuals, because they allow alternative interpretations and, therefore, room for policy manoeuvre. Regulatory transparency is the key issue for the effective implementation of the digital regulatory regime, but the present regulatory agenda remains fundamentally political

with unclear regulatory guidelines. This is a result of the private nature of negotiations between government bodies, regulators and media institutions. As an executive producer at SMG says:

> Although the state offers the same rules for every platform and content provider, the final decision is made by humans. The predominant self-censorship tradition means that there are no specific predetermined criteria. (Interview, I-9, 27 March 2019)

This view relates regulatory uncertainty to the contextual decision making in the practice of self-censorship. It is problematic that the line between appropriate ideologies and transgressive ideologies is open for interpretation under different political and socio-cultural circumstances. The status quo of vague regulatory principles may appeal to the interests of a few powerful individuals who have the authority to decide the release or removal of certain content, but it is a huge barrier to creative and professional conduct in the production and distribution practices. Also, negotiations with unwritten rules entails huge communication costs for both the government and producers. Given the scale and scope of the digital content industry, regulatory uncertainty potentially undermines the sustainability of cultural production.

4.2.2 A tightened regulatory grip?

The interplay between self-censorship practices and regulators' administrative interventions has long been part of the regulatory agenda. Before we make a comparative analysis of traditional broadcasters and digital platforms, we need to have a historical understanding of the mechanism of censorship within a hegemonic broadcasting system. The three-tier-censorship system provided a basic structure for the way in which censorship has been carried out by national broadcasters. The first round, or tier, entails self-censorship within the distribution platforms, before the content then goes to government censorship bodies. Before 1987, the Film Bureau (a division of the Ministry of Culture) was responsible for a second round of review, while the Ministry of Propaganda was responsible for a third, as it 'held the ultimate

power over all media production in the country and was responsible for cleansing the discursive field of any politically oppositional or subversive elements' (Xiao, 2013, p.124). This model is still recognised in the contemporary broadcast sector. In order to serve the policy objective of enhancing political control, regulatory bodies were merged and reformed. In 1986, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television was formed from the merging of the Film Bureau and the Ministry of Radio and Television. It was reorganised as the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) in 2013. SAPPRFT was then dismantled in 2018 and replaced by the present regulatory body, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). The NRTA issues regulatory guidelines for audio-visual content and directly controls state-owned cultural enterprises, whereas its previous responsibilities of regulating the press and book publishing now falls under the remit of the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), the government agency responsible for drafting and enforcing regulations on news, print and internet publications (NRTA, 2020b).

Recently, China's central government decided to re-centralise regulatory power and enhance political control over the digital content industries. In the words of a senior cultural producer, 'after the 19th Congress, the air suddenly grows incredibly intense in media politics. At least from an institutional level, the broadcasters used to be independent, but now it seems that the party has reclaimed it all' (Interview, I-11, 28 March 2019). Since the NRTA became the central regulator, the key difference from SAPPRFT is that the top regulatory body now comes under the aegis of the State Council. This means that the NRTA was about to take over the roles of legislator, administrator and regulator as an executive agency of the CCP leadership. The government describes the reasons for centralising regulatory power as the need 'to strengthen the central leadership of press and publication, to enhance the management of key publicity arena, to take the lead in ideological work, and to maximise broadcasters' function as the voice of the Party' (*Xinhua News*, 2018, Article 35). This is a policy push towards the

formation of a top-down regulation system that aims at regulating a more fragmented public sphere and enhancing political control over the digital content marketplace.

The government intends to apply the same regulatory methods for both traditional and digital broadcasters, which brings interventionism into the digital content industry (State Council, 2017). Previously, the digital broadcasting sector followed a loose self-regulation regime. As a senior documentary director at SMG claims, 'unlike the producers at national broadcasters who take responsibility for what they say, word by word, the streaming services are able to distribute anything as long as they can afford the financial risks. They actually had the option to remove the problematic content at any point of being reported' (Interview, I-29, 21 December 2019). However, the current regulatory forces have tightened the space for commercial and creative exploration. Compared to what was experienced before the new regulatory policy, many producers, especially those who work in the private sector, have witnessed a more restrictive policy in the depiction of cultural images on digital platforms.

Since the centralisation of regulatory power, cultural producers have begun to take more care with ideological coherence – 'Dancing with chains on our hands', as a screenwriter in a production company said. 'CCTV is concerned more about the mainstream ideology, whereas other broadcasters have to think about advertisers and sponsors' (Interview, I-6, 23 March 2019). She adds: 'The code of conduct for content production is getting more and more rigid, it doesn't matter where you are going to distribute your products'. When asked about the criteria of censorship and content regulation, the screenwriter said, with a laugh, 'of course the bottom line is to accord with the mainstream ideology. As the overall theme has to bring positive energies, you cannot write about certain topics: revenge is too sensitive so, no; fairies and mythical animals in the modern era – that's superstition – so, no' (Interview, I-6, 23 March 2019). As Chapter 2 explained, censorship across digital platforms is driven by the political

need to overcome ideological contestation. The centralised regulatory power does not change the logic of the self-regulation system, but it puts pressure on the production sector by introducing more restrictive guidelines and implementing severe administrative measures.

Weber and Jia have examined the predominance of self-regulation in China's digital media sector through forging a subtle, controlling relationship with media firms by the state (2007). Tightened administrative measures show media commercialisation is balanced by the regulatory power to reaffirm the role of the government as a central agency in the process of digital globalisation. Producers in both public and private sectors follow self-censorship practices to ensure the moral worthiness and ideological correctness of their content. Their shared anxiety over unpredictable administrative orders reveals the cultural logic that underpins the hegemonic regulatory system in China.

The outcome of the interplay between centralised regulatory power and self-censorship is a consensus on tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as mainstream cultural images. The control over the exposure of marginal cultural images can be seen as intending to ease social tensions and enhance stability. But the inclusion or exclusion of certain cultural images is key to the process of what Foucault describes as 'the control and delimitation of discourse' (1971, p.12), associated with the unique way a community organises its spaces of identity (Morley and Robins, 2002). 'No one really knows what are the kinds of cultural images that are too marginal', a producer with a national broadcaster said. 'I can't see why topics like autism and struggling mothers are problematic – apparently, my manager thinks they are, perhaps due to the fact that the main characters have suffered from social injustice. I mean, to me, they are perfect examples of people who strive in tough situations and thus seem to represent positive energies' (Interview, I-18, 6 April 2019). The difficult decisions on

mainstream and marginal cultural images raise the issue of the contemporary depiction of national identity in cultural content, which I will discuss in later sections.

4.3 Red lines and compromises

The red line, however unclear, is about compliance with the official discourse shaped by CCP ideology. This section examines producers' responses to government interventive measures. Whilst ideological correctness remains fundamental to the norms of cultural production, producers look at new areas that allow negotiation. This section explores the red lines and compromises present in practicing self-censorship and looks into the consequences for potential violations of the ideological line.

4.3.1 The non-negotiable political correctness

Media self-censorship aims to avoid offending power holders such as the government, advertisers and major business corporations (Lee and Chan, 2009). As a former producer at CCTV Documentary suggests, 'the assignments are always related to politics: documentary production in China, regardless of themes and topics, is related to politics or the promotion of national culture, which is the rule' (Interview, I-3, 16 March 2019). She describes the process of 'assignments' in relation to 'political correctness' in forming the public discourse as follows:

> The head of CCTV compiles a massive form each year, which specifically lists the number needed for each theme, for example, how many they need for Tibet-related content, how many for Xinjiang, how many for nature reservation and wild animals [...] Then eight directors in our department will pick from these themes. The description is broad and open for interpretation. You pick the number, and you could go around shooting Tibetan mastiffs or monkeys. (Interview, I-3, 16 March 2019)

Uncertainty about fluctuating political motives leads producers to 'read between the lines' to discern the deep commitments of the authority. Self-censorship by media institutions is

performed by the chief director and the administrative leader of media firms. As a producer at CCTV says, 'the creative chief focuses on the stories and artistic quality, whereas the head of the media firm ostensibly takes an ideological lens' (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019). Take religious topics as an example:

> Religions, territories, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan, these sensitive topics are always about political correctness. We film these topics in order to improve 'territorial relations' [...] We don't normally film religious topics if it isn't for a political task. For instance, we'd film culture and arts in Xinjiang, or the Tibetan antelope to get around political sensitivity. What 'no religious content' actually means, is that you can't extensively depict the religious belief. But tourism content is fine, say. Showing the Jokhang Temple is great – just don't get attached to the ideas behind the architecture. (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019)

This indicates the ways in which political control is exercised within the regulatory process. The changing power operations within traditional and digital broadcasters have led to the cultural production sector leaning toward reiterating the national ideology. Producers choose to adopt the most conservative route because this tends to minimise political criticism. A senior documentary producer in a local broadcaster describes the politics of content regulation as follows:

> The decisions on the fine line between appropriate and transgressive is subject to personal preferences. This is how I feel from my empirical knowledge. Many political disciplines are subject and the head of the broadcaster is not from the creative team so he constantly misses the point of artistic expression. We have a few people on behalf of the government leaders to supervise the project. Some people are very accurate, others not so much. (Interview, I-11, 28 March 2019)

Again, the regulatory red line remains fundamentally political. National broadcasters adopt the notion of 'politics first', eliminating controversial scenes or narratives risking potential violations in the eyes of the political leadership. Positioned as 'the voice of the authority', national broadcasters knowingly take a strict approach to the interpretation of political and

socio-cultural elements, compared to digital platforms' bold exercises. As a cultural producer at SMG suggests, national broadcasters 'stand for more credibility' and 'cannot live with even a minor error' (Interview, I-17, 2 April 2019). 'Error' here refers to any apparent irreverence for what the government holds to be national ideology. Normally, distributors are held responsible for the decisions on appropriate audio-visual content for public screening. As previously explained, the aim of ideological control over the communication sector is to contain conflicts between political power and the power of the market, as well as contain ideological fragmentation in the public sphere (Zhao, 2008).

Maintaining CCP ideology has been the national media's aim as they seek to maintain their mainstream position during turbulent times. Being 'the throat and tongue of the party', as most producers agree, means, for national media, taking a non-negotiable editorial direction entailing ideological correctness, usually associated with CCP ideology at a given time. It is not new that the establishment of a national broadcasting system aims at overcoming ideological conflict and contention by reconstructing 'the mainstream' (Gerbner, 1969). According to a senior producer at SMG, CCP organs follow the tradition of 'the party supervises the ideologies', and the authority describes the public sphere as 'the publicity frontier' in the contemporary 'cultural battlefield' (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019). There is consensus in China's media culture that the party line is not to be crossed by any means in the public sphere, although China's national broadcasters adhere to an increasingly inclusive programming agenda that tries to incorporate a variety of cultural images. This consensus reaffirms Meng's observation that China's political authority is resorting to heavy-handed political control to unite the people under a national ideology (2018, p.180).

As the trend toward commercialisation continues to grow in the digital media environment, broadcasters have been stretched between the roles of media cultivator and cultural enterprisers.

Digital convergence has challenged the consensus of what is 'correct' in different political and socio-cultural situations. Given the scale and scope of digital platforms, the lack of regulatory transparency entails taking increasing risks on the public agreement of 'ideological correctness'. The proliferation of digital content and platforms challenges the rigid interpretation of mainstream culture, which forces new thinking about the notion of an inclusive broadcasting agenda. To quote the head of a digital distribution company:

> Streaming services do not care that much about the ideological aspects. Working for the commercial sector, we wouldn't deliberately include radical attitudes and opinions against the mainstream's views, but if subcultures bring more audience attention, we will have to produce what the audience wants to see. We do not have a choice to make what we want due to commercial pressure. (Interview, I-22, 24 December 2019)

Digital distribution, driven by profits, audience needs and professional autonomy, has accelerated the fragmentation of mainstream identity. Self-censorship is less applicable in digital content distribution as platforms have difficulty scrutinising every product distributed on their channels. As the head of a production company observes, 'policy makers just copied a model of censorship from traditional broadcasters and the government bodies have the power to ban the programmes that they think involve a violation of political, moral or social boundaries' (Interview, I-5, 21 March 2019). Driven by financial interests, digital platforms are more willing to take risks in distributing controversial content compared to national broadcasters. This is manifested in how amendments are made after the distribution of problematic content. If regulators identify any content as 'problematic' the platform will make amendments to ease any public impact. It usually manages the crisis with an apology and removes the content. As the head of a production company reveals:

> Self-regulation is enough unless there were incidents after the distribution of content – then an investigation would be carried out by a top-down method. If it was not a big accident, a

> common argument would be 'this does not represent the broadcaster's point of view'. (Interview, I-5, 23 March 2019)

However, even in a highly commercialised digital media environment, as the former CCTV producer notes, the order from the political authority is non-negotiable; the top-down order remains whilst the digital broadcasting landscape has already changed its shape (Interview, I-3, 16 March 2019). Meanwhile, the head of a production company suggests that the bottom line means abiding by written policy without challenging its legitimacy (Interview, I-5, 21 March 2019). As the head of the documentary department at Bilibili suggests, it is not about the platform, it is about the common consensus around ideological correctness. In her words:

> What you cannot say, you cannot say it in any form of content [...] There are, and will always be, vague areas or soft criteria, which require your own judgement. The judgements on that vary among different people, but there's something agreed by all. For example, on any platform, the Dalai Lama must be avoided. For example, the party flag of Kuomintang must be avoided. (Interview, I-9, 27 March 2019)

While national broadcasters increasingly stick to the party line, digital producers are exploring the bottom line. Producers have raised questions on the tension between needing to keep to an indeterminate red line and the need to deliver an inclusive programming agenda in order to improve the credibility of public broadcasters and maintain their communication power.

4.3.2 The politics of broadcasting content

The lack of easy-to-follow legislation challenges the effectiveness of the digital regulatory regime. As the head of a national broadcaster says, 'regulatory transparency has been the policy goal for years, and we all know the importance of legislation. But if this is the only pursuit, regulation is coming to a dead end. "Best practice" for now seems to be removing problematic content whenever necessary' (Interview, I-38, 7 January 2020). The sheer volume of digital

content means that rapidly expanding new domains require policy updates. Issues regarding transparency of censorship are often raised in the debate around digital regulation. As the government has decided to implement the same regulatory guidelines for online and offline content, the question becomes: how do the regulators plan to manage the complex negotiating space in the digital regulatory system?

The NRTA remains the final arbitrator for decisions on problematic content. The chief regulator holds the power to determine the line between decency and decadence. When deemed necessary, it issues banning orders to remove certain content. As an executive producer at Youku says, 'there are some programmes which went really well commercially but, because some of the ideological orientation is not "correct", if the government intervenes, the NRTA can pull it off. This is what the regulator is entitled to do' (Interview, I-7, 23 March 2019). Producers are anxious about the potential financial loss if a show is shelved. According to the production sector, considerable effort is made in communicating and networking with regulators and government bodies, in trying to make sense of regulatory guidelines. In the words of one screenwriter:

> Generally, if we submit it for review before going into production, we will ask for some minor revisions. A common feedback would be, 'this line needs to be in accordance with reality'. Some scenes are too violent to be displayed on the public screen – homicides, for instance. We are supposed to create an impression of a harmonious society and you should just go in this direction. Don't always think about 'interesting' plots, such as chopping off a head, which causes distress and discomfort. (Interview, I-6, 23 March 2019)

Interventive measures that lag behind production provoke criticism of the regulators. Moreover, the editorial line is not always written but is, instead, discussed. As the screenwriter reveals, red-headed documents only offer vague statements such as 'not in line with reality' or 'too much blood', and that she often has difficulty in getting the message behind the statements.

‘The back-and-forth communication is too much trouble, but it could be worse if they [the NRTA] want to delete the film after it’s been done’ (Interview, I-6, 23 March 2019). As the head of a production company admits:

> There will always be paper documents coming through to us, but a lag in the timeline can be identified. Policy papers are issued after the observation of a particular phenomenon, right? In China it is quite a thing, that there will be a series of similar content following up after the success of a hit show. Therefore, we can’t always expect policy documents to be up to date and that they are the cure-all for ongoing issues. (Interview, I-5, 23 March 2019)

These documents only serve as guidelines for producers, not as official legislative papers. ‘These are only to remind the producers of certain sensitive areas that they’d better be cautious about,’ the head of a production company explains. ‘If the subjects involve sensitive topics, it will be difficult to obtain a license. For instance, one of my productions was originally withdrawn due to campus violence. It would not have been possible to get it released if it weren’t for our long-term relations with the regulator. It will be more difficult to shoot this type of subject in the future because the genre was too popular and the authority may feel it had a negative impact’ (Interview, I-15, 31 March 2019). The NRTA is under pressure to achieve its claim to ‘find out the problematic content in time: [we] do not wait until it has been completed then take it off the shelves’ (2018). Producers worry that the artistic quality and commercial standard of China’s cultural products are limited by the slow-moving regulatory process.

The politics of editorial accountability is related to the opaque nature of elite politics. Usually, consensus on the editorial line is privately negotiated between the production sector and the government. It has been common practice that digital content providers try to comprehend the unwritten ideological position by communicating with the government. This reaffirms the private nature of negotiations in the censorship process. The Department of

Government Development (GD), formerly known as the Department of Government Relations (GR), was established for streaming services. As a senior producer in Youku says, 'we are not treating the government bodies as enemies. They are actually our friends. The more you communicate with them, the more security you will get. If you don't communicate with them, it is easier to get into trouble. You have to reach a better consensus on the direction of the show in collaboration' (Interview, I-40, 8 January 2020). For instance, Government Development supervises the producers' output in terms of the exposure of advertising. As a producer at Youku explains: 'We will communicate with the GD department to see if there are any problems, especially with regard to the commercial interaction between the advertisers and the audience. Because advertising is our major revenue source, we have to consider the interests of commercial clients. The question is whether calls to action for immediate purchasing are allowed in particular contexts and to what extent' (Interview, I-40, 8 January 2020).

The negotiation over editorials increasingly involves the political need for nation building. The balancing act between commercial interests and political needs is nothing new for media firms but content makers and providers recognise an increasing political strain on cultural products circulated on digital platforms. What CCTV, for instance, decides to expose correlates with national views on culture. The topics they choose for documentaries consistently include the development of modern infrastructure, scientific breakthroughs, arts and crafts, and wild animals (Interview, I-37, a senior producer in CCTV, 31 December 2019). As the head of a production company suggests:

> Documentaries are not designed to make the click-through rate look good, but more to meet the requirements of 'online propaganda', initiated from government publicity needs. Actually, the monitoring of digital streaming services is very tight now. They may write articles, manage social media accounts, find some reports, say, to work on a good impression for the government. Frankly, it is all about political tasks. (Interview, I-5, 23 March 2019)

The pace of change is so dramatic that the digital broadcasters are trying very hard to catch up with the policy shift. Political power intends to influence the audio-visual sector by tightening its regulatory grip on digital platforms, in order to regulate the dominant commercial imperative and the autonomy of professionals and audiences. But the policy effect is far from seamless. Tensions escalate between the production sector and the regulators. It is still unclear, however, whether the present digital regulatory regime is powerful enough for the political need for ideological control.

4.4 Mediating cultural images

This section examines the process of cultural reproduction through the mediation of cultural images among China's national broadcasters. It looks into how content regulation plays into the negotiation, between media power and cultural identity, in promoting mainstream identity and also in controlling the depiction of cultural images seen as peripheral or foreign. It reveals the dilemma between recomposing a collective mainstream and formulating cultural diversity in contemporary cultural narratives.

4.4.1 The contemporary cultural cultivator

Digital regulation serves as a system for re-establishing ideological boundaries through the mediation of cultural images and shaping Chinese identity by reconstructing the official media discourse around nationality, shared cultural tastes and the collective power of the state and the citizens. It is the case that the productions of national broadcasters are ideologically more homogeneous than in the private digital sector as the present regulatory policy has enhanced control over state media. Shortly after the centralisation of regulatory power, the government decided to form the China Media Group from the merger of China Central Television, China National Radio and China Radio International (2018). CCTV's changed affiliation under the CCP State Council may entail more political responsibilities assigned directly by the national

publicity department. The CCP Central Committee has reclaimed direct control of the film sector as well as the press and publication sectors, under the aegis of the publicity department (2018). China Media Group was given the new official title of 'the Voice of China'. This demonstrates a policy objective of highlighting the role of the state media in representing the 'official' voice and in promoting what is regarded officially as a legitimate national discourse. A producer at SMG suggests that national broadcasters need to stick to an impartial discourse – with no radical opinions – and 'be responsible for what they write and say for the public screen' (Interview, I-29, 21 December 2019). The producer explains an 'impartial' and 'legitimate' discourse as one that does not 'depict controversial views or contentious values other than what is written in the public sphere by the official bodies' (Interview, I-29, 21 December 2019). National broadcasters take a cautious view towards the ideological aspects of cultural production because they see themselves as representing the voice of authority.

According to regulators, the main function of content regulation is to counteract the accumulation of commercial power caused by the expansion of digital media economy. Many producers at national broadcasters are worried that commercial conglomerates choose to promote whatever content is attractive to audiences, as the trend of digital fragmentation continues to grow with the active participation of digital networks and social media (to be discussed in Chapter 5). Policy makers and regulators contend that commercial practices may distort the representation of cultural values in the media by misrepresenting cultural diversity as the spectacular exhibition of popular cultural elements. The limitless manifestation of eye-catching stories and characters is far from protecting cultural diversity in terms of its socio-cultural significance, because the predominance of media spectacles inevitably reduces the vitality of open debate and political engagement in the public communicative space (Morley and Robins, 2002, p.195).

The public role of national broadcasting systems, according to Gerbner et al. (1982), is essentially one of cultivating socio-cultural values to mediate ideological conflicts and achieve a reasonable degree of conformity. Traditionally, cultural content has been a powerful tool for cultivating audiences' tastes and facilitating the formation of a national discourse. In China's hegemonic broadcasting system, the publicity function of cultural content has long been established in cultural production activities. Many producers and directors understand documentary, for instance, as a genre for 'documenting society', which is not only about making a historical account of a time and place, but also about reflecting the mainstream ideology that prevails in a given socio-cultural context. The 1990s witnessed the beginning of a period of growth in Chinese documentary production. At that time, strong policy support for cultural production led to the establishment of documentaries as a major content genre in the broadcasting schedules. As the head of a local broadcaster explains:

> In the 1990s, the ideas of development and openness came into light, and we were so keen on delivering these ideas and illustrating what had been changed. The wide usage of digital cameras certainly accounts for the flourishing of documentary production. But, besides the technological reason, another important impetus was the increasing need for publicity at the beginning of China's big era of entering the global marketplace. This led to the existence of a professional team of documentary producers like us in the national broadcasters. (Interview, I-30, 7 January 2020)

In expressing his artistic ambition and the role of documentaries in the programming schedule, the producer highlights the selective depiction of cultural images and social values, pointing to the ideological necessity of the time. The collective definition of the political, social and moral message shapes the ways in which mainstream ideologies are established in the cultural content. Narratives within the content output tend to encompass cultural images of aesthetic value that are highly esteemed, and which create a sense of a desirable 'high culture'. This is how cultural content with national themes and subjects influences audiences' perception

of ‘good taste’. This is particularly the case with documentaries and other factual content, as audiences may easily take non-fictional elements as reality (Gorfinkel, 2018). This relates to Leerssen’s critical concept of seeing romantic nationalism as an instrument to enhance the top-down model of political communication (2013), focused on the public celebration of national glory as an ideal that inspires artistic and creative activities. China’s public broadcasters, it seems, have brought the role of cultivator back on to production schedules in order to overcome ideological contentions and enhance social stability amid the challenges that come along with digital fragmentation. As Gerbner maintains (1969), the cultivation model adopted by national broadcasters, is one in which the media’s effects, achieved by an audience’s exposure to certain cultural elements, fulfil the intended outcome of long-term ideological influence.

Sectoral evidence from the fieldwork suggests that producers interpret the role of cultivation as part of the educational function, which is firmly on the broadcasting agenda. For them, it means the continuing process of using the influence of media to improve audiences’ knowledge and tastes. Contrary to resistance to a ‘propaganda system’ where levers of power are seen in the hands of a state bureaucracy (Herman and Chomsky, 2010), media professionals are now less likely to associate the role of cultivating cultural tastes and ideological coherence with the monopolistic control of the public sphere. As an executive producer at SMG says:

> It seems that we simply can’t help but try to improve audiences’ value systems – to persuade them that artistic things are also necessary for our life, apart from daily consumption and basic survival needs. We need to ‘let them know’. The influences from documentaries may have better results, compared to mainstream publicity content, in terms of cultivation. I agree that driving audiences’ attention to something highly appreciable in our nation can increase the sense of patriotism and bring out positive responses, even more than what patronising propagandas are capable of. (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019)

This gradualist approach favours the promotion of national ideologies along with the continuing exhibition of aesthetically appreciable cultural elements. The immersion in national

cultural content may lead to sustainable influences on audiences' tastes and preferences within a type of culture. The aim of cultivation is to provide the audience with what national broadcasters consider good for them, as opposed to the diverse content they want (Hendy, 2013). This serves the purpose of helping build a top-down communication model that is able to continuously exercise ideological influence during digital fragmentation. As the executive producer admits, the process of repositioning traditional culture as 'something nice and admirable' is not easy, given that morality, as traditionally understood, is in decline in modern times (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019).

This also shows how the understanding of the attributes of public service has changed in terms of broadcasters' perception of what is good for audiences. As the former state regulator, the SAPPRFT, stated in its policy paper: 'The dimension of social values emphasises the political orientation and ideological guidance, but also examines the social influences and audience feedback' (2018, p.7). According to Shanahan and Morgan (1999), it is the function of national broadcasters to educate citizens in the values, beliefs, and code of behaviour and to provide models of conformity or targets of rebellion in the mass-produced story-telling process. A producer at SMG describes this role as 'the voice of leading, guiding and "parenting"' (Interview, I-29, 21 March 2019). For him, the need to hold on to the uplifting tone in the storytelling is key to the insertion of 'positive energies' and the promotion of 'national cultural values'. Producers regard this function as part of national broadcasters' political responsibilities. Today, the role of improving audience' taste has become more relevant to cultural producers, the government and the regulator, given the fierce competition between media providers over market share and audience engagement, whereby the wider parameters of ideological correctness increasingly come into play.

4.4.2 The inclusion/exclusion of cultural images

As Gorfinkel argues, the current negotiation around the politics of identity in China's national television is foregrounded by the production of national unity (2018). The display of various cultural groups aims to create an inclusive broadcasting agenda that showcases cultural diversity as well as national solidarity. Since the 19th CCP National Congress in 2017, the central government has introduced a cultural approach to enhancing social stability in the policy framework. The policy goal of promoting national culture to enhance ideological coherence has led to the rapid growth of national cultural content. Here, within the policy regime, the 'contemporary usage of traditional culture' is framed within CCP ideologies (2017). This means the policy objective of ideological unity may affect the representation of cultural images in media output.

In practice, decisions on balancing audience needs with political needs shape the depiction of cultural images on the public screen. The producer's decisions on whether to include certain cultural images stem from pragmatic concerns about audience reception and the anticipated result of government censorship. As many producers indicate, the production is safe from censorship if it illustrates unity, harmony, stability and social development, narratives which are in accordance with the official discourse in describing the contemporary social transformation. As an executive producer at SMG illustrated, the NRTA, for example, has banned the showing of dreadlocks in cultural products due to their perception as 'vulgar culture'; but in one of his productions on ethnic minorities, he used footage of a Mongol boy with dreadlocks, because they are traditional among Mongols (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019). The regulators determined this to be the correct depiction of this ethnic identity.

Tensions emerge between media industry's assumptions about collectivism and the unclear red lines around which divergent cultural images are mediated. As a producer at CCTV says: 'We have to give way to content that performs the unity of ethnic minorities to depict a sense

of cultural unity. There are quotas for these kinds of stories, and the idea of ethnic unity and diversity is also written into the principle of our storytelling strategies' (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019). The CCP Central Committee defines the ideological function of the media as 'applying the core socialist value system to lead the social ideological trend' and 'consolidating the common moral foundations of the entire party and the people of all ethnicities across the nation' (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2011, p.2). The narrative of plurality framed within the mainstream ideology is part of national broadcasters' tradition of national promotion. The pursuit of the 'cultural confidence' thesis underlined in policy statements resorts to the ideological function of public broadcasters. Related to the political imperative of maintaining social and ideological stability, the policy emphasis on collectivism and conformity is increasingly on China's digital production agenda. The policy agenda is perceived by producers and academics, either approvingly or critically, as an attempt to renew the cultural approach to national unity, due to an emerging political desire to keep ideological fragmentation under control.

Still, political bodies have a strong influence on the depiction of cultural images by placing official discourses in media texts using administrative measures. 'Assigned tasks' by the government put pressure on the production sector to keep a high artistic standard while living up to political expectations. As the senior documentary producer suggests:

> Theme is everything. Chinese documentaries have their distinctive characteristics [...] The storytelling is based on a specific theme. This applies equally to commercial productions, independent films, which are usually more expressive and, in particular, documentaries with government sponsorship. Mostly, broadcasters in traditional media choose their topics in order to complete the tasks assigned by their higher-level administrators and managers – let's be honest. (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019)

By means of assigned tasks, the political leadership exercises the power to influence cultural producers' choices of theme and subject within the cultural production schedule. The choice of national themes contributes to the insertion of the mainstream ideology in cultural content. The Publicity Department of the Central Committee, also known as the Central Propaganda Department, works with the NRTA in giving instructions to national broadcasters on editorial recommendations, especially around delicate areas such as Taiwan and Tibet, which may affect national security. The acceptable themes, according to producers at CCTV, cover arts, culture, histories, landscapes and wildlife – 'anything but the excessive depiction of politically controversial elements' (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019).

However, a rising creative drive, albeit with limited policy influences, is beginning to challenge the entrenched notion of a collective mainstream. The mediation of mainstream cultural elements entails regulation of peripheral images, which leads to debate about the politics of recognition and the articulation of cultural diversity. As Kellner (2011) argues, the recomposition of national identity has emphasised the boundaries between inside and outside: between who is considered 'in' the mainstream and who is pushed to its margin. Producers from the private sector take the representation of mainstream ideology as a rhetoric that is open to contention and the pursuit of professional autonomy drives the producers to creatively explore marginal cultural subjects. Their interest lies in what many have described as 'social pain points', which entail seeking to address the moral and social concerns that prevail in contemporary society. As a producer at a local broadcaster suggests:

> You will see what is wrong in society. Now that the second-child policy has replaced the one-child policy, Beijing Satellite TV has made the show *Second-child Era*. Social pain points are some of the things that people are most concerned about, and they are the easiest to generate public impact. It is not always about 'greatness' and 'a perfect illusion' of prosperity. There are problems to be solved and the 'dark side' is also worth showing on the

public screen so that people may pay attention and take actions – I think this is what a more responsible broadcasting schedule is made of. (Interview, I-18, 6 April 2019)

Gao maintains that the rhetoric for balancing censorship against creative freedom is still absent from China's regulatory regime (2009, p.433). This is still a reality for many producers who insist on a diversified programming agenda that allows the vitality of ideological contestations in the public sphere. The argument of creative expression is adopted in the production of more sophisticated narratives with more diversified themes and subjects. Digital fragmentation challenges the ideas of the producer as propagandist: autonomy pulls against political determinism. As a senior producer at Youku suggests: the negotiation between political responsibilities and professional autonomy has led to the subtler approach of cultivation, compared to the political propaganda many local producers recognise as 'platitudinous' (Interview, I-40, 8 January 2020).

Conclusion: Digital regulation and cultural values

Chapter 4 has investigated the mechanism of digital regulation played out by self-censorship within institutions and by administrative intervention performed by the regulators. By 2017, the question of how to implement digital content regulation was firmly on the policy agenda. The regulator tightened its grip as it targeted growing commercial forces across the digital broadcast sector. Whilst the regulator is by no means exclusively concerned with political power, its predominant focus on ideological correctness in cultural narratives has set the standard for cultural producers inventing a new national discourse. The policy objective of digital regulation gives rise to political intervention on online platforms. Currently, the regulator is under a lot of pressure to try to mitigate tensions between political control and commercial imperatives. The recently introduced digital regulatory regime is designed to restore order to, and control over, the digital content landscape, but the lack of regulatory

transparency and legislation that can't keep pace combine to limit the efficacy of the regulatory system.

This chapter has examined the tightened ideological boundary for content and production, drawing on empirical cases of self-censorship from traditional and digital broadcasters. The interviews suggest that issues of religion, ethnicity and national security are vital to the present regulatory agenda, whilst the enforced compromise between political, commercial, and creative positions has shaped a more restrictive regulation system. The production sector follows a politically acceptable discourse and avoids the depiction of cultural images that may transgress on politically sensitive areas. However, whereas national broadcasters keep to a rigid editorial orientation, streaming services tend to include controversial elements. Shifts of the regulatory red line are a result of the negotiation between producers and regulators in trying to reach a consensus on what constitutes mainstream. Criteria for what is appropriate content remain absent in the present digital regulatory regime, and this may impede the effectiveness and legitimacy of the regulators' function.

By investigating recent examples of digital regulation, this chapter has revealed the problems of censorship in the digital arena in managing the national discourse and the wide diversity of views and values. This leads to questions over the claim by policy makers of using traditional culture as an approach to enhancing ideological unity. The cultural argument, newly found in the policy agenda, suggests tighter boundaries to be drawn around what can be publicly represented as national cultural values. However, the instrumental view of culture may not best match the reality of cultural diversity. Cultural policy maintains that national culture can be deployed as a means to 'cultivation', while insisting on the legitimacy of a culturally inclusive programming agenda. Contemporary policy discourse folds cultural values into the common belief in the idea of 'cultural confidence', supporting the recomposition of a

fragmented national identity. Some worry, however, that this approach may lead to a uniformity among cultural presentations and in the repression of sub-cultures. Chapter 6 will further explore the tensions between the collective imagining of a national identity and the articulation of cultural diversity in China's digital cultural sphere and the global marketplace.

Chapter 5 The digital broadcasting culture in transition

Following the discussion of the mechanism of regulation in China's digital cultural sphere, Chapter 5 analyses the changes in the digital broadcasting sector that regulation is seeking to keep up with. It focuses on the competition for audience engagement between the publicly funded national broadcasting system and commercial digital media as an expansive process arising from technological and economic development as well as policy changes. Section 1 illustrates the rising communication power of streaming services shaped by the digital broadcasting network and how this power challenges the established top-down national broadcasting model. It examines the intensified competition between national broadcasters and streaming services for audience traffic and how they undertake different strategies in building up digital platforms and online applications to improve user engagement. Section 2 looks at particular challenges facing the national broadcasting sector, resulted from commercialisation within a changing media structure, and this leads on to questions about the commodification of cultural content and audience flow, drawing on empirical evidence that illustrates producers' new thinking on media economics and intellectual property rights (IPR).

5.1 Convergence and the digital content war

The growing force of commercialisation within the cultural sector has intensified the competition between national broadcasters and streaming services – a phenomenon that many producers have described as 'the digital content war' (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019). This section sets out how the digital broadcasting landscape is in transition by illustrating the shifting power relations between national broadcasters and digital content providers during the process of media convergence. It investigates state media's responses to digital distribution by aggregating content resources and expanding their online distribution channels, while recognising streaming services' increasing communication power in engaging audiences across the audio-visual marketplace.

5.1.1 National broadcasters and the 'one-cloud' convergence centre

In his analysis of the challenges facing the BBC in the digital era, Hendy has underlined the difficulty in conjuring up the concept of a space held 'in trust' for online generations (2013, p.125), which is associated with the declining status of public broadcasters. Certainly, the issue of trustworthiness is concerned with national broadcasters' role in political communication but, in the context of a competitive cultural marketplace, audience trust is also a concept that defines the perceived legitimacy of the values and principles of national media institutions and sustains broadcasters' effective exercise of communication power in influencing a national discourse. Before digitalisation, when the public values of national broadcasters were still unchallenged, Chinese television was heavily subsided and therefore protected from market competition to ensure that the broadcasting schedule had a clear focus on national responsibility (Keane, 2015, p.91). But, as Chapter 2 explained, digitalisation and marketisation led to a fundamental reimagining of how broadcasters engage with their national audiences in an increasingly interconnected and interactive digital cultural sphere. Although national broadcasters can hardly compete with streaming services in terms of variety of entertainment content, their technological advantages allow them to create platforms with national reach that provide exclusive cultural content as they seek to nurture audience support for national values.

In 2019, the NRTA announced an initiative to build up the 'one-cloud' service infrastructure, to enable nationwide digital access to the content produced by national media. On 20 November 2019, CCTV launched the first state-owned 5G new media channel, CNTV Mobile. China Network Television (CNTV) is the CCTV subsidiary that provides digital services including websites, Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) and mobile television. CNTV aims to connect content with audiences and link televisions with mobile screens using the wide coverage of the 5G mobile network, as the investment into technology infrastructure has been highlighted in China's policy agenda. Its mobile service application is positioned as the 'high quality

streaming social medium' and its interactive features highlighted in this approach. China's national broadcasters still see multi-platform distribution as an opportunity to increase audiences' exposure to national content by taking advantage of the expansion of 5G infrastructure that many producers term the 'one-cloud' service. Whereas streaming services continue to expand their digital territory, national broadcasters endeavour to enable national access to their distribution platforms. National media's focus on the expansion of platforms characterised by cutting-edge technology shows an increasing motivation to engage in commercial competition in the digital content industry. According to a producer at CCTV, the broadcaster has benefited from technological advantages including the 5G infrastructure, 4K resolution in filming and the support of AI technology. The government has devoted significant financial resources, as well as its best team, to support the development of CCTV's own digital convergence centre (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019). The state broadcaster's decision to improve the digital distribution infrastructure, supported by the government, can be seen as an attempt to secure a national reach for their cultural products.

However, the aggregation of archival content may hardly address the market disadvantage of the public sector. The top-down broadcasting model is at odds with prominent audience consumption patterns and the dominant commercial logic in broadcasting. A convergence media centre certainly allows wider and more convenient access to national content, which, to some extent, allows more exposure of the official discourse. But the increasing visibility of national content has not effectively tackled the issue of audiences' trust in national media. The notion of 'trust' mentioned by many media professionals in discussing audience engagement in media consumption during interviews, can be best understood as public consensus on claims of legitimacy for broadcasters' output. As many producers have observed, national audiences have become more critical of the credibility of national broadcasters' output in the face of a proliferation of output from digital media outlets.

Despite the seeming efficacy of expanded platforms supported by the one-cloud service with its national mobile reach, the pressure for ratings and positive audience reception challenges how national broadcasters develop their programming schedule for streaming services. According to producers at national broadcasters, young audiences in particular quickly start to show signs of decreasing satisfaction with the factual inaccuracy of educational documentaries. Narratives in *The Tale of Chinese Medicine*, for instance, were criticised as 'a mixture of telling stories based on cultural assumptions but with no scientific evidence being presented' (Interview, I-27, IPR owner of the documentary, 18 December 2019). A senior producer with CCTV suggested that adaptations of narratives were intended to appeal to digital consumption patterns and to address the needs of a diverse audience (Interview, SI-37, 31 December 2019). The narrative also shows that the commercial logic of the marketplace – in Hendy's words, 'the need, crudely, to maximise ratings and minimise costs' (2013, p.56) – has been increasingly explicit in CCTV's programming agenda as it bids to expand its digital reach. According to the CCTV producer, the multi-platform distribution of cultural content across streaming services and social media platforms is part of CCTV's overall convergence plan, which aims to engage a younger audience and create a wider audience impact through national content (Interview, SI-37, 31 December 2019).

CCTV's focus on content aggregation, supported by the technological development of its media infrastructure, seeks to sustain its role as the mainstream television service that provides its national audience with a range of programmes that reflect national identity. It takes the integration of distribution channels as a starting point for merging central, provincial and local resources within the site of contestation where 'whoever has power shapes the institutions and organises society around its interests and values' (Castells, 2010, p.83). Producers describe the convergence centre as 'the central content kitchen', due to its underlying functionality as the aggregator of integrated content resources (Interview, I-13, 28 March 2019). For example, the

range of output in the newly launched CNTV Mobile, which includes current affairs, arts and cultural content, live streaming of events and natural scenery, and which are regarded as public-service content with high educational and socio-cultural value, is placed in commercially attractive narratives to increase its exposure. The establishment of the convergence centre shows national broadcasters' attempt to create a diversified and more competitive operating model with a greater programming capacity, as the current limited programming capacity and lack of market appeal hold back their efforts to regain control of the domestic audio-visual marketplace.

For national broadcasters, keeping their communication power is fundamentally about the maintenance of audience trust in terms of the perceived legitimacy of its output while at the same time fulfilling the political and ideological tasks assigned by the party and state. Many media professionals at national broadcasters have expressed concerns over a perceived decline in the credibility of national production. National broadcasters endeavour to rebuild the image of, in the words of one producer, 'an official institution that provides trustworthy information and positive energies to enhance national unity' (Interview, I-4, SMG, 20 March 2019). As a senior director at SMG said, the digital distribution of cultural programmes and factual content is about the capability of delivering the correct message to audiences on mass platforms; as he put it, national broadcasters need to 'deal with the issues of scale and trust of the audiences as soon as possible' in order to regain their market share and maintain the delivery of public service media (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019). Fairclough (2003) explains the controversy over political correctness from the perspective of the cultural politics of media, wherein political and socio-cultural movements influence the changing languages used in political communication. The correct message, related to the officially acceptable political discourse, as discussed earlier, defines the editorial lines of national broadcasters. This goes beyond simply

expanding digital access and is more concerned with audience reception for the national discourse and its ideology.

Currently, national broadcasters are struggling with, on one hand, commercial pressures and, on the other, political constraints, which means production is pulled in divergent directions. On the one hand, the fierce digital content war has forced national broadcasters to allow a certain degree of commercial practice into their system – this begins with the integration of distribution platforms and is also associated with the current thinking on advertising and the commodification of intellectual property rights (to be discussed in Section 2 of this chapter). The economic thinking behind the expansion of distribution platforms may not be sufficient to deal with the intense competition for audience traffic. At the same time, there is a sense of increasing political responsibility due to a policy shift designed to tighten up political control of national media institutions. The government has highlighted the dual role of national broadcasters as its representative in the media and as the mainstream content provider. As Chapter 4 has illustrated, central government has decided to enhance its political control of national cultural production, to be achieved by administrative intervention on the institutional structure and also on the production schedule. But policy and political measures to support the production sector are limited and technological support alone is unlikely to be the solution to clashes between broadcasters' values and the audiences' needs, which are increasingly fragmented in the digital marketplace.

5.1.2 The rise of streaming services

As Castells maintains, digital technology has changed power relations in the network society through what he describes as a framework of 'mass self-communication' (2007, p.239). The rise of the digital distribution model has led to the proliferation of audio-visual content. An executive producer at Shanghai Media Group (SMG) contends that the merging of production

and platform resources has sparked a 'digital content war' between media providers fighting for limited audience attention (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019). Whereas national broadcasters struggle to keep up with multi-platform distribution strategies, streaming services engage the digital audience through diversified entertainment output. The bulk of the domestic market is split between the three major streaming services, iQIYI, Youku, and Tencent Video, and which are controlled by the country's 'big three' internet companies: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, respectively. Competition has been intensified among online audio-visual platforms and the growth of streaming services has challenged the top-down broadcasting model led by national media.

Streaming services have taken over a significant level of the audience traffic that traditional broadcasters used to attract. Statistics on present consumption patterns suggest that Youku, iQIYI and Tencent dominate the audience marketplace. In the latter half of 2018, an astounding 89.6% of the digital audiences used Youku, iQIYI or Tencent in consuming digital content (Zhou, 2018, p.12). By November 2019, iQIYI had the largest audience share, with 187.61 million monthly unique visitors, followed by Tencent (182.18 million) then Youku (147.33 million) (Thomala, 2020, p.9). The dramatic user concentration among the major streaming services indicates a tendency towards monopolistic competition in the digital arena, where the big three's dominance determines the rules of the marketplace. By contrast, in the UK, data show that 12.35 million households had subscribed to Netflix by the end of 2019, which accounted for 44.6% of the total number of British households (Stoll, 2021). In comparison, the subscriber base in the US stood at 69.96 million by the first quarter of 2020 – approximately one third of Netflix's total worldwide subscription base (Tankovska, 2021). Moreover, the expansion of streaming services has continued due to commercial thinking that prioritises audience preferences.

Many producers admit that traditional media are in decline, while social media are thriving in China's audio-visual market – in line with a global trend where the centrality of national broadcasters is being challenged by the spread of networked, digital communication methods. Audience ratings, the quantitative index traditionally used to indicate any media outlet's pulling power, have dramatically dropped among national broadcasters in China. As many producers in national broadcasting echo, China's state-run television media are in decline as more viewers move to digital platforms, which, as a result, have registered phenomenal growth in recent years. As a senior producer with 30 years' experience at Shanghai Media Group (SMG) suggests, it is nothing new that cultural content with national themes may get a zero audience rating in the latest random survey of 100 households (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). A more useful method for comparing the traffic on digital platforms with audiences for TV is developing: for example, market researchers take into account not only viewing on TV sets, but also on websites, social media accounts (Weibo, WeChat and TikTok), client-network video aggregators and on TV stations' own dedicated apps. This indicates that audience measurement is evolving with a clear digital focus and with a distinctive focus on mobile devices.

The rise of China's streaming services has engendered a commercial approach regarding content commodification, which has been focused on the monetisation of intellectual property rights (IPR). As Bosworth and Yang maintain, China has moved since the 1980s from seeing intellectual property (IP) as public property to 'having in place a raft of modern IP legislation' (2000, p.453). This development reveals the new market order where competition between cultural producers is played out and also leads to shifts in how broadcasters understand the privileges and struggles within the audio-visual industry, especially related to the allocation of profits between IP owners and non-owners. Youku Documentary, for instance, is endorsed by Alibaba's powerful digital networks, while its video output benefits from most of its user traffic

coming through its mobile services. According to the vice president of Youku, the company's focus on linking its brand with arts and cultural content is a strategic decision to win over specific audience segments from a higher education background as well as female audience groups, through the use of original-content IPR and the creation of what the industry describes as 'premium cultural products' (Interview, I-41, 10 December 2019). Using original-content IP can been seen as a self-sufficient commercial model to enhance the company's competitive advantages and help promote Youku's cultural productions in the wider audience marketplace.

Changes in the formation of a national audience and its viewing habits challenge how broadcasters manage their relationship with viewers and the wider national public. One of the key reasons for the growth of the streaming market in China is a rising demand for near-continuous streaming of data as per a user's convenience and time. Despite the increasing diversity of audience demographics, young people still account for the main audience flow. In a survey of the Chinese share of live-streaming users, as of the third quarter, 2019, those under 24 years old accounted for 47.2% of live-streaming platform audience; around 33% of live streamers were aged between 25 and 30, compared to respondents older than 41, who made up just 7.2 % (Thomala, 2021). According to the head of Bilibili's documentary department, young viewers have significantly increased their digital consumption of cultural content (Interview, I-9, 25 March 2019). Producers at Bilibili claim that their goal is to provide quality cultural content for a younger generation who are more confident in their own tastes and preferences.

Streaming services' extreme emphasis on the importance of user traffic encourages the proliferation of entertainment content. Digital distribution managers pursue what a senior producer at Youku describes as 'the development of vertical, horizontal and diagonal networks of interactive communication that connect the local and the global in chosen time' (Interview,

I-40, 8 January 2019). As a producer at Shanghai Media Group (SMG) suggests, the distribution capacity of digital platforms allows considerable variety in output; unlike for traditional broadcasters, this allows unlimited streaming in accordance with the effectiveness of digital infrastructure (Interview, I-4, 20 March 2019). This optimistic view of what a digital media environment can offer is shared by producers and distributors in both the public and private sectors.

However, unregulated entertainment content can be problematic for state media in China because it may result in the fragmentation of users' perception of the representation of the mainstream ideology. As a former manager at SMG suggests, streaming services are built upon their commercial logic, whereby they continuously seek to grow content volume and variety for competitive advantage, regardless of the quality of engagement (Interview, I-14. 30 March 2019). Certainly, the definition of quality content is periodically debated in the industry and in academic contexts. But, in national media production, this debate is often interpreted by the government and regulators within the terms of production practices that show a sense of ideological coherence and national unity. Commercialisation, on the other hand, has encouraged the production of 'eye-catching' products that may well transcend the ideological 'red line' (Interview I-11, a producer in SMG, 27 March 2019). As a senior producer says, the 'unlimited space for the sharing and spread of diversified voices' may not necessarily be an asset to the production industry but may instead be a danger to the digital media environment (Interview, I-14, 30 March 2019). This leads to changes in how digital citizens understand the boundaries of the public sphere and how they engage in public affairs. Particularly in the Chinese context, individual participation in content creation and distribution has become troublesome for the authorities when it challenges ideological coherence and social stability. For example, the promotion of content that engages with sensitive ethnic and religious topics, especially related to Xinjiang and Tibet, and which tends to use social media platforms to spark

connective political actions that challenge the official pursuit of social stability, points to an increasing regulatory difficulty in censoring digital content. As stated in the NRTA's initiative (2019), the need to overcome ideological tensions continues to constrain and increasingly determines the regulatory process in China.

5.2 Content commodification and digital audience traffic

This section examines how changing media economics have shaped the contemporary digital regulatory regime. It questions the use of 'audience traffic flow' as the key metric for the monetisation of cultural products, one which encourages the expansion of commercial forces and leads to difficulties for content regulation. It also identifies a decline in advertising revenues since 2015 and a rise in alternative thinking regarding content commodification, such as the sale of property rights and distribution rights, allowing greater negotiating power for IP owners.

5.2.1 Monetising audience traffic

Advertising accounts for the major share of revenue from streaming. Data show that advertising revenue from the online video industry in China has grown rapidly in the past decade. In 2020, total advertising revenue from the online video industry reached 71.38 billion CNY (8.09 billion GBP), with an annual growth of 24.3% (Thomala, 2020, p.17-8). Despite a modest revenue increase from out-stream video ads (which appear on partner sites and apps outside of the streaming service), in-stream video ads (streamed before, during, or at the end of a video being viewed) accounted for the majority of revenue sources from 2015 to 2017, accounting for 76.8% in 2017 (Thomala, 2020, p.19). The stable growth of advertising revenue stems from the increasing number of users of streaming services and an increasing consumption time.

The logic of the monetisation of digital content rests on the metrics of audience flow, also described as 'user traffic' or 'user flow'. The negotiation of the advertising rate is primarily

based on the click-through rate (CTR) measurement for audio-visual content. The owner of a documentary company suggested that viewers' time spent on cultural products can be seen as an 'endorsement' of the medium, which means advertisers should be willing to pay more for placements (Interview, I-16, 31 March 2019). This shows producers' initiative in attracting a mass audience to expand user flow toward their content. The need to cater to an audience's preferences and tastes is particularly obvious within streaming services. Bilibili's production team highlights audience attention as the real digital currency and considers the possibility of 'cashing out the audience flow' during digital distribution (Interview, I-9, 25 March 2019). This reveals the production sector's increasing reliance on commercial sponsorship generated from audience engagement. Concentrating on audience quantity illustrates a wider commercial principle within the audio-visual content marketplace, that is, the need to focus on the commodification of the audience asset.

Broadcasters have always been concerned about audience traffic in any kind of competitive media environment: in Varis' analysis (1984), traffic is a correlate of audience flow between channels in the global production and the dissemination of diverse content in an interconnected audio-visual marketplace. In the context of China's cultural industry, the underlying notion of audience traffic appears to be used as a recent invention that caters to commercial logic, located in a surge in the number of content providers and their cultural products for audiences to choose from. As a former producer at CCTV put it, media institutions are jumping into the content production and distribution industry for advertising and sponsorship, because they see the business model of audio-visual content as potentially profitable (Interview, I-30, 24 December 2019). This leads to intense competition for audience traffic and revenue between national broadcasters, streaming services and short-video services, including TikTok, that feature user-generated content (UGC), and, increasingly, professional user-generated content (PUGC).

Based on the volume of audience traffic, distributors share advertising revenues with producers. The growing trend of commercialisation in content production is evident across both public and private sectors because of the changing business model in digital distribution. According to the documentary producer behind a start-up, streaming services including Tencent, iQIYI, Youku and Bilibili offer accessible distribution platforms for individual content makers and propose sharing profits from in-stream advertising when the CTR reaches a certain target (Interview, I-16, 31 March 2019). This differs from the prevalent commissioning model of traditional broadcasters, in which production companies sell their audio-visual products together with the copyright for the production. As many interviewees who work with streaming services suggest, in a revenue-sharing model, producers retain the IPR to their work, which allows stronger negotiating power for them when interacting with media institutions and distributors. Instead of a one-off deal for the product and the IPR, producers now tend to keep the copyright and share the profits from content distribution based on the volume of audience flow. Shared ownership of content means a sustainable revenue stream and this approach leads to producers' increasingly emphasising the potential of a product for generating revenue. Frantic attempts to monetise the creative assets, however, encourage the expansion of commercial thinking in the creative sector (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005) and aggravate the tensions surrounding the insertion of commercial thinking into a cultural policy regime that focuses on the maintenance of ideological and social stability.

The rising commercial trend for commodifying audience traffic has already triggered policy attention. As illustrated in Chapter 4, the Chinese government has, in recent years, increasingly stepped up the regulation of digital entertainment services, focusing on drawing boundaries around which cultural images can appropriately represent the conformity of the public, the national and the official. As a former CCTV producer/director maintained, producers' indulgence in the pursuit of short-term profits from audience traffic has become a common

concern within the industry; the extreme focus on the quantity of audience traffic can make content providers impetuous in competing for an audience's attention, which leads to an emphasis on the creation of eye-catching, entertaining content (Interview, I-30, 24 December 2019). Many producers admit that the over-use of audience traffic figures, the currency of the commodification of digital content, has created a huge risk for the sustainability of tightly controlled national broadcasting institutions in terms of their commercial competitiveness. In the words of a CCTV producer/director, 'the focus on "hot [quick] money" forces the content industry to repetitively produce popular content that screams out for attention, compromising socio-cultural values and meanings in return for instant audience traffic and paying no respect to any other possibility for the future content market' (Interview, I-30, 24 December 2019). The proliferation of reality shows that feature celebrities and their private and family lives, such as *Where are we going, Dad?*, is an example of how the factual industries engage in the production of entertainment products in order to increase audience traffic associated with profits.

The commercial sustainability of advertising revenues is also questionable in the current model, which exploits IP and monetises audience traffic. According to China Netcasting Service Association, from 2016 to 2018 the percentage of advertising revenue from streaming has shown a slight decrease (50.9% down to 49.0%) (Zhou, 2018, p.11). The *Chinese Advertising Market Review* suggests that the share of advertising among the total annual income of digital companies has been decreasing since 2015 (2019, p.3). After digital advertising revenue reached its peak in 2015, the industry showed considerable fluctuations, with an 11.2% revenue drop in Q1, 2019 (CTR, 2019, p.3). A senior director at CCTV said that the decline of the advertising industry's profitability affected advertisers' willingness to invest in streaming content. In her production experience, major advertisers and sponsors of large-scale science documentaries, e.g., Intel and Bosch, had noticeably reduced their budget for

advertising since the second half of 2018 (Interview, I-36, 30 December 2019). Another documentary director and scholar also suggested that, despite increasing profits from streaming services, revenue growth had flatlined and this may have pressured the major streaming services into commercial strategies focusing on corporate expansion (Interview, I-31, 26 December 2019). The decline in advertising revenues has had a major impact on media firms' profits, which has in turn led to new ways of content commodification.

5.2.2 Content distribution and IPR

The predominant economic thinking on the production and sales of IPs indicates a new trend in the industry's competition for cultural ownership by the monetisation of creative work. As Bosworth and Yang argue, the upsurge in IP activity in China since 1985 has influenced market opportunities through exporting, licensing, and direct investment (2000). In the case of the cultural production sector, this is manifested in changing relations between content owners and non-owners. IPR protection creates an exclusive right for the content creator to control and profit from authorship. As the director and shareholder of a production company said, the changing model of content distribution allows certain creative autonomy and encourages the distributors' thoughts on quality audience engagement, which is likely to facilitate 'the long-term survival of the IP brand' (Interview, I-16, 31 March 2019). But the interplay between producers, digital platforms and audiences may contribute to uncertainty of IP regulation amid a shifting media structure.

The growth of the IP industry, which is associated with the expansion of the commercial, profit-driven production model, stems from the need to find alternatives to advertising revenues. The video on demand (VoD) model is an example of changes in media finance that have allowed IP owners increasing negotiating power. Take IQIYI, the streaming service, as an example, where IPR sales account for its third largest revenue stream from digital distribution

after advertising and membership services. This is achieved by the sale of intellectual property rights and distribution rights through, for example, the sub-licensing of audio-visual content from third parties and the distribution of selected premium content to domestic and international television stations. Revenues from content distribution have increased steadily in the past few years. In 2019, content distribution brought in 2.54 billion CNY (290 million GBP) for iQIYI, representing 8.8% of its total annual revenue, compared to 1.19 billion CNY (130 million GBP), that is, 8.6% of total revenue, in 2017 (iQIYI, Inc., 2020, p.71). In comparison, online advertising revenue was 8.27 billion CNY (920 million GBP) in 2019, representing an 18.4% decrease on 2017 (iQIYI, Inc., 2020, p.71). This model gives the IPR owners more negotiating power in determining a contract with distributors and in claiming authorship.

While the cultural policy surrounding IPR trade and its legislation has been rapidly changing in China since 1980s (Montgomery and Fitzgerald, 2006), media institutions have, too, developed their managerial protocols to build more stable revenue streams. The VoD consumption model supports producers' motivation to create 'a profit closed loop', generating direct profits from cultural products. Content providers' initiatives in building up 'closed-loop' revenue streams have fostered a commercial approach to the trade in cultural goods between production companies and digital distributors, which, as the owner of a production company explained, cuts out advertisers as the middleman and tries to generate revenue directly from the interaction between the product and the audience (Interview, I-15, 31 March 2019).

As mentioned, the increasing use of IPR as currency boosts the negotiating power of IPR owners. For example, the hit documentary series about traditional herbs, *Chinese Medicine*, proved to be a commercial success and achieved wide digital distribution. The IP owner of the series suggests that the successful negotiation of distribution deals with multiple platforms (CCTV and digital platforms including Youku, iQIYI and Tencent) was very fortunate, and

that this large-scale cultural production had, as a result, generated surprising profits for the funding company, the exclusive IPR owner (Interview, I-27, 18 December 2019). Recently, content creators have paid increasing attention to the ownership of copyright. The exclusive legal right to content ownership offers an advantageous bargaining position for its owners in making revenue-sharing deals. In the words of one distributor, 'the copyright of the key production is the owners' negotiating power', and IPR owners will not easily give away the copyright to original content, although they sometimes sell half of the rights to spin-offs from the original content to major producers with national reach, for further profit as well as to create a wider impact (Interview, I-27, 18 December 2019).

The competition for distribution rights to 'hit' content features is the latest battle between national broadcasters and the streaming services 'for exclusive and secondary rights and the entry of cashed-up online media players willing to invest in production', according to Keane (2015, p.123). Most commonly, copyright to audio-visual content is sold in exclusive distribution deals. As a senior documentary producer explained, the first round of distribution rights is the most appealing to potential buyers, because being able to premiere factual content 'is all that matters for audience ratings': CCTV, for example, only aims at the acquisition of first-round distribution rights for its productions on traditional arts and crafts (Interview, I-16, 31 March 2019). The producers and distributors also describe hit content as premium content, or 'head' content – a term used in various industrial settings, but one also indebted to Anderson's (2007) long tail theory, in which he distinguishes hit products with a mass-market distribution scale at the head of the distribution scale from the niche products with a smaller viewership in the tail; the head content entails more discoverability for the viewers among the range of products. For instance, a producer at Youku revealed that significant resources had been invested in head content, which, while accounting for only 20% of its total content output, is expected to achieve the majority of audience traffic (Interview, I-40, 8 January 2020).

Producers believe that head content with higher commercial value is more likely to attract a significant volume of audience and add value to their company. But this, again, adds to the concentration of production and platform resources among the digital services with the greatest commercial power.

The increasing focus of producers on premium-content IPs has contributed to a concentration of distribution networks' resources. Amid apparent creative autonomy and producer power, however, the production of potentially profitable IP inevitably involves negotiation with production companies and distributors with significant financial and platform resources. The trading activity in copyright across the audio-visual content industry accelerates resource exchanges amongst production companies, major streaming services, national broadcasters and international distributors. For instance, iQIYI has established a partnership with various documentary producers, including BBC and CNEX. Youku, the production company Yunji Media and National Geographic jointly produced the Chinese version of *One Strange Rock*, which premiered on 24 October 2019 (Interview, I-41, 24 October 2019). Tencent Video cooperated with 14 international organisations, including the BBC, by means of co-production and by nurturing new IPs. According to Bilibili's production team, in September 2018 the company sealed a co-production deal with Discovery which included 145 documentary programmes and 200 hours of exclusive content (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). The prevalence of large-scale IP trading has meant increasing opportunities for documentaries with high commercial standards. However, increasing transnational cooperation among global networks has also led to digital conglomerates increasing their commercial power.

In China's cultural sector, given the behavioral changes induced by the Trade War, the policy focus on IPR legislation tends to remain a key theme in the digital regulatory regime in order to maximise the political and economic interests through technological innovation

(Shang and Shen, 2021, p.76). Focusing on China's post–Trade War commitments to higher intellectual property rights standards since *The Economic and Trade Agreement* between China and the US was concluded in January 2020, Shang and Shen (2021) argue that an approach better aligned with the WTO framework may best facilitate the multilateral interaction between international players and balance the states' policymaking autonomy and international regulation of protectionist measures (p.53).

The prevalence of IP trading among producers and distributors has changed the way in which cultural goods are monetised and has challenged the financial basis for using an advertiser as an intermediary. However, the IP industry is entangled with a market logic that re-emerges in China's digital cultural sphere, where the uncertainty of trading rules remains an issue and the endorsement of licensing and distribution rights depends on commercial negotiations between producers and distributors. The emphasis on commercial IPs also indicates yet further concentration of resources in the hands of digital conglomerates. This leads to digital conglomerates strengthening what is already a dominant position in the marketplace, which is, in turn, related to the various regulatory initiatives now being undertaken. For instance, in September 2021, the China Academy for Information and Communications (CAICT) (the think tank of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology) published the *White Paper on China's Digital IP Regulation* – the main principle of which is to identify the problems regarding IP infringement across the online audio-visual market between 2016 and 2020 and provide jurisdictional solutions according to the present legislative framework for copyright issues. This matters to the legislative thinking under the cybersecurity initiatives being taken against the intellectual property rights infringement over the Internet, one that aims to contain the market disputes and enhance political control.

Conclusion

Chapter 5 has discussed the rationales for the political need of national broadcasters to regain their industry centrality in order to enhance ideological coherence and social stability, which is key to the digital regulatory regime within China's contested broadcasting environment. The commercial imperatives emerging in the digital production culture have substantially challenged the government's control over the audio-visual sector and triggered increasing administrative intervention on digital distribution activities. Increasing conflicts have been identified between the NRTA and the digital production sector over the past decade, especially during the negotiation of what can be publicly interpreted as representing public and national values. Clearly, the government has decided to intervene and maintain control over the digital content marketplace, rather than follow the market-led mode that is often associated with deregulation. Following the censorship agenda developed in the traditional television production, the regulatory bodies continue to use content regulation as the main interventive method, focusing on the monitoring of ideological aspects of audio-visual content that are publicly distributed. The government intends to rely on content regulation to resolve tensions emerging in the highly commercialised, digital-content marketplace. However, regulatory uncertainty is clearly an issue for effective negotiation between the public and private sectors, and between government bodies and the cultural industry.

Chapter 5 examined the dynamics of digitalisation and convergence in China's broadcasting industries which have challenged the policy initiatives to overcome ideological conflict. The rise of streaming services has impacted on the established communication power of national broadcasters while commercial forces have brought about the fragmentation of digital distribution channels, whose range of cultural products and whose values are conveyed in the diversity of content. Whereas streaming services are investing heavily in IP productions, national broadcasters are seeking to build up their own digital channels and link their content archives with mobile services to secure their national reach. However, the influence of

commercial thinking on content production has caused difficulties for national broadcasters trying to fit their cultural products into the digital content market. This influence also invokes the regulatory imperative of the government to maintain ideological control over the cultural production sectors.

This chapter has analysed the changing ways in which media production companies manage their relationships with audiences, focusing on the changing economics of the commodification of audience traffic flow associated with production from, and sale of, IPs. The streaming services are now playing an increasingly important part in renegotiating the cultural production agenda, because of their commerical production capacity, associated with the understanding of the audience market, although the government and the regulators remain the 'power-holders [who] understand the need to enter the battle for control in the horizontal communication network' (Castells, 2010, p.95). The increasing focus on IPR legislation in the regulatory thinking shows the state's response to market competition and digital fragmentation. Sectoral evidence suggests that production companies who own major IP declare their commercial negotiating power in choosing distribution channels, which may lead to further integration of production and platform resources. Here, the tension between political control and commercial imperative is transformed into a conflict about audience involvement in cultural activities that engage with national values but which at the same time are subject to market logic.

Chapter 6 Cultural production and nation building

Chapter 6 examines intervention in Chinese documentary production as part of an official policy approach to construct a contemporary national identity, as already noted above. Section 1 compares the political impetus for creating a modern cultural image at both domestic and international level and considers how changing audience consumption patterns and geopolitical power shifts have shaped China's internal and international cultural policy goals. It argues that the government initiative to take a cultural approach to national promotion drives the negotiations for a modern cultural self-image in the public arena. This chapter questions the instrumentalising of rigid ideological representations in the formation of a collective national identity and then analyses the interplay between production practices and the audience marketplace in negotiating such an identity. Section 2 looks at the actual practice within CCTV Documentary in terms of its response to media regulation, with respect to the internal policy goal of improving ideological cohesion in the public sphere. It investigates how the political imperative for ideological unity affects the broadcaster's policy on the presentation of national themes in domestic cultural content. It also tackles the dilemma, within the production and distribution schedules of national broadcasters, caused by the contradictions brought about by, on the one hand, political intervention and, on the other, changing audience consumption patterns. Section 3 looks at the recent changes at the China Global Television Network (CGTN) Documentary channel, and gives an assessment of CGTN's international broadcasting network, focusing on the audience reception for its cultural output. It examines the contemporary challenges for the state broadcaster in meeting the international policy goal of exporting national culture to increase the nation's communication power and support public diplomacy.

This chapter investigates the production projects of CCTV Documentary and CGTN. CCTV Documentary, or CCTV-9, is a television channel operated by Chinese state broadcaster China

Central Television (CCTV), broadcasting documentaries in Mandarin Chinese. It shared its name with CCTV's English language documentary channel until 31 December 2016, when the latter was renamed CGTN Documentary. CGTN, formerly known as CCTV-9 and CCTV News, is an international English-language cable TV news service, one of six channels provided by China Global Television Network, based in Beijing.

6.1 Reinventing national identity on the public screen

This section examines the politics of national identity in China's cultural production sector, in light of the political need for public diplomacy in global communication. Since 2016, the government has adopted the term 'cultural confidence' to articulate a cultural approach to ideological coherence. This section examines how current national images are formulated within traditional television and digital networks, and how this contributes to a desired collective imagination and national consciousness and influences the discourse on cultural diversity in the public sphere.

6.1.1 Political impetus for cultural confidence

The development of a 'cultural confidence' strategy reveals a reiteration of the political motives behind mediating conformity to a national discourse. In March 2018, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party announced a new direction for Chinese cultural policy, underlining the promotion of 'cultural confidence'. The orientation of this policy engenders the formation of a collective cultural self-image through the adaptation of traditional, national culture. The official doctrine explains confidence in national culture as a 'basic, profound and enduring' attitude towards the appreciation, consumption and production of national culture, which is the key to the nation's 'survival and revitalisation' (Huang and Liu, in *CCTV News*, 2019). This shows the political impetus to rebrand the national image globally in terms of its

traditional artistic and historical assets (Anholt, 2010; Fan, 2010). The aims and ambitions of soft power are situated within the presentation of this cultural approach.

In their analysis of the changing media discourse in China's online space, Chen et al. observe a trend where digital audio-visual services have increasingly engaged in the promotion of 'positive energy' since 2012, which has embodied mainstream political ideology (2020, p.97). The promotion of a consistent national image is especially important in an era of information fragmentation, where the shifting power dimensions in the communicative space challenges the formation of politico-cultural identities and cohesion of different kinds of collectivity (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007, p.66). To achieve a sense of national solidarity in accordance with the official discourse, mainstream media modify the national image through what Wodak describes as national identification and 'a focus on cultural similarity as a basis for political legitimacy' (2017, p.404). The emphasis on cultural sovereignty in media communication supports the government's aspiration to bring back a sense of cohesion to dominant ideologies, following fragmentation during digitalisation, in the public discussion of national affairs. The narrative of a modern, shared history has flourished and been used as an instrument for social cohesion and identity building (Li, 2019). As the head of a national broadcaster suggested, China's national media focus on the integration of platforms and content resources in order to promote national consciousness, underlining the moral aspects of the cultural framework that are regarded as unique to China (Interview, I-38, 7 January 2020). The strategy seeks to emphasise the ideological role of national broadcasters by highlighting their responsibility for governing national values – a public-service attribute of media institutions that is written into cultural policy. This means that national broadcasters are required to deliver continually changing political messages through mass communication, and the current interpretation of cultural policy seeks to recapture traditional cultural elements.

Furthermore, beneath such cultural assertiveness lies a new cultural diplomacy. The political impetus for 'cultural confidence' illustrates a change in China's policy pursuit for nation building and public diplomacy in global communication, related to the implementation of the soft power initiative in East Asian countries. As Chapter 4 has explained, the mechanisms of centralised media control and regulation are deployed to 'produce cultural cohesion' (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007, p.71) and this trend signifies not only the political need to enhance national values and maintain social stability, but also to build the country's soft power in the global cultural arena at a time of possibly pivotal geopolitical change. The policy emphasis on national values and nation branding amounts to a euphemism for promoting the state's interests, through what Flew and Waisbord describe as 'the continuing centrality of nation-states to media processes, and the ongoing significance of the national space in an age of media globalisation' (2015, p.620). As a senior cultural producer at SMG suggested, the reinforcement of cultural confidence aims at creating the image of a powerful player, as opposed to a passive participator globally (Interview, I-12, 30 March 2019). This shows the more explicitly expressed policy aim of using public diplomacy as a means of promoting a country's soft power and, as Nye describes, as 'an essential tool in the arsenal of smart power' (2008, p.94).

Again, China seeks to develop the political and cultural power that 'embodies an attractive way of exercising influence, a comparatively harmless manner of projecting power and engaging other nations, and even a civilising force in the region's international relations' (Melissen, 2011, p. 249). The soft power strategy seeks to use national culture as an instrument for influencing the international political agenda, combined with the commercial approach to 'traveling a higher value road' in cultural production (Keane, 2013, p.95). While the domestic audience marketplace has contributed most to the growth of China's cultural industries, the government has recognised that more efforts should be made to improve the projection of

China's cultural identities in the global sphere. The government has assigned a diplomatic role to CGTN, China's newly established international broadcasting network. The CCP describes its nation-branding policy as one of 'great external publicity' that became part of CGTN's production schedule in 2016. This new terminology has a positive connotation in the context of China's media and legitimises the political aim of giving diplomatic significance to international broadcasting. Considerations on the protection of national interests have become more obvious in the cultural production schedule. As an executive producer at CGTN comments:

> All nations want to take their opportunities to promote their national culture to the world. Some strategies are more straightforward, others more implicit. We were influenced in so many ways by American cultural products. We grew up watching the American heroes' brave fights during the civil war, when you tend to forget to question the ethics of war. This view of cultural production is not about the recognition of globalisation, but totally about the exportation of a national culture. (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019)

The use of international broadcasting to enhance the global reach of communication power is nothing new to the policy agenda, as the mechanisms of influence and control are deeply connected to the exercise of media power. However, the emphasis on the manifestation of arts and culture shows a policy shift toward a gradualist approach that focuses on ideological influence. The government articulates the policy goal of promoting a collective cultural image for ideological unity, describing cultural confidence as 'the key to the independence of the national spirit' (Huang and Liu, in *CCTV News*, 2019). The newly found diplomatic role of state media affects how national cultural images are depicted in cultural output. By means of the selective exposure of national cultural elements, national broadcasters aim to invent a national image consistent with international political discourses and pertaining to modern cultural values. It is also worth noticing how the political impetus for creating a collective cultural identity has, in part, shifted its focus from the domestic level to the international level,

which causes tensions between the domestic production culture and the needs of the international marketplace (Chapter 7 will elaborate this point).

6.1.2 Reimaging a collective cultural identity

As Chapter 2 explains, the rhetoric of tradition within a national discourse seeks to enhance mainstream ideology and overcome ideological conflict in the public sphere. The new question here is whether the policy can succeed in manufacturing a collective cultural identity that is agreed by the political authorities, the cultural marketplace, media professionals and audiences. Since Xi's cultural-confidence thesis became prevalent, the depiction of cultural and historical elements in the media have placed greater emphasis on China's traditional culture as national broadcasters showcase national culture in conventional representations characterised by social order and rigour.

The top-down approach to the promotion of national identity is a modern invention to restore social order and political control over the cultural sector. The issue in this regard is how broadcasters could mediate cultural identities to reaffirm the coherence and cohesion of China's traditional cultural values. Wodak distinguishes imagined from real identities in unpacking the discursive construction of national identity (2009). As Schlesinger argues, 'national cultures are not simple repositories of shared symbols to which the entire population stands in identical relation. Rather, they are to be approached as sites of contestation in which competition over definitions takes place' (1991, p.174). The task for mainstream media then becomes moderating contending ideologies in the formation of a consensual imagining through a national discourse. According to a senior producer at CCTV, invoking traditional cultures seems 'best practice' for catering to both the elite and the masses, because policy makers find that traditional cultural assets can be used to stimulate a sense of ideological cohesion, based on the common ground and knowledge of its citizens (Interview, I-31, 26 December 2019).

Many producers have found that the media discourses around national identity in recent productions are increasingly linking culture and aesthetics with order and discipline. As an executive producer at SMG points out:

> Cultural content tends to depict traditional culture as something highly regulated. It is very restrictive in terms of what is tolerated and what is not. This fits into the traditional value system, what is allowed and what is not allowed. Chinese opera singers have a saying that goes, 'rather wear rags than wear the wrong costume' – a perfect illustration of the strict rules. It may sound very restrictive, but the respect for order and discipline might be exactly what is missing in the contemporary digital world. (Interview, I-11, 27 March 2019)

A cultural approach toward ideological unity, which integrates social order with historical aesthetics, may suggest that the media depiction of national identity has been reversed to one that values traditions over creativity, conservative norms over individualism. Take, as an example, *The Tale of Chinese Medicine*, a large-scale documentary supported by the National Health Commission and private investment. The producers initially attempted stories of handicrafts and the struggles of craftsmanship during the era of urbanisation and modernisation, but government bodies decided to modify their 'poignant' images into something more glamorous that represents ancient wisdom and national heritage (Interview, I-27, IP owner of the documentary, 18 December 2019). A producer at SMG suggested that he had been doing the job of 'fitting aesthetically pleasant audio-visual footage into written stories' (Interview, I-29, 21 December). According to producers at CCTV and SMG, the editorial orientation is deeply anchored within the value system of maintaining traditions and respecting national norms.

This engenders a collective approach among media professionals to conceiving a cultural discourse. The shift back to social conventions contributes to a top-down approach to formulating a national identity. Gramsci (1971) persuasively argues that hegemony is not an

uncontested achievement; rather, the consensus over it is a contingent arrangement of negotiations between political, commercial, and socio-cultural forces. As in Allan et al.'s words, 'hegemonic orders depend on a legitimating ideology that must be consistent with the distribution of identity at the level of both elites and masses' (2018, p.839). A 'spontaneous' consensus given by the mass population over a collective national identity justifies policy intervention in forming 'an ideologically legitimate national image' (Interview, I-34, with a producer and scholar, 28 December 2019). This approach encourages the return of a national, centralised model of mass communication. Such a narrative facilitates the development of a political culture in which open conflicts and confrontations are moderated (Meng, 2018).

However, the unanimous depiction of national identity challenges the operation of an inclusive media agenda that can reflect the complex identities of diverse socio-cultural groups negotiated in the public domain. As previously discussed, the promotion of national cultural images reduces the media space for what political authorities see as peripheral or foreign. For instance, the tensions and conflicts between individual and government bodies are not allowed to be shown on screen, because this would be perceived as a challenge to the imagining of the desired modern image. Consequently, the emphasis on a consistent discourse may lead to the divorce of diverse cultural images from the representation of national content. As Taylor has famously argued (1994), the failure to meet the demand for recognition, linked to the understanding of individual and group identities, may result in the marginalisation of social groups in political communication, which risks undermining the policy aim of using the imagery and themes of unity to maintain social stability. As a documentary producer at SMG reveals:

> We filmed an old man with Alzheimer's disease. He didn't remember any of the answers to the questions from the medical practitioner. Then the doctor asked him if he remembered Mao's birthday. He thought for a long time, and suddenly he started to slap himself, crying,

> how could he forget Mao's birthday? Do you think we could keep the footage in the documentary? It was deemed as inappropriate eventually. But why? This is obviously the shared memories of the of 50- to 60-year-old generation, but why would it be intolerable on the public screen now? (Interview, I-29, 21 December 2019)

The footage is certainly artistically interesting, but it relates to the question of historical oppression during the time of the Cultural Revolution, which contradicts the current approach to social instability and non-cohesion. The depiction of historically oppressed social groups is not acceptable in the official discourse today because it does not accord with the harmonious cultural imaging needed to define ideological unity in the current era. This exemplifies the changes in producers' perception of what is to be included in the mainstream and what is not tolerated. The illustration of the gap between privileged and marginal social groups is absent from public television. Some also describe it as a 'reductionist' approach to mass communication; one that reduces the complexity of the ideological dynamics of cultural production and minimises the risk to the uniformity of public opinion (Guan, 2019).

To frame the question in the interconnected global cultural sphere, we may come across different kinds of dilemmas, compared to the analysis of the domestic cultural industries. Tensions arise when top-down interventive methods challenge the protection of pluralism and cultural diversity. In the words of one independent documentary producer, 'the rigid norms and rules represented in media production tend to reduce the complexity and fluidity of the world, promoting an acceptable lifestyle that one is obligated to abide by and follow' (Interview, I-24, 28 July 2019). The creative pursuit of individuality and pluralism does not always concur with the policy goal of depicting the image of a national culture through a modern narrative of China's cultural heritage (Interview, I-5, production company head, 21 March 2019). The interventive impulse, therefore, came to be seen as a barrier rather than a driving force in the development of an inclusive cultural agenda.

This underlines the challenges for the present discussion on inclusion and diversity of cultural representations in mass media. The CCP Central Committee envisions the flourishing of socialist literature and arts by stimulating 'the creative vitality of the popular masses' (2015), a line that supports the principle of cultural pluralism and inclusiveness in media production. The recognition of one's own identity, in Taylor's words, 'mirrors back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves' (1994, p.25). As a producer at CCTV says, 'the poor, the minority, the under-educated groups must be included in the programming agenda. They need to see themselves on television, otherwise there will be political consequences. The outcome, however, is a fabrication of various materials trying to fit into the national storytelling, like a stir fry of all sorts of cultural elements' (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019).

6.2 National identity in domestic broadcasting

This section examines how the application of the cultural-confidence strategy finds expression through China's documentary channels. Drawing on cases of television documentary production by CCTV-9, this section looks at ways in which national identity has become the dominant ideological aspect of the officially recognised public sphere. Furthermore, it investigates how political constraints and audience needs have shaped broadcasters' approach to engaging with national values.

6.2.1 Forging a collective cultural identity

Current cultural policy emphasises the ideological role of the domestic broadcasting network. A producer and scholar in Beijing believes that 'media products are now designed to connect the audience with the nation's history, linking the past wisdom and values with contemporary ideologies' (Interview, I-34, 28 December 2019). The use of traditional cultural elements as a tool for constructing ideological unity is implanted in the broadcasting schedule.

The cultural-confidence thesis constitutes a top-down approach to nation building. As Chapter 4 shows, the production of national cultural content is done within a hegemonic media system characterised by negotiation between media firms, political authorities and the regulator. Interventive measures by government bodies facilitate a top-down model for cultural production and distribution. As discussed, the CCP Central Committee initiated a restructuring of the public broadcasting system on 21 March 2018 and national broadcasters now take orders directly from the National Publicity Department. This restructuring has shaped the hegemonic process of media production and engendered a top-down approach to the promotion of a national identity. Following the new policy orientation, national broadcasters prioritise the promotion of a shared national awareness, aiming at maintaining ideological control in the contemporary media environment. This leads to questions of how a media-led national discourse may shape audiences' perception of national values.

CCTV has developed a cultural approach to representing the official line on national values in its programming agenda. Some regard the tailoring of traditional cultural elements to a contemporary narrative as a modern version of national propaganda. The changing dynamics within the audience marketplace drive policy makers to improve communication strategies within the public sphere. As many cultural producers agree, the previous model for national and international promotion featured monotonous narratives with straightforward illustrations of party ideology and 'positive energies' mocked as 'shouting out slogans'. As one screenwriter put it, 'the tedious and unimpressive narrative is by no means a good fit for audience consumption habits today' (Interview, I-4, production company screenwriter, 23 March 2019). The manifestation of culture, arts and heritage in national content seeks to target national audiences and improve communication effects, but the influences of a shared cultural identity may be questionable in the contest for attention in the competitive communication network that

'branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas' (Habermas, 1996, pp.373-4).

Government bodies are more directly involved in the production and regulation process when the creative content is about nation branding. For example, in the making of *The Tale of Chinese Medicine* (2006), a six-episode documentary series on the discovery and application of traditional Chinese medicine, the National Health Institute took part in the production, distribution and regulation process as the government body intended to use this large-scale cultural production to enhance its public image. Quoting from the project manager for the series:

> We proposed a project on the story of the old medicine workers who had a hard life preserving traditional techniques. The government bodies really liked our proposal, but they need a great series that promotes 'cultural confidence'. Then we had to change the whole direction of the storytelling, starting from changing the title to *The Tale of Chinese Medicine* [...] The special constraint for Chinese producers is that you have to do whatever the leadership tells you to. I mean the government bodies in general, not necessarily one particular person. In this case, we were addressing the demand of the National Health Institute in terms of publicity for traditional medicine techniques. (Interview, I-19, production company project manager, 18 December 2019)

The policy makers intend to link the modern national image with the aesthetics of traditional culture and civilisation, while avoiding the depiction of underdeveloped parts of contemporary society. Here, the government administration insists on modernity rather than a traditional approach because it seeks to project a positive image for the institution in the public sphere. Although the operation of political intervention falls under the promotion of national identity, it is also concerned with the management of the public impact and authority of government institutions.

The interplay between a centralised broadcasting agenda and administrative intervention shapes and sustains the notion of a collective cultural identity in the media. Currently, the

cultural images featured in documentary productions focus on national culture and conventions. Collective concepts of traditional morals and values are replacing individual expression in media productions. Various narrative measures on aspects of traditional culture are designed to boost the nationalist discourse and the public impact of national institutions. As a senior documentary producer suggests:

> Amongst all the traditional themes and topics, some content is easier [to produce] to call for cultural awareness, such as traditional Chinese medicine, or the crafts of paper, ink and pen; these objects can be regarded as historical heritage, exclusively existing in Chinese culture. As these crafts are real objects, it's easier to capture their beauty visually, so the result is quite impressive on film. (Interview, I-6, a production company, 24 March 2019)

Meanwhile, uniformity in the manifestation of culture contributes to a shared national consciousness increasingly modelled on historical concepts of culture and civilisation and the interpretation of culture as a national possession becomes more explicit in cultural policy. In the context of the example set by CCTV, the symbols and objects displayed in cultural content are consonant with, and also manifest, the historical coherence of Chinese civilisation. Confucian culture, arts and traditions are recast to make a shared, historical identity which outlives the circumstances which gave birth to it. According to Li (2015), the tradition of Confucianism is highlighted in China's contemporary socio-cultural discourse as one of the main components to 'reinvigorate the deeper cultural and intellectual resources available in Chinese history' (p.8). For instance, *National Treasure*, CCTV's factual series, explores museums in China, linking traditional arts and crafts with popular cultural elements and highlighting the contemporary relevance of cultural heritage and rituals. In the words of its executive producer:

> The modern depiction of traditional culture unfolds in the narrative from the past and applies morality to present society. This serves the purpose of ideological guidance [...] By means of the integration of popular and traditional cultural elements, we tried to link the traditional

> cultural elements with a modern persona. For example, we would incorporate popular stars as narrators for the story of *National Treasure*. We hope this may lead to better audience ratings and audience engagement with traditional culture, especially for the younger generation. (Interview, I-45, CCTV, 9 January 2020)

This is an example of the attempt to engage a mass audience by integrating popular culture into storytelling with national content. This consideration of mass audiences' needs, however, is associated with the political imperative to maintain order and control. As a producer at CCTV suggests:

> The distribution of cultural content must address the needs of the mass audience. It is a necessity, not a creative choice. A huge proportion of the national audience is under-educated, not even with a college degree. As a central broadcaster, we need to make them feel they are important, that their needs are respected and valued by the state. If the national media do not show the slightest gesture of inclusiveness, there will be political consequences. (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019)

This reveals the dilemma between the supposed links between the media's recognition of individual and group identities and audiences' self-understanding. Again, the politics of recognition are not an uncontested discourse but are being communicated in interconnected cultural spaces, which means national identity is not subject to consensus but is best understood as the projection of a collective view of a national image associated with one's own identity during the construction of a public discourse (Luhmann, 2000). According to Taylor, 'nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (1994, p.25). The tension between a top-down and a bottom-up solution is obvious in developing an inclusive agenda and representing national cultural values. CCTV is stuck somewhere between being an authoritative medium and an interactive content provider. This is especially relevant to the documentary channel, which is seen as an educational platform and plays a crucial role in the

cultivation of common beliefs and shared values. However, as Chapter 5 discusses, the complexity of the audience's tastes and preferences may lead to further contradictions within the production schedules of national broadcasters. The policy initiative toward formulating a collective national identity is fraught with difficulty in the digital era. Despite policy interventions, in practice negotiation over the depiction of cultural images continues.

6.2.2 Contradictions and dilemmas for CCTV

The restoration of strong cultural confidence may be a policy ideal, but the complex dynamics of digitalisation and commercialisation have made it difficult for national broadcasters to meet this goal and regain their communication power in shaping a national discourse. The challenge for CCTV is to represent diverse cultural images while abiding by the politically acceptable, official discourse around ideological unity.

The CCTV Documentary channel is in an awkward position, struggling between the roles of authoritative informer and commercial content provider. Domestic audiences regard CCTV as a media authority that represents the nation's perspectives on key public affairs. Producers and distributors accept the tradition that the central broadcasting institution performs its role as 'the mouthpiece of the party' (Interview, I-18, a national broadcaster, 6 April 2019). It has been the case in the CCTV television network that the portrayal of cultural images follows the guidance for the official discourse at the time, compared to commercial broadcasters with a similar production capacity and national reach. As a producer and media scholar puts it:

> As the central broadcaster, CCTV takes a distinctive position in comparison to other provincial or local broadcasters with clear commercial attributes. The positioning of the central broadcaster has been embedded in its production since its establishment. For example, if there's a policy request that demands CCTV promotes cultural confidence, to produce particular content to support the political aspiration of self-affirmation, it has no

> choice but to take immediate action, at all costs. In this case, national interests definitely override commercial interests. (Interview, I-34, 28 December 2019)

Since Xi's cultural-confidence thesis is firmly on the policy agenda, the publicity department has emphasised national broadcasters' role in national publicity and propaganda. For the production sector, this means increasing political constraints by a hegemonic production system that involves government intervention. Xi's cultural-confidence thesis aims to 'cultivate a high level of cultural consciousness and cultural self-confidence and strive to build a powerful country with a socialist culture' (Li, 2016, p.1). In the context of media and communication, the policy goal of nation building is to forge and project a desirable representation of national culture that contributes to conformity with mainstream identity. Zhang attributes the construction of a favourable cultural image to the CCP's aim to improve the control of public opinion and enhance the hegemonic nature of social relations (2011a).

Producers agree that political intervention challenges creative expression. As Chapter 4 explained, professional autonomy is considerably constrained by the prevalent practice of self-censorship within media institutions and the administrative measures of regulators and government bodies. The publicity department clearly wants CCTV to follow the administrative order and serve the political need for nation branding. The policy orientation places an expectation on national broadcasters to improve their role in guiding and informing audiences through the restatement of national identity in the production and distribution of cultural content. As an executive producer at CCTV suggests:

> When documentaries are used for nation building, the content must be about China. Official documentaries must focus more on the big picture, such as ethnicity and social issues. Those documentaries aiming at the international market may seek to reveal something less positive or people who are struggling. Those are the things government media would definitely not want to show in their production. (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019)

Again, this shows the process by which ideological contestation is mediated and collective consciousness is built through national production. As Meng suggests, the discourse on struggles between social classes are no longer part of China's contemporary broadcasting agenda and nor are the divisions between high culture, such as literature and art, and popular culture that focuses on entertainment (2018). China's projected national identity thus becomes an act of achieving a politically desired buy-in: an ideal image composed of traditional cultural symbols. The producers substitute propagandistic elements and political views with soft cultural elements and make the content more about 'different types of history and reality' (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019). This can be sensibly associated with the notion of romantic nationalism that is indebted to Leerssen's (2013) analysis of the European cultural sphere in the 18th century, where romanticism and nationalism are combined into an ideological instrument that promotes national values in the formation of mainstream discourses. Here, in the context of CCTV's cultural production, ideological doctrine is implicitly implanted in creative, aesthetic and representational activities, a process that involves trade-offs between politics and creativity to create a unified cultural image.

In the meantime, the conflict between political and commercial interests challenges broadcasters' value as national institutions that serve as a public field of contestation for the different cultural groups they represent within society. As Chapter 5 discussed, the expansion of streaming services and users' engagement in commercial production has caused increasing uncertainty in terms of national broadcasters' capacity to reach their audience. In a media world with diverse content choices, audiences are reluctant to accept a repetitive re-statement of rules, norms, traditions and social orders. Limited audience engagement is the main barrier to CCTV exercising ideological influence over its national audience. An executive producer of cultural programmes says that Chinese audiences perceive traditional arts and cultures as 'old, low and ugly' and that it is extremely difficult for national broadcasters to change this stereotypical

perception simply by formulating a linkage between stories of the past and the appeal of the modern (Interview, I-11, SMG, 27 March 2019). This is perhaps unsurprising for producers in the private sector who well understand audience consumption patterns in relation to their commercial nature. According to the head of Bilibili's documentary department:

> Audiences do not want to be educated by the 'lofty' and 'pretentious' stuff traditional broadcasters used to deliver. The true question in digital distribution is, to what extent would the producers be able to create a rapport with audiences by better positioning their products of the national cultures? You need to connect with the contemporary era; don't create 'a heritage that is distant from here and now'. (Interview, I-7, a streaming service, 25 March 2019)

This viewpoint from a streaming service department head, then, is also a perfect illustration of the market-oriented view of imagining a national identity that can best represent domestic audiences. CCTV's struggles to engage digital audiences and maintain its market share pertain to the constriction of producing and reproducing the cultural representations of the society and its public in the digital cultural sphere (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). National broadcasters need to consider how audience consumption patterns may influence the ways in which citizens engage with national cultural content in the digital space. Cultural producers with national broadcasters are now working on adapting popular shows and on entertainment programming to accommodate digital-audience consumption patterns. As a former executive producer at CCTV suggested, increasing tension between the promotion of a prestigious national image and the need to address mass culture has led to the invention of a contemporary 'down-to-earth' style of cultural production (Interview, I-30, 24 December 2019). This formula seemed auspicious in terms of meeting both political needs and commercial needs and a number of documentaries and documentary series were made using popular formats to showcase cultural heritage and collective memories. For instance, a 22-episode documentary series, *A Bite of China* (2012-18), incorporates traditional lifestyles into the showcasing of food and culture.

This represents, according to the head of a national television channel, ‘an attempt to integrate the promotion of national culture with a thoughtful adaption of production strategies in line with changing audience patterns’ (Interview, I-38, 7 January 2020). He describes the rationale for the ‘down-to-earth’ production style as follows:

> In the past, it was more about what we thought was important for the audience. But now our production teams consider more conflicts and controversy when they choose a theme; tell a story. It needs to be both fun and important. We care about what the audience really cares about, and we’d love to provide them with what they actually need. (Interview, I-38, 7 January 2020)

Of course, a more pragmatic concern is that the limitation of commercial production capacity confines market impact. According to an IP specialist and project manager in a production company:

> Particularly in the Chinese domestic market, we don’t have the budget for the production of high-quality factual content that may have the potential for commercial competition. It’s different from the creative teams in the BBC and the Discovery documentary channel, who are equipped with experienced production lines for different themes and an established international distribution model. We simply don’t have enough money to fight for the chance of great audience appeal. (Interview, I-27, 28 December 2019)

The inadequate production resources limit the commercial scale of documentaries produced by national broadcasters and hinder the public impact of their creation. Questions then arise as to the scale and scope of CCTV’s national production and what this may contribute to the market impact of the centralised national broadcasting network. The political need to promote a national identity is what continues to hold in tension conflicting forces including creative autonomy, commercial competition and diverse audience needs. In view of this, it is crucial for state media to consider how the national identity is presented to the public and what this means

to the formulation of complex individual and group identities that are composed and constricted into a collective, national imagining.

6.3 National identity and international broadcasting

This section explores the policy challenge of China's outward-facing production practices, focusing on the role of CCTV's international broadcasting service in promoting a contemporary national identity in the competitive global cultural arena. It begins with an analysis of the political and cultural role of CGTN (the English-language cable TV service owned by the Chinese state media) in the international marketplace, and considers how the exercise of soft power is manifested in the international broadcasting agenda as an element of diplomacy. It reveals the potential conflict between China's domestic and international cultural policies, which brings the discussion of nationalism and global communication back into the policy focus.

6.3.1 Communication development through CGTN documentary

After the replacement of CCTV-9 and CCTV News with CGTN and its newly branded ethos of 'see the difference', the cultural approach to nation branding became clearer. CCTV-9 had been run by China Central Television, broadcasting documentaries in Mandarin, while CCTV News had been an English-language news channel. CGTN was established, on 1 January 2017, from the merger of seven sub-channels of the CCTV international and news networks. The blending of cultural content with news in pursuit of global influence has been central to CGTN's production schedule. The broadcaster claims to provide global audiences with news coverage and audio-visual services, 'promoting communication and understanding between China and the world, and enhancing cultural exchanges and mutual trust between China and other countries' (CGTN, 2016). The emphasis on the enhancement of international relations reflects changing broadcasting strategies focusing on soft power.

Following the cultural approach taken by CCTV Documentary, by the same token, CGTN seeks to foster a global conversation by engaging the officially endorsed, ideological elements as well as China's traditional cultural symbols as a means to enhance the nation's soft power and influence world politics. The development of public diplomacy, as Nye describes, rests primarily on the culture, political values and foreign policy of a nation (2008, p.96). The promotion of these intangible assets seeks to enhance the legitimacy and moral authority of the national image (Nye, 2008). Communication development through China's international broadcasting network is a process whereby the nation's traditional aesthetics, culture and values in media production are integrated into a national cultural brand. CGTN takes responsibility for promoting the modern Chinese identity in the international audience marketplace through the global distribution of national media products.

As the state-controlled broadcaster, CGTN is the primary medium for delivering national messages in the global cultural sphere. The question that then arises concerns how states might regulate overseas content within their jurisdictions, which take on different standards to determine the conditions of publicly acceptable editorials. With the rising needs for nation building and nation branding, the international channel is desperate to produce storylines about China's culture and traditions that the audience finds relatable (Interview, I-37, CCTV, 31 December 2019). The seemingly depoliticised narrative not only deals with the mismatch between the domestic and international perceptions of China's cultural identity (Melissen, 2011) but it is also a result of broadcasters' fear of transgressing rapidly changing red lines around political discourses in nationally specific markets. In CGTN's programming schedule, national identity is manufactured by a set of practices that create meaning for contemporary Chinese society. As an executive producer suggests:

> The employment of contemporary cultural elements – say, cuisine and lifestyle, like the example in *A Bite of China* – no matter how neutral the story goes, it still echoes with the

> ongoing politics. Politics is multifaceted; it is about the relations between individuals. When you see the exquisite ways in which the finest food is being produced and enjoyed, you also feel the human emotions and affections attached to it. Stories like this can be universally resonant. (Interview, I-37, CGTN, 31 December 2019)

This view informs the broadcasting objective of highlighting the cultural dimension to build international rapport through global communication. 'At least this kind of content does not seem to make people think, "Chinese government propaganda"' (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019). However, the pursuit of supporting global diplomacy is full of challenges for China's international channel. In failing to establish global audience trust and communication power, CGTN struggles to engage global audiences. As a producer at CCTV says:

> We need to deliver the stories with the lowest communication costs. Cuisine and lovely animals – these are things you feel close to. It is a long-term process, but I think it is a great media strategy. Unfortunately, the mass audience in western countries relate Chinese cultures to symbols such as Kung Fu and Pandas [...] Chinese stories are not a necessity for global audiences in their daily consumption habits, but it is our necessity to communicate our story to the world. This is where the tension arises. (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019)

The gap between the consumption patterns of domestic and global audiences often leads productions into divergent propositions. In effect, CGTN's decisions in its broadcasting orientation and editorial strategies depend on the negotiation between what the Chinese government sees as 'an effective projection of the nation's soft power' and, as Shin-Wha Lee describes as 'what other nations perceive it to be' (2011, p.17). Despite careful self-censorship on politically sensitive elements, CGTN still encounters the criticism that it is a state-controlled media company producing 'national propaganda'. In Nye's words, 'preaching at foreigners is not the best way to convert them' (2008, p.103). For China's national media, the task of translating the country's cultural assets into ideological influence in the global communication

space entails more than promoting traditional cultural symbols that constitute national values. As a curator for Edinburgh Film Festival suggests:

> People have certain tastes, and we go to see certain things. The acquired knowledge on what is right or wrong determines what people want to see and believe. How do you market the stories happening in another country, and make them seem relevant, make people overseas choose to believe in those stories? Audiences need to feel the connections, such as shared histories, memories, opinions or emotions. (Interview, I-17, Edinburgh, 28 July 2019)

This affects producers' editorial strategy for cultural products distributed internationally, with a focus on the localisation of cultural narratives. For example, *The Forbidden City* (2005), a 12-episode, 600-minute, large-scale series about the Palace Museum, was remade into a two-hour international version and retitled *Inside the Forbidden City*, which indicates a mystery genre and, therefore, caters to the consumption habits of international audiences. As a director who works with international media firms observes:

> The international audience is not really interested in the display of 'culture'. Making something like reading a poem and explaining the metaphors between the lines is simply impossible for international distribution. For the majority of the international audience, the mass consumers, the straightforward education on Chinese cultural concepts and symbols is off the table. (Interview, I-44, 7 December 2019)

As Chapter 2 has discussed, the perceptions of cultural relevance influences audiences' reception of cultural content that is not locally produced. Cultural distance between countries is inherently a challenge for CGTN to facilitate the cross-border consumption of China's cultural products. The proximity of language and culture shapes the ways in which audiences of a particular nation or region acquire their tastes and preferences in cultural consumption as, in Fu's words, 'cultural preferences are more similar among societies that share a cultural or linguistic affinity than those that do not' (2013, p.789). Producers at CGTN are well aware of the difficulties in managing the acquired differences in languages and cultural backgrounds of

diverse audiences, which play a key role in their active engagement in cultural consumption activities (Interview, I-3, former CCTV producer, 16 March 2019). This concerns language not only from a linguistic perspective, but also as embedded in audiences' consumption habits, tastes and preferences, and as related to the conditions of the collective socio-cultural psychology and the political climate of different countries and regions. As the head of a Chinese production company admits:

> Personally, I think Chinese documentaries are hard to sell because of the cultural values. Even those productions with overall high quality can hardly be linked to the universal values system in western countries, including themes and focuses that would interest audiences. These are still two language systems. The connection between western and Chinese cultural values is insecure. It is possible, but by no means an easy task. (Interview, I-15, 31 March 2019)

With the intense ideological competition in the global cultural arena, notwithstanding that the level of political uncertainty has increased in the pandemic era, China's global communication network needs to deal with the conflict between an internal-facing policy focused on ideological coherence and an external-facing policy focused on nation branding. What Lee and Melissen describe as the 'need to search for a national identity by linking the nation to the outside world' (2011, p.5) is still remarkably relevant to the contemporary dilemma facing China's global communication policy. The question to follow, however, inevitably concerns the issues of audience trust, which confines CGTN's credibility to perform its institutional role as an agent of public diplomacy.

6.3.2 The division between national and global stories

In Gillespie and Webb's analysis of the soft-power significance of the BBC World Service over the past century, they examine how the international broadcasting channel 'has created a sense of intimacy and connection with audiences across the globe to cultivate trust and

credibility' (2013, p.2). The struggle around the reputation of trustworthiness pertains to the key challenge for CGTN in finding a receptive audience before trying to cultivate international audience tastes. CGTN's limited commercial production capacity, coupled with a lack of 'the intricacies of tone and idiom' (Gillespie and Webb, 2013, p.2) in approaching its editorial lines, has undermined its ambition to find its legitimacy in engaging with international audiences, amidst controversy around the operation of global communication power via cultural output.

The lack of overseas audience trust hinders the role of Chinese state media in promoting China's national identity and in fostering an aspirational cultural image (Gorfinkel, 2018). Despite the non-confrontational intentions of CGTN documentary programmers (Zhang, 2011b), questions prevail in the global marketplace regarding its editorial principles. Since its establishment in 2016, CGTN has received criticism in the West for engaging in propaganda and being a mouthpiece of the government. Most recently, for instance, the UK's broadcast regulator, Ofcom, banned CGTN from British airwaves following a dispute over which entity has editorial control over the Beijing-based media organisation (4 February 2021). Ofcom withdrew its licence for CGTN to broadcast in the UK after its investigation concluded that the licence was wrongfully held by Star China Media Limited (Ofcom, 2021). As Angus McNeice, a journalist at *China Daily Global*, reported, despite Ofcom's decision to revoke CGTN's license, the company was allowed to operate on the continent in Europe (2021). More evidence is needed from the regulator, but it is clear that the lack of international trust in the state-controlled broadcaster came into conflict with its plan to enhance its global communication power, affecting its perceived credibility and its reliability as an international content provider.

The incident between CGTN and Ofcom is just one example of the negotiation between China's state-controlled broadcasting agencies and overseas regulators in reaching a consensus about the operation of international communication networks in dealing with the conflicts

between different national strategic interests and the media's engagement in facilitating a global dialogue (Ang et al., 2015). As Lee argues, 'compatibility with other nations' values and interests can be as important as the exercise of hard power to achieve a nation's desired objectives' (2011, p.11). The complex make-up of a global audience is a challenge for the exportation of selected aspects of China's national discourse. As an executive producer at CGTN suggests, 'because the targeted market includes the whole world, it is difficult to make quantitative surveys on audience engagement results, but the basic demographics of our audience base are those with high social status, income and education background – those who would actually listen to what you have to say, which doesn't come as a surprise' (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019).

The attempt to internationalise China's cultural output and the sales of its cultural content involve localised communication strategies that depend on various market needs. It is crucial to understand the target audience, yet market research on the discourses around globally acceptable editorial standards and international taste is absent and only supplied by the partial knowledge of producers. According to the producers, it is common practice simply to extract and adapt a commercial narrative from a documentary series that has enjoyed a good domestic audience reception. Take, as an example, the overseas distribution of the documentary series, *Post-00s*, based on the experiences of young people born after 2000:

> We made five episodes from the materials from 12 years of shooting but, considering international audience habits, we decided to refine the story into a two-episode film. Taking into account the taste of foreign audiences, we took a completely different approach from the domestic storyline. To begin with, the protagonists speak English themselves, which makes the adaptation way easier. We also presented fewer characters by following the storylines of a boy and a girl. We hoped this would make the key theme emerge clearer and it would be easier for foreign audiences to figure out who is who. (Interview, a producer for *Post-00s*, I-31, 26 December 2019)

There are still tensions between the pursuit of an internationally acceptable narrative around China's contemporary cultural images and the promotion of its national traditions as a means of ideological influence. Producers, meanwhile, express their concern over how censorship may impede the international competitiveness of original Chinese cultural productions as they try to avoid the propagandistic storytelling that inserts CCP ideology into narratives. Yet the ideological constraints of self-censorship and administrative measures confine the programming capacity of the international broadcaster. The ideological constraints on what are proper themes leave national broadcasters with limited options. According to the director of a documentary about artificial intelligence and human life, *Hello AI*:

> I cut out the exciting opening in an episode about the use of AI in surgery, for fear of offending the medical department, because the scene may cause distress [...] When distributing our series in the international marketplace, we often receive comments from international directors and commenters that 'Chinese documentary does not know how to tell a good story'. Do I know the techniques to create conflict and tension in the storyline? Apparently, we all know that. But you simply cannot tell your story in a provocative way, highlighting all the social conflicts, because you don't want to affect the interests of any particular party involved in the film. (Interview, I-36, a production company, 30 December 2019)

CGTN follows the communication strategy of CCTV-9 and promotes a contemporary discourse characterised by harmony and social progress. The government has decided that the international broadcasting network must be 'culturally confident', in order to – in President Xi Jinping's words – 'improve the construction of communication capacity, enhance international discursive power, and tell China's story well to the world' (Li, 2016, p.1). It is acknowledged within the industry that CGTN is expected to 'legitimately represent' the nation's response to diplomatic, political and economic issues (Interview, I-33, CCTV, 27 December 2019). However, the contestation in reflecting national culture, as Debrett describes, is concerned with

the conflict between inviting national introspection and promoting the nation abroad (2009, p.812). As a senior documentary director suggests:

> The perception of editorial ethics determines the audience reception of particular content. Cultural productions are tangled with ideological influences, on behalf of national interests. It is not a question of 'whether', but rather 'how'. Censorship itself is not a problem, but if government bodies attach too many strings to the broadcasting schedule, to the extent that it may affect the output of exportable content, then it would become a problem. (Interview, I-31, 26 December 2019)

In the context of the competitive international marketplace, seeing CGTN solely as a government agency of nation branding can be misleading as the commercial imperative plays an essential part in determining the success or failure of productions in terms of audience reception. The ability to frame its programming schedule within an internationally acceptable discourse is essential to its credibility as an international broadcaster. The programming agenda of international broadcasters is negotiated between diplomatic interests and those of global audiences (Gillespie and Webb, 2013). Effective audience engagement with content is built on an audience's perception of the legitimacy of the broadcasting outlet, based on a shared understanding of how universal values are to be negotiated in the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). The main issue to be reconciled here concerns what Ang et al. (2015) see as the dilemma of a soft-power approach to foreign policy and global communication; the balancing act between national sovereignty and the continuous pursuit of global collaboration and dialogue. These discussions above all point to the necessity of exploring alternative solutions for nation branding. Considering the challenges facing the practice of soft power, Chapter 7 will explore practical measures taken by China's broadcasting sector, including co-production and the expansion of distribution channels.

Conclusion: Nation building and global communication

In this chapter, it is argued that there are contradictions in China's cultural approach to nation building between the need to overcome ideological contentions in the domestic, public sphere and the external needs of nation branding and public diplomacy. In the analysis of China's domestic cultural sphere, as this thesis has argued, the emphasis on shaping a collective identity through media stems from the political imperative to restore social order and ideological control during the process of digital globalisation, pertaining to Present Xi Jinping's cultural-confidence thesis that advocates the integration of culture and national identity in recomposing a national discourse in media output. Situated in the interconnected global cultural sphere, this chapter has also examined how China's state broadcasters produce cultural content as an instrument to facilitate the nation's soft-power initiative, focused on the mechanisms of promoting a culturally compatible national discourse in the global market. Following the cultural approach taken in the domestic broadcast sector, China's national media take a top-down approach to the reproduction of a national identity composed of shared history, the arts, culture and traditional values. However, for China's state-controlled broadcasters, methods for the practical implementation of the sources of soft power may entail inherent difficulties in engaging with the logic of the international audience marketplace and in securing market share (Lee, 2011, p.12).

This chapter has investigated the production practices of CCTV-9 and CGTN – respectively, China's internal-facing and external-facing documentary channels, focused on the promotion of an officially recognised national discourse. Drawing on the case of CCTV-9, this chapter has examined the production of a collective national identity within cultural content. China's current cultural policy has put the role of cultivating ideological coherence back on the broadcasting agenda by engaging a mass audience in a national discourse. The national broadcasting network has increasingly taken part in facilitating a national discourse and in promoting national values to a domestic audience.

However, the case study of CGTN suggests that the negotiation between diplomatic interests and the commercial and cultural needs of the international audience marketplace is yet to be reconsidered in the development of its global communication network. Since 2016, China's cultural policy has linked nation building to the diplomatic role of state broadcasters and, thereafter, its changing broadcasting priorities have led to increasing exposure of national content on international networks. But its limited understanding of the diverse tastes and preferences of international audience groups, coupled with the political constraints inherent in the hegemonic production system, challenges how CGTN tries to build a strong sense of legitimacy as an international broadcasting agency as opposed to a mere instrument of government propaganda. The analysis of the current condition of China's nation branding approaches has led to an exploration of alternative measures in international communication, such as co-production and the enhancement of distribution channels, which will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Co-producing culture: International co-production and IPR trade

A co-production is one that features joint investment between China-based media institutions and foreign production agencies. The investments may include funding, labour and materials, and joint filming. This chapter examines the policy impetus of supporting international co-production in film festivals, focusing on the interplay between the political need for nation branding and the commercial drive for global engagement. Section 1 revisits the role of international film festivals in China's contemporary cultural scene in terms of facilitating global cultural goods trade while at the same time holding onto the political responsibilities of cultural diplomacy. However, given its limited commercial production capacity and a lack of audience engagement, China's cultural production sector has had limited success in distributing original cultural content globally. Next, Section 2 looks at the uncertainty of censorship and issues with IPR legislation in China's audio-visual market. It explores how divergent views and values among Chinese and international producers spark disputes over co-production practices and add to the market disadvantages facing China's cultural products. Section 3 addresses ethnographic observations carried out at Guangzhou International Documentary Festival (GZDOC) and examines the performance of international film festivals in internationalising China's cultural production and the sale of its cultural content. As some domestic and international producers have observed, a lack of regulatory transparency and negotiations being largely behind-the-scenes limit the ability of co-productions to facilitate global collaboration in the audio-visual sector. This chapter finds that the establishment of transnational festivals represent only a weak, countervailing trend against protectionist nationalism and trade barriers.

7.1 The rise of the co-production agenda

In this chapter, co-production is examined as a commercial practice for the delivery of cultural goods by which international media agencies co-operate to create audio-visual content. This section sets out how co-production has become the policy response to the politico-economic need for cultural exportation, through film festivals as transnational infrastructures. It explains how the rise of the co-production agenda has been driven by diplomatic interests and facilitated by commercial exchange. It also highlights the challenges of limited audience reception for co-produced content.

7.1.1 International film festivals as an intermediary for nation branding

The boom of film festivals in China since the 1980s is part of a political momentum that seeks to engage with the international cultural sphere (Yu, 2014; Berry, 2017, p.17). Berry and Robinson (2017) describe transnational film festivals as 'a translation machine', which serves as a window for movements and mutual understanding between cultures (p.1). Influenced by Bourdieu's theory concerning distinctions De Valck (2016) interprets the cultural activities conducted in film festivals as a process of adding value to cultural products and redrawing the boundaries around mainstream tastes. Her notion of film festivals as sites of cultural legitimisation pertains to the policy impetus of recomposing and promoting China's contemporary cultural images through transnational infrastructures.

In her analysis of China's film festivals and their power constellations, Iordanova explores the different stakeholder configurations within what she variously categorises as 'the cultural diplomacy festival', 'the corrective festival', and 'the business card exchange festival' (2017, p.291). The recognition of the political-economic functions of cultural venues underpins the role of international film festivals as an intermediary for the articulation and promotion of national discourse. As Loist explains (2016), the institutional logics are integrated into the existing structures of media industries and the wider societies, and structural changes in turn

affect the festival agenda (p.49). Deeply anchored in China's cultural diplomacy and soft power mechanisms, the Guangzhou International Film Festival underlines its international rapport to increase its global visibility in seeking to expand the cultural influence of China's contemporary, national discourse.

Present cultural policy supports international co-production as a means of enhancing China's cultural influence in the international cultural scene. In this chapter, co-production is examined as a commercial practice for the delivery of cultural goods by which international media agencies co-operate to create audio-visual content. According to China's current *Film Industry Promotion Law* (promulgated on 7 November 2016 by the Standing Committee of the National Peoples' Congress of People's Republic of China), a co-produced film that meets the policy guidelines of total financial contributions and revenue share can be granted approved co-production status and is treated as a national programme for any benefits afforded in the domestic market (Article 14).

In the past decade, a combination of profits, diplomatic interests and administrative convenience has led to the rise of international co-production projects negotiated through public trading venues such as international film festivals. As a senior documentary producer in the China International Communication Centre (CICC, a state-funded international cultural communication agency) suggests:

> For a documentary, the perks of being defined as a co-production are significant. It will be regarded as a UK production in the UK, which bypasses the 'cultural test' that determines its nationality. At the same time, it is treated as a domestic production in the Chinese market. This means that it is exempted from the quota policy for imported cultural goods. (Interview, I-31, 26 December 2019)

Despite the commercial nature of transnational co-production, political requirements have played a determining role in the policy shift. Since the beginning of the 21st century, a cultural

approach to nation branding has been more explicitly written into China's cultural policy. Contemporary policy associates public diplomacy with the reimagining of a national cultural identity. The statement of this policy first appeared in CCP official documents in 2007 (at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China). Official guidelines have claimed that the cultural approach was to 'enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests' (*China Daily*, 2007). This shift to internationalising cultural production has prompted industry interest in global distribution and in the transnational co-production of cultural content. Subsequently, the CCP State Council put forward policy measures to 'encourage cultural enterprises under various ownerships to engage in the foreign cultural trade business' (2014). Cultural bodies have attempted to implement a centralised cultural agenda focusing on the promotion of Chinese cultural identity in the global audio-visual market.

Government administrations in China are involved in the production of national content through state-funded media institutions such as the China Intercontinental Communication Centre (China Intercontinental Press), a state-funded media agency set up in Beijing in December 1993 and operated under the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. It is a multimedia and comprehensive external communication agency that concentrates on producing audio-visual and print materials for external publicity. The official function of the production/press centre is to 'help the world to understand China, and help China to understand the world' (CICC, 2021). Obviously, beneath the explicit cultural goal of facilitating mutual understanding lie the elements for enhancing China's soft power. The Ministry of Finance provides financial support for media companies and supports the 'going global' ambition of the cultural sector by integrating digital resources and expanding overseas distribution channels. The CICC's mission for nation branding is based on the diplomatic need to promote China's cultural image to the world.

Most co-produced documentaries are made with more than commercial trade in mind given that, according to my fieldwork interviewees, Chinese production companies emphasise the branding opportunities of internationalising national cultural production over the pursuit of profit. The gap is significant in the distribution of expenditure and revenue between Chinese and international partners: it has been the practice that China's media institutions would cover the majority of production costs whereas international agencies provide creative teams while retaining copyright. The political impetus to promote a new, national brand and enhance China's soft power has played an important role in shaping the co-production agenda. On this basis, state-led production companies, such as the CICC, have sought to expand their role in international co-production projects. Certainly, national broadcasters have figured profit into their institutional thinking while calculating co-production costs. However, enhancing the nation's cultural power, which falls under the public diplomacy approach, outweighs the need for revenue.

Two decades ago, the CICC began work on transnational production projects, starting with the international distribution of original content. 'But it was mostly lost in the sheer volume of international audio-visual content, like the sand in the sea, invisible among the content flow in the overseas marketplace', according to a senior producer with the CICC. 'Self-made content was used only for the Chinese embassy for publicity events and campaigns. No one would actually bother watching it' (Interview, I-31, 26 December 2019). For national media institutions, this is far from fulfilling the aspiration of engaging global audiences more fully by promoting national narratives. As noted in the previous chapter, without establishing the resonance and credibility that sustains global audience trust (Gillespie and Webb, 2013), Chinese media have found it difficult to participate in global political and cultural dialogues and to exercise their ideological influence in the interconnected cultural arena.

The audience reception for China's original content is unsatisfying to producers and distributors who must overcome the gap between the Chinese production sector and the audience's needs in the international marketplace. A distributor with A&E Networks, the US company that provides distribution services in the Chinese audio-visual market, explains that 'the demand and need for audio-visual products are extremely tilted; most local production simply would not get distributed, or distributed at a much cheaper price' (Interview, I-35, 28 December 2019). Given the limited audience engagement, cultural producers seek to expand international distribution channels in order to broaden the reach of their communication network beyond its traditional role as a government-controlled broadcasting agency (Zhang, 2011b) and to facilitate the interaction between productions and audiences. The rise of the present co-production regime offers an alternative structure for the exportation of national cultural products.

7.1.2 Selling China's national content

The pursuit of financial interests has provided the co-production regime with opportunities for development. In her analysis of China's policy tools and restrictive political control, Shin-Wha Lee argues that soft power in international relations is often 'elusive' when implanted through policy initiatives (2011, p.16). In many cases, including the co-production projects discussed here, opportunities for profit and broader distribution channels, rather than political strategy or policy drive, are the pragmatic forces that stimulate collaboration between China's broadcast institutions and international media firms. For China's local producers, co-production exercises are associated with resource and platform exchanges. For example, in a deal signed between CCTV-9, Tencent Penguin pictures and BBC Studios in 2019 to make *Seven Worlds, One Planet*, the UK production team sought access to China's production resources and audience marketplace; whereas the Chinese national broadcasters wanted to expand their international

distribution channels and improve programming capacity. However, according to one interviewee, the desire to build up commercial relations is the same for each partner:

> During the cooperation, actually all the parties want money: the BBC wants the Chinese market, whereas the Chinese producers want their name on the co-production project. To arrive at a win-win situation, you have to reach a middle-point where both sides are happy with the shape of the product. This is simply the nature of capital's operation. (Interview, I-35, A&E Networks, 28 December 2019)

For China's cultural industries, it seems, global engagement through co-production is an attempt to mobilise production talent and resources as well as to promote a national cultural identity – a strategy that can be effective, many producers maintain, only when it can be tailored to suit commercial need (Interview, I-36, executive producer, CCTV, 30 December 2019). Accordingly, transnational cultural production frameworks best adapted to the digital environment are foregrounded amid the emergence of platforms and talent exchanges and the dynamism of commercial practices in China's local production sector.

This leads to what Yecies et al. describe as the proliferation of 'media projects with a lighter commercial entertainment feel' (2016, p.7-8). 'It is not just propaganda' is a statement of passion that cultural producers use to justify their creative work. Documentary makers believe that the co-production of art and culture documentaries is better described as a creative collaboration, rather than as propagandistic work under tight government control (Interview, I-11, senior documentary producer, SMG, 27 March 2019). An executive producer at CCTV says:

> I don't think people can easily relate our story to propaganda, as we did not focus too heavily on praising the nation's economic development or infrastructure. Obviously, we can't predict the audience reception, both domestically and internationally, but our starting point is really about drawing the audience's attention, instead of their moral education, like you are trying too hard to be persuasive. (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019)

In the case of *China's Greatest Treasure*, a documentary series subsidised by CCTV and co-produced with BBC World News and the UK-based Mustang Films, an executive producer at CGTN says that, 'the emphasis is obviously on cultural heritage and traditional art, but the narrative produces a less hidebound version of Chinese culture for the global audience' (Interview, I-37, 31 December 2019). For example, in the first episode, 'Family and Ancestors', the producers moderated the worship of traditional rituals and added an irreverent viewpoint on conventional family values. The attempt at commercial storytelling shows producers' overriding concern with international audience tastes and cultural value orientations in different socio-cultural contexts. For China's national broadcasting sector focused on engaging in co-productions, decisions come down to a balancing act between delivering entertaining elements and respecting the ideological orientation that is acceptable both to China's political authorities and to overseas regulators and audiences. Moreover, making significant modifications is more relevant to international co-productions compared to domestic productions, because their product is aimed at the wider, international audience marketplace.

The growing interest in commercial practices does not preclude the pursuit of public diplomacy in terms of promoting China's national image. Whilst the incorporation of commercial practices indicates producers' aspirations to move into the global marketplace, a producer and scholar reveals that:

> Our hope is to change the perception of China's international communication from mechanical propaganda to soft storytelling. Co-produced documentaries were more likely to be made without enforcing ideological doctrines. When you focus on stories rather than ideologies, the audience may find the story well told and engaging. They wouldn't think it's patronising. By the involvement of the international production team, we hope the insights and experiences may lead to a globally accepted narrative of traditional culture. (Interview, I-39, 8 January 2020)

The inherent tension between political control over cultural production and the growth of market forces discussed earlier in this thesis (Keane et al., 2007; Zhao, 2008) is still relevant to the struggles of China's national media in international co-productions. Despite creative and commercial motives to engage in the global marketplace, the established hegemonic production system is at odds with free commercial exchange among cultural sectors. Constraints, as Chapter 5 has explained, due to the interplay of media institutions' self-censorship and regulators' interventive measures, increase the challenge for domestic and international producers to remain commercially engaged in co-production projects. In China's cultural production sector, producers are responsible for maintaining the ideological correctness of their creation based on the politically acceptable discourse, while at the same time exploring new and engaging ways to interact with their audiences. The question of balance gets harder when it comes to co-production cases, given the great diversity in audience tastes and preferences.

As previously discussed, the political need for nation branding is crucial to the production agenda. The policy initiative to use state media as a means to increase China's soft power combines global communication with public diplomacy. China's production sector sees co-production as an opportunity to expand global audience reach by securing access to global distribution channels, and thus as an alternative method to broadcasting national content via state-owned channels. Moreover, producers may describe trade with limited revenue as a long-term investment to increase market share and engage in a 'global conversation'. One executive producer at CCTV describes it as 'an exchange of resources and platforms with sustaining cultural and economic benefits' (Interview, I-36, 20 December 2019). Currently, profits are tied to commercial deals on shared IPR ownership. Policy makers contend that the co-production of China's national content contributes to the development of international distribution channels and facilitates the exportation of cultural products. Producers of national

media, meanwhile, believe that investment in co-production is the inevitable price to pay for China's cultural products being able to find a receptive audience.

The lack of international audience engagement in China's cultural narrative impedes the effectiveness of the co-production regime in terms of nation branding. Again, in Nye's words, 'all information goes through cultural filters, and declamatory statements are rarely heard as intended' (2008, p.103). It seems increasingly challenging for China's cultural producers to reach a consensus on the contemporary, national, cultural identity to be promoted in the global marketplace. The division between domestic and international audience tastes also presents a challenge to the production of consistent cultural narratives. Such entanglements between the domestic imagination of a national cultural identity and the cultural image promoted in the global arena for nation branding are shared in the case of national cultural policy of Japan (Iwabuchi, 2015). The manufacturing of an exportable Chinese identity involves the selective depiction of cultural images and social values, derived from the various decisions made regarding the representation of China's cultural imagery (Gorfinkel, 2018). Conflicts arise when local producers emphasise national cultural narratives based on their understanding of audience reception patterns in the domestic market, rather than attending to specific themes and agendas articulated across cultural spheres globally (Habermas, 1996) as well as in the regulatory frameworks of different countries. Consequently, the increasing ideological struggle in the global cultural marketplace has begun to challenge the sustainability of the co-production regime.

7.2 Conflicts in cultural co-production

Section 2 tackles the barriers to international co-production in the contemporary Chinese media environment, drawing on cases of recent co-productions between China's media firms (CCTV-9 and the CICC) and international broadcasters (the BBC, National Geographic and Discovery).

It questions the rapid shifts in policy orientation and the uncertainties of legislation in the trade of cultural goods. It specifically addresses the two main concerns of domestic and international producers: uncertainties of censorship and the questionable implementation of copyright laws and regulations.

7.2.1 Uncertainties of censorship

Uncertainty, as Hjort states, is 'a defining feature of risk and risk taking' (2012, p.52). In her analysis of tensions between artistic risk taking and the risk-aversive tendencies of the film industry, Hjort (2012) points to the difficutlies facing multinational casts in retaining the space for creativities while at the same time fitting into the politico-ecnomic arrangements in culturally specific markets. Following the discussion of the methods of risk mediation in multi-national co-production, Choi (2012) reflects upon the compromises made in the narratives and the editoral strategies because of the presumption of cultural differences of international audiences (p.174). In the Hollywood context, Pokorny and Sedgwick (2012) explain why economic risks may lead to a conservative production schedule and how the financial imperative to stimulate consumption affects producers' decisions on risk reduction (p.184). Despite the blurred boundaries of censorship criteria for foreign and co-produced media products, associated with the shifting geopolitical climate, China's censorship regime still prefers to ban media content that involves high political risks, such as that which focuses on 'human rights abuses and calls for political reforms' (Tai, 2014, p.191).

In China's audio-visual marketplace, the view that editorial censorship has escalated in the past decade is shared by those in the production sector. Co-productions are treated as domestic cultural goods and thus equally subject to regulation by censorship bodies. According to current regulation, co-production projects between state media and foreign investors are censored by the state regulator, whereas other co-production deals are censored by provincial regulatory

bodies. The former state regulator, State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), lately replaced by the NRTA, presented the censorship guidelines as follows:

> A combination of ideologies, artistry and appreciation is advised. After the provincial regulators review and approve the release of international co-produced documentaries, the Chinese co-production companies will conduct a second review. Finally, the provincial censorship body will grant the decision to release with a Dragon License (Long Biao 龙标). (SAPPRFT, 2014)

As previously discussed, the censorship criteria effectively highlight the 'proper ideologies', which often entail rules that exist in media institutions through the observations and interactions of political bodies and media professionals (Lee and Chan, 2009, p.123). The government needs to ensure that the national images formulated in exported cultural goods accord with its political messages. However, the mechanism of self-censorship within broadcast institutions, coupled with administrative intervention from regulators and external political bodies (as discussed in Chapter 4), as expected, increases political pressure and limits producers' willingness for commercial and creative experiments. A common complaint heard from the production sector is that heavy censorship restricts programming capacity and, therefore, limits commercial growth. As a documentary producer at Shanghai Media Group puts it:

> It is hard to say whether the current censorship helps in formulating a positive national image, or actually puts the reputation of China's cultural production on the line. Too much of our publicity content is terribly patronising. This kind of international propaganda obviously doesn't work in the digital era, because of the lack of commercial motives. (Interview, I-29, SMG, 21 December 2019)

Clear-cut areas of political sensitivity do not exist due to a lack of definition (Lee and Chan, 2009; Xiao, 2013); rather, they are negotiated between political authorities, media institutions

and the public, focused on the interpretation of national values in specific cultural texts and contexts. While domestic producers can more readily sketch where the political 'red line' lies on the basis of their experience, international crews may have to go back and forth before finding the line. A former executive producer at Discovery Canada understands the red line in the Chinese context as 'sensitive topics that are likely to raise political issues or complexity' (Interview, I-32, 27 December 2019). Currently, co-produced audio-visual content is not exempted from domestic censorship. According to the head of a production company specialising in transnational production:

> Regardless of the nationality of the end product, one can never get around the guessing, the attempting and the mistakes before receiving the Dragon License. Better be prepared before you decide to enter the market [...]. We would recommend foreign producers take some time to do their research on sensitive topics in the Chinese context that can easily touch the red line, so that we can make changes before the production begins. (Interview, I-5, 21 March 2019)

Currently, surviving censorship is the top priority on the co-production schedule. Media professionals at national broadcasters accept this as 'broadcasting safety'; that is, to make sure that the editorial lines abide by the officially recognised narrative of national discourse to get past the censorship (as Chapter 4 has discussed). As an international producer reluctantly says, 'if the editorial orientation is deemed inappropriate, the end product may be indefinitely shelved, and that means no returning revenues for us at all' (Interview, I-32, former executive producer at Discovery, 27 December 2019). These concerns affect international producers' understanding of the present programming strategy. The prioritising of editorial compliance has led to a proliferation of soft content seeking cultural resonance. Producers highlight a 'universal rapport', which transcends the differences of language, culture, ethnicity and regions, as this approach tends to be less open to political criticism. Producers tend to explain their mediation of the cultural narrative as avoiding topics that are 'too culturally specific to be

understood correctly by foreigners' (Wang, 2008, p.258). However, a lack of incentive to push boundaries is described by Varrall as a result of a production environment that 'acts as a brake on staff's motivation to engage with "sensitive" issues' (2020, p.12). As producers at CCTV admit, co-produced content needs to respect the political authority in order to get through censorship, which explains the repetition of 'harmless' themes put together in a single show, such as the celebration of national unity (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019). In a tight production environment, decisions on what constitutes culturally acceptable themes come down largely to a matter of self-censorship in politically sensitive areas.

The lack of regulatory transparency in the production environment undermines its ability to generate exportable cultural content. In co-production cases, the limited understanding of how censorship is played out frustrates international crew members. Production experiences may not easily translate into knowledge of local politics, yet they usually play a key role in bargaining for the essential political resources needed for media production. An executive producer at a streaming service has some sympathy for international crews, commenting:

> I don't think it is easy to adapt to the 'Chinese way of doing things', in which so many agreements are unwritten, and the executive transparency is beyond reach. The execution of censorship is really a random process. This is not achieved by research or any kind of agreement, but more likely by internal consent from the authority. The networking resources of the production companies are essential to the access of unpublished information about the red line. (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019)

This, again, raises the issue of tensions between bureaucratic secrecy and regulatory transparency. As Chapter 3 explains, participants' preference during fieldwork interviews for silence on topics such as censorship suggests the private ways in which political bodies and the production sector conduct their negotiations. Throughout the conversation on censorship, some interviewees chose to anonymise the company's name in order to 'distinguish personal

opinions from the company's viewpoint' (Interview, I-10, 25 March 2019). In effect, during fieldwork interviews, most Chinese producers talked about censorship in a secretive manner and tended to take extra care with their words when being confronted with the issue of regulatory uncertainty.

Now that discussion on censorship has fallen back behind a curtain once again after a short period of open debate in the previous decade, media professionals have become more anxious about uncertain trends in policy. Xiao contends that Chinese film censorship regulations are 'rendered in purposefully vague and ambiguous language', which makes it extremely difficult for producers to challenge the censor's ruling (2013, p.127). This view highlights the issue of a porous regulatory system characterised by centralised power. While the centralisation of regulatory power is on the digital broadcasting agenda, the pervasive negotiation space allows room for policy manoeuvre. As noted, the Chinese government has forced digital services to apply the same regulatory guidelines as traditional broadcasters but, in the digital era, 'the de-centralised nature of the Internet means that no censorship methods are foolproof' (Roberts, 2018, p.4). The implementation of the policy is full of difficulty due to the complex nature of the censorship system and a lack of consensus between the regulator and the production sector.

Response to the need for policy reforms within censorship bodies is slow and incomplete. It is hard to tell whether the current regulatory regime has met the expectations of the political authorities in terms of enhancing political control over the media sector, but failure to legitimise censorship guidelines may result in not only the repression of creative autonomy, but also in the loss of profits from international cultural trade. Amid cultural and economic consequences that could, arguably, have been minimised, regulatory transparency is becoming a matter of growing importance for China's audio-visual sector, and also a policy question in its own right for bodies such as the NRTA.

7.2.2 Questions on IPR legislation

In November 2020, the third revision of the Copyright Law was completed after 10 years of work. It introduced a broader concept of 'audio-visual work' and clarifies that 'all intellectual achievements in the fields of literature, art and science that are original and can be expressed in a certain form' can be included in the legal framework for copyright protection (National People's Congress, 2020).

International reform of IPR, meanwhile, has been central to the debate around managing technological change and market globalisation. The issue of infringement of copyright protection is regarded as a challenge to maintaining the global trading order (Maskus, 2000). In 1994, the World Trade Organization (WTO) arrived at a legal recognition of the link between intellectual property (IP) and trade by signing the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS): if copyright can be commodified, it can be traded. The legal framework uses IPR as currency in order to facilitate trade in international cultural goods. The absence of effective copyright law in China restricts the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Chinese market (Bosworth and Yang, 2000, p.454). However, international agreement on the WTO's copyright laws has forced Chinese producers to adopt property rights as the currency of global cultural trade.

In the past three decades, trends in copyright litigation have been changing quickly in China. A comprehensive legal framework to protect local and foreign intellectual property was absent in China before the 1980s. However, since 1982, the Chinese government has enforced IP laws to comply with international trading orders by enacting a raft of IP-related legislation and implementing tighter rules on intellectual property via the judicial route (Bosworth and Yang, 2000, p.455). Since enacting its first copyright law in 1990, China has been engaged in the development of an IPR system that accords with international practice (Montgomery and

Fitzgerald, 2016). As summarised in a white paper from the Supreme People's Court, China has taken legal measures to eliminate local judicial protectionism and ensure a fair adjudication process in IP cases (2017). To some extent, the establishment of legal practices has improved the situation where there was little or no protection for IP, and also changed the ways in which cultural goods are monetised during international trade.

However, questions are raised within the industry regarding the current implementation of IPR legislation in China. Presently, regulation is carried out via a copyright registration system. A distributor at A&E Networks describes the approach to monitoring potential piracy and protecting copyright in the Chinese market as follows:

> Before distributing the content via our platform, we would go through a system that registers the global intellectual property rights of audio-visual content by area, and make sure that the content in question has met the IPR regulation standard. But still, I'm not quite sure about the accuracy in the records. There are so many archival contents that were registered in the copyright system. The infringement could be unintentional. (Interview, I-35, A&E Networks, 28 December 2019)

Some producers say that they are nervous about, and unsure of, the implementation of IPR laws and regulations in the contemporary audio-visual sector (Interview, I-32, 27 December 2019). According to Weber and Jia (2007), 'the self-regulatory rules for conduct potentially limit the perception of risk for foreign investors, who can feel more confident in forming workable and profitable strategic relationships with domestic media corporations' (pp.782-783). Although the government has promised the enforcement of IPR laws, the industry has been complaining about dispersed and unsatisfactory results. Unregulated piracy has led to fear and doubts in the production industry. As Montgomery and Fitzgerald note, 'levels of piracy in China mean that the royalty-based business models that dominate other markets are simply not yet viable in China' (2006, p.411). This points to a gap between a policy initiative intended

to establish a comprehensive IP legislative system and the reality of uncertainty around its implementation and enforcement among public and private sectors.

It has been the case that copyright legislation protects the financial interests of IPR owners. Copyright law legitimises the proprietary rights associated with cultural production by claiming a distinction between owners and non-owners of the creative work. Conflicts between owners and non-owners arise over disputed 'fair use', an inherently vague area of copyright litigation, although specific provisions can be set out – for example, educational use or parody. However, the rapidly shifting direction of IPR legislation has sparked disputes between IP owners and non-owners. As Stahl maintains, debates on proprietary rights are struggles over 'privileges and distinctions in media production' (2009, p.55). One interviewee suggests that, '[a]s opposed to a straightforward transaction from creativity to profits, the ongoing negotiations over authorship is a balancing act in pursuit of commercial power. Deals are made to decide the proportion of shared ownership, which determines sustainable revenues in the long run' (Interview, I-36, CCTV, 20 December 2019). The profit incentive has made negotiations over ownership more competitive and the increasing competition between media institutions for international market share has led to a higher likelihood of industrial friction in co-production cases. For instance, on the documentary series *Hello AI*, invested in by Intel and produced by News Reels Production (a state production company), an interviewee reveals:

> Intel claimed the distribution rights for the international marketplace while sharing its distribution rights with the Central Studio of News Reels Production in China's local market. In the meantime, the digital distributor and co-investor, Youku, do not share the copyright. Neither do the private commissioners. (Interview, I-36, the chief director, 20 December 2019)

Negotiation power is unevenly distributed within the industry when it comes to IP ownership. Local production companies, usually non-owners, are in an inferior position to

national media institutions and international conglomerates who own the IP. Local producers are reluctant to implement IP laws, because paid access to intellectual property incurs extra charges on production. The argument of fair use is often used to justify unpaid access. Across the global audio-visual industry, decisions on resolving the tension between economic logic and the public good have relied heavily on context and, therefore, judgements on fair use have become an area of considerable legal dispute.

From the perspective of national broadcasters, producers support a tighter legislative plan on copyright, because this tends to facilitate their commercial activities during the transformation from state institutions to institutional enterprises (Chin, 2017). China's national media hold a better record in abiding by IPR regulations. With considerable political endorsement, they have certain advantages in the competition for copyright acquisition. The opportunity to retain IP rights has put China's state media into a more powerful negotiation position in pursuing co-production deals and deciding terms in targeted regional markets and revenue share. As the director of *Hello AI* says: '[B]eing the IP owner means that we seize the power to decide when and where to distribute our content, whereas a partner only gets the financial profits in exchange for the resources they have provided' (Interview, I-36, 30 December 2019). National broadcasters have clearly developed their business acumen in the management of IPR by increasing their acquisition of exclusive distribution rights. As a producer describes it:

> Apart from our own production, we purchase external content by purchasing the copyright. The key is to acquire as much content copyright as we can, with the lowest price possible. We need to think about which rights to purchase in each deal – for example, exclusive copyright or distribution license only, television only or digital and mobile as well. (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019)

The present discourse around IPR is scattered across the audio-visual sector. Whereas some understand IPR as a legal term, others see it from an economic perspective. It seems that China's cultural policy will further pursue a forceful IPR legislative system to recalibrate the balance of interests between copyright owners and non-owners. By tightening up the rules of conduct in both domestic and international media projects, the Chinese government seeks to create 'an image of a fairer economic system' (Weber and Jia, 2007, p.782) that attracts foreign investment while at the same time protecting the legitimacy of political control within its national broadcasting system. Nonetheless, issues remain on the question of regulatory transparency regarding the processes of negotiation between the regulator and domestic and overseas production companies, which are focused on deals on investment and revenue, as well as IP owner's access to global markets.

7.3 International film festival as a marketplace

This section examines the role of Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (GZDOC) as, effectively, an intermediary in facilitating transnational collaborations for the audio-visual marketplace. It questions the scope and limits of the festival, taking into account the distance between GZDOC's claim to offer free-market trade and offstage negotiations with the networked production sector. Furthermore, it underlines the challenges facing the co-production regime with regard to rising nationalist views in global communication and protectionism across the cultural industries.

7.3.1 Onstage performances and offstage politics

Problematically, commercial negotiations are most often carried out offstage. As one of the international judges at a GZDOC pitching session put it, 'when you sign up to a contract, that's the beginning of the negotiation, whereas in the West, that's the end of the negotiation' (Interview, I-32, 27 December 2019). This refers to the complexity found in local politics that

brings about uncertainty in the planning and execution of co-production projects. This is also a cultural question about the private traditions of negotiation in China, where conformity is manufactured in the public space while the real bargaining is done behind closed doors (Interview, I-14, SMG, 30 March 2019). As Chapter 3 has discussed, the gesture of compliance both to social order and to political control prevails among the culture industries, which demonstrates what Hall and Ames (1995) describe as a 'language of deference [that] involves a yielding to the appropriate models of the received tradition and to the behaviours of those who resonate with those models' (p.229).

GZDOC's designation as a commercial venue for open trading has become more overt. Since 2013, GZDOC has grown into 'a meeting hotspot for transnational networking and deal making' (Yu, 2014, p.77). As the official website describes, the festival has developed from an academic seminar with 147 entries from 10 countries in 2003, to over 4542 films from 122 countries and regions in 2018. The organisers highlight the commercial opportunities for global engagement between documentary producers, distributors, content buyers and commissioners. The attempt at internationalising cultural production, characterised by free trade and low political intervention, is intended to facilitate IPR trade.

Despite this growth, GZDOC has had limited impact in attracting international investment. Despite its aspiration of facilitating free trade, GZDOC's level of commercial appeal has failed to impress global investors. Until recently, most of its commercial elements have been limited to Docshop, which records viewers' purchases, and international pitching sessions. However, one producer insists that 'the pitching events and networking opportunities are not good enough for IPR owners and potential buyers to reach some kind of agreement on the real deals that are good enough for the scale of a commercialised operation' (Interview, I-27, production

company, 18 December 2019). This points to a disparity between the performance of free trade and actual negotiations in the audio-visual market.

Of particular importance to negotiation power are the established networking resources of media firms. This includes various negotiations, within the industry network, between local and international producers, investors, government bodies and the regulators. One project manager with an IPR company suggests that:

> In China, most documentary projects need government support. It is the case everywhere, even if a production team is made up of a multicultural gang. This is because the political bodies are in control of media access, resources and the decisions on acceptable public discourse. You have to get permission from the upper level authority on those issues before airing the content. You can make the film when the person in charge confirms that the editorial orientation [koujing 口径] is good to go for the public screen. (Interview, I-27, 18 December 2019)

The negotiation between production companies and government bodies is not always antagonistic. Rather, producers seek political resources and access to improve their commercial performance. National broadcasters have certain advantages in terms of the political support that gives them access, resources and policy benefits. In practice, they are more likely to get government funding. 'It is a long-term mutually beneficial relationship between the government bodies and my production team. You need to earn their trust through a long period of collaboration. We have built up this special friendship over time' (Interview, I-36, CCTV, 30 December 2019). The management of the government relationship is an essential part of the workload of national media institutions. In comparison, commercial producers are more used to trying to 'figure it out for themselves' in each negotiation to try to seal the deal, and to 'making strategic decisions on the "friend-enemy" situation with other competitors' (Interview, I-14, senior producer, SMG, 30 March 2019).

However, commercial producers still feel the pressure to get political approval. One senior producer reveals that:

> The real work is to reach out to somebody at a senior level who sees the strategic advantage of collaboration. You can't film confidential technologies without the approval of political authority. Needless to say, this is usually a non-linear process and sometimes requires support and coordination from international coordinators such as the embassies. (Interview, I-40, Youku, 8 January 2020)

In the meantime, however, for international investors, the private way of conducting commercial negotiations is undesirable as they feel anxious about political intervention behind the curtain, so to speak. Moreover, the prerequisites for attracting internal resources and political capital are significant entry barriers to those outside the national media system. 'The entry barrier of IPR trading is more than simply an entry ticket to attend the film festival events. In order to find the right contact, you need to build up your network through accumulated production experiences' (Interview, I-14, SMG, 30 March 2019). This pertains to exclusive access to the professional media culture, interrelated with the political and cultural capitals in a hegemonic, networked production model in China (as discussed in Chapter 3). An IP specialist and documentary producer says:

> You need to know the person before you get access to filming. If you're not in their circle, you can't get anything useful. Public media have the endorsement of the government bodies, so it's easier for them to break the ice. But private media companies and international producers may not be so lucky in getting the right chance to film the right project. You can hardly enter the market if you do not know anybody in the industry. (Interview, production company, I-27, 18 December 2019)

The comments highlighted here exemplify how interpersonal networks and institutional politics influence the ways in which commercial negotiations are carried out, and also how this might affect the production sector. Many producers worry that IPR trading platforms have not

been shaped into the perfect ecology for producers to conduct commercial exchanges. Moreover, the unpredictable and untraceable offstage negotiation process increases the financial risks for co-production projects. 'Sadly, at the end of the one-week carnival, things will return to usual. Local politics and labour-intensive negotiations on the details to proceed the contract are inevitable' (Interview, a production company, I-27, 18 December 2019). The distance between the aspiration to openly facilitate international deals and the private negotiation process becomes more evident and requires the attention of policy makers.

7.3.2 A stumbling-block: The battle over global engagement

For Chinese producers, the disadvantages of commercial production are obvious during international competitions, where it is difficult for China's cultural production to meet international commercial standards. As an executive producer at CCTV says: 'The fabulous sessions in film festivals are just a pretence of commercial exchange if the content fails to meet the commercial bar and is not what the audience, commissioners, or international buyers want to see' (Interview, I-36, 30 December 2019). The gap between commercial standards in the international marketplace and the limited local production capacity is one reason for the lack of commercial appeal of domestic cultural products.

GZDOC's international platforms may not be sufficient in terms of improving the modest appeal of domestic cultural products in the global market. Film exportation as cultural diplomacy is an underdelivered aspiration due to what Hong has observed to be 'the lack of commercial capacity for international production and marketing' (2014, p.619). Many interviewees have noticed an awkward disparity between the need for exportation of China's cultural products and a lack of demand for them in the international market. The underlying market disadvantages for China's original cultural products, as noticed by Yecies et al. (2016), relate to the limitations in commercial production capacity and in international audience

engagement. The establishment of international trading venues can hardly resolve the barriers to local producers entering the international market.

Producers are surprisingly frank about financial scarcity in production sectors. They believe that insufficient funding is responsible for the underperformance of China's documentary series in the international market. Many media professionals blame limited production budgets. For instance, the head of a national broadcaster reveals: 'We only had about 300,000 CNY [34,500 GBP] for one episode, compared to 1.73 million GBP per episode for producing the BBC's *Planet Earth*. The competition over visual quality is rather unfair' (Interview, I-38, 7 January 2020).

In the meantime, government funding is extremely limited compared to the significant production costs. In 2019, the Chinese government granted subsidies to 89 documentaries under a funding scheme for domestic documentary production and talent development (NRTA, 2020a). Through this scheme, for example, the co-produced documentary series, *One Strange Rock* (co-produced by Youku, Yunji and National Geographic, 2018) received a subsidy of just 20,000 CNY (2,280 GBP) (NRTA, 2020a).

While the level of government funding is unpromising, international commercial investment is quickly drying up. Many producers have witnessed a drop in advertising revenues over the past decade. 'Since 2018, advertisers are cutting their investments in documentaries. Conglomerates have been less generous and more cautious about their advertising arrangements, while the small brands simply stopped their advertising in documentary' (Interview, I-30, senior producer, CCTV, 24 December 2019).

Essentially, the production cost comes down to the cost of hiring a crew. Even with sufficient funding, local production teams are still under extreme pressure when it comes to

delivering a commercial product due to a lack of experience in producing large-scale documentaries. One senior documentary producer contrasted his crew with those of the BBC, saying:

> The BBC has its specialised production chain in different categories, such as wildlife, food, art and fashion, et cetera. Each team has their own experienced camera man, screenwriter and presenter. But our production team is so messed up. We tend to resort to smaller production companies or even hire contractors wherever convenient or cost effective. But the hidden cost of coordination, training and management has been annoyingly ignored. (Interview, I-27, a production company, 18 December 2019)

However, in the discussion of market disadvantages in interviews, policy restrictions are less openly discussed, compared to explicit points being made about financial difficulties. The tight broadcasting environment has worsened the market disadvantages for China's cultural products. Issues of national politics, primarily regarding the exercise of censorship, have only been briefly brought up in interviews. These unresolved issues are critical to the co-production regime: the conflicts that affect co-productions are evidence of this. In practice, the divisions over editorial orientation between the Chinese and overseas production teams often lead to divergent views in carrying out creative tasks. Different cultural politics within Chinese and western production companies also increase tensions and frictions that disrupt the coordination of the production. A senior director suggests that there is a connection between political constraints and the limited appeal of cultural output, saying:

> You need to take care of the local production environment. There are things that are not allowed to be filmed. There are stories that are not allowed to be told. These are hard decisions based on feasibility, as opposed to creativity. The end result could be strange if you do not manage to edit what you got into a consistent story. We have good reasons to worry that the final story may fail to achieve the proposed narrative. It might well confuse the audience rather than entertain them. (Interview, I-36, CCTV, 30 December 2019)

The dilemma for an international crew is that their job is to enable the execution of a co-production project through international storytelling values that very often challenge local politics. This can lead co-production deals into a dead end. Moreover, another divisive issue arises in the course of co-production, as local producers prioritise audience reception in the domestic market over the international one, as they own the IPR for the Chinese market but not the global distribution rights. As the head of one of China's national broadcasters says:

> The international producers may not understand our market quite well. Collisions during co-production cases are just normal and inevitable. Rather than thinking how to cater to their opinions on our production agenda, we might as well pay attention to the things that we have left behind, our original ideas, and making sure we deliver that. (Interview, I-38, 7 January 2020)

This reveals a countervailing trend to global engagement. As Chapter 2 discussed, increasing nationalist views across the global public sphere now appear in academic and policy debates on global communication (Wodak, 2017, p.403). The observation can be made that China's cultural sectors are now pivoting towards domestic productions and consumption. This is because, for the Chinese government, the long-term priority is to ensure national security, both ideologically and financially. To ensure security, it needs to protect its own ideology while the cultural consumption sector has been increasingly reliant on imports.

From the perspective of a national regulation system, taking the initiative to promote transnational collaboration in the audio-visual sector is to resolve the tensions between the political need for ideological cohesion and the diplomatic and commercial imperative for cultural exportation. As Weber and Jia argue, '[in] using the media to extol Chinese values and practices, the state-directed media assists in establishing a total system of social relations as a way of countering the negative aspects of globalisation (i.e., Western cultural hegemony) while maximising the economic returns that a commodified cultural industry offers China's digital

economy' (2007, p.783). A focal point of much recent debate has been a rising protectionist policy that challenges transnational collaboration across global cultural sectors. Protectionism is the result of government initiatives to protect the domestic cultural industry. A recent McKinsey report, for instance, highlights the rise of protectionist tendencies in international trade, in a re-evaluation of the changing relationship between China and the world (Woetzel et al., 2019, p.109). This reveals the increasing difficulties facing China's co-production agenda to deal with the dilemma of global engagement versus the protection of domestic cultural industries to promote national values. With the rise of nationalist views, new policy thinking on global engagement and transnational collaboration in the cultural sectors is needed at such a time of great uncertainty.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to reassess the tensions between the shifting politico-economic and socio-cultural forces in China's international co-production regime. In doing so, it has located the tensions as arising in an interconnected, competitive global marketplace that challenges China's current national cultural policy. Whilst the reconciliation of conflicting pressures from political control and market drive shapes the co-production agenda, the negotiation power of media professionalism is rather limited; the struggles between increased political intervention and growing commercial initiatives tend to curtail the creative forces and lead to the intensification of conflicts in the co-production activities. Situated in the context of cultural competition, this article has revealed the dilemma between the diplomatic and commercial need to remain globally engaged and the market disadvantage of China's cultural products, associated with the limited commercial production capacity of the industry and the lack of empirical research in the culturally diverse global markets.

For Chinese producers, the market disadvantage is obvious during international competition. Transnational trading sites, such as GZDOC's international platforms, seem to underplay the elements of nation branding in terms of promoting China's domestic cultural products into the global marketplace. Policy support on co-production and international collaboration has limited effect in easing the barriers for local producers to enter the international market. According to the interviews, issues of non-transparent censorship practices and unclear IPR rules have worsened the collisions and conflicts in transnational co-production. Questions arise concerning the sustainability of international cultural goods trade in nationally specific markets.

The tensions emerging from the regulatory regimes have become more explicit in the policy discourse in the past decade, considering China's changing policy needs of nation branding. This thesis maintains that regulatory transparency is key to sustaining the negotiation between national and international power across the audio-visual marketplace. Currently, the policy discourse encounters two main issues: the non-transparent negotiation of censorship and the rapidly shifting IPR legislation. Evidence found in co-production practices between Chinese and international agencies suggests that producers' limited understanding of commercial and policy needs of divergent cultural markets has impeded the commercial quality of co-produced cultural products. Further empirical research on the digital regulatory regime, including nationally specific production research, is needed to finesse the understanding of the prioritising of national discourses and global communication.

Chapter 8 Conclusion: Renegotiating a national identity

This thesis has dealt with two interrelated arguments around the pressing issues of media regulation and global communication agendas, focused on the collective reimagination and the promotion of China's contemporary national identity in the competitive cultural spaces. Firstly, it has located the tensions arising from China's policy approach to ideological unity as between the increasing political control over media production and the expansion of market forces; secondly, it has argued that the conflicts in China's global communication agendas are to be understood as the interplay between the diplomatic initiatives for nation building and nation branding and the divergent needs in a competitive international marketplace.

In the introduction, I have sought to explore the rationales and the outcomes of a tightened regulatory regime in China's cultural sector. This chapter revisited the key question around the challenges facing China's digital regulatory regime and the current solutions taken by the regulators. At a national level, the regulation system has tightened its grip on the media industry by drawing tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national culture, although the lack of regulatory transparency impedes the policy aspiration to overcome ideological contentions in the public sphere. Meanwhile, in the international marketplace, the soft-power initiative in public diplomacy is challenged by the limited commercial production capacity of the state-owned broadcasting network, coupled with broadcasters' insufficient understanding of divergent audience needs and the regulatory lines of other countries. Finally, this chapter explores the implications drawn from this thesis, insofar as it is applicable to future research on the digital regulatory regime, national identity and global communication.

8.1 Is a digital regulatory regime manageable?

Understanding the interconnected, competitive digital media landscape has become increasingly central to the regulatory remit. Not dissimilar to the trend being experienced

internationally, China's audio-visual sectors have blurred their boundaries and national viewers are now engaging with a diverse range of televised products via streaming services. The regulatory body, the NRTA, has stated that the same regulatory guidelines shall be applied to digital and traditional platforms alike, including licensing programmes for public distribution and censoring politically sensitive content (State Council, 2017). This shows a policy initiative aimed at setting a level playing field for traditional and digital platforms – a rationale that goes with political control. The NRTA has already announced tighter interventive measures for the digital sphere – including platform and content regulation falling under the legislative plan of the State Council – and is set to announce further steps as set out in the Radio and Television Law (2021).[2]

Is a digital regulatory regime manageable for the NRTA, however, considering the complex and contested global cultural sphere? This thesis has interrogated the policy aspiration to maintain the coexistence of a hegemonic broadcasting system characterised by ideological control of new thresholds for acceptability arising from digitalisation and commercialisation. In this thesis, I explain the digital regulatory regime in terms of power and its control, with a focus on the exercise of balancing the divergent forces at play. As discussed, cultural products and production activities in certain contexts are shaped by the prevalent political order, commercial interchanges, collective cultural values and technological conditions. Evidence suggests that China's political bodies have tightened their regulatory grip on the industry through a more centralised regulation system, aimed at achieving ideological coherence and overcoming social conflict. Certainly, the policy focus on the promotion of a national discourse

[2] The State Council solicited public comments in March 2021 and a report on suggestions for revision is pending.

may achieve the surface impression of unity, but the unpredictable interventive measures to quell ideological tensions would not necessarily increase social stability.

Focused on China's politically controlled national broadcasting system, this thesis has examined the policy that has been pursued for regulating a commercial broadcast agenda that engages with divergent audience needs while at the same time cultivating mainstream depictions amid ideological contestations (Throsby, 1994). Tensions between views, values and actions emerging within the industry's culture suggest increasing conflict between a politically controlled media agenda and the robust growth of cultural industries. Chapter 4 investigated the mechanisms of control, played out through self-censorship by media institutions, and administrative intervention by regulators and government bodies. Empirical cases of content regulation across traditional and digital platforms reveal that central government bodies are trying to draw tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national or mainstream discourse, while the flexibility for negotiation between media participants is diminishing. Chapter 5 examined the policy rationale of reinforcing a more restrictive regulatory framework. Interviewees from national broadcasters recognise this policy shift as an attempt by the government to regain media control, stemming from the political need to mediate ideological contentions (Gramsci, 1971) which are now driven by commercialisation and audience fragmentation.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the mechanism of control is associated with the ways in which new boundaries are being established by content regulation. The implementation of legal and administrative measures over digital platforms and content is a necessary but insufficient basis for the regulation of the audio-visual industries if media institutions are having difficulty in complying with transparency with the rules-based legislative system. Current regulatory practices regarding ideological aspects of content rely heavily on context and on producers'

prior knowledge and experience; while administrative methods are most commonly used in empirical regulatory cases. Many producers and directors indicate that the NRTA plans to introduce a more restrictive regulatory regime, one which may further change the power dynamic in the contemporary broadcasting landscape during convergence. However, it is still unclear how regulators are to adapt the present interventive measures on digital platforms to a more forceful legislative regime.

From the perspective of national broadcasters, their challenge lies within a balancing act between political priorities, commercial competition and audience engagement. They have found that professional autonomy does not seem to play a significant role in negotiating the policy agenda of the state media but, rather, it takes its place in terms of quality control for commercial standards and audience management. Digitalisation and globalisation have, expectedly, shaped the contemporary ideological struggles in a public media sphere that was previously produced and maintained mainly by national media institutions. With national broadcasters losing their centrality, arguably, China's national broadcasters have been stretched between the political responsibility to enhance ideological unity and the commercial imperative to produce content for entertainment. Assessing media policy through the lens of nation building, there is a need to rethink the practical approach to dealing with political imperatives in mediating a mainstream cultural identity and also with the diplomatic need to promote a collective identity in the global cultural arena.

For regulators, the question is how to use interventive methods in cultural production as a means to enhance ideological unity and social stability in the digital era. Interviewees have described the current digital regulatory system as 'porous' and subject to manipulation by political and commercial interests. A clear set of rules and boundaries are crucial to the establishment of a transparent digital regulatory regime, but the lack of written policy criteria

on, for example, what are deemed to be 'harmful effects', undermines the legal basis for administrative regulation and arbitration. As previously discussed, the 'red line' demarcating ideological correctness remains fundamentally political, thus it is difficult for producers to find the line between what is appropriate and what is transgressive. In the case of censorship, despite a policy aspiration to exercise a tightened regulatory regime, consensual choices between regulators and industry figures in offstage negotiations become increasingly problematic for policy outcomes. The extent of contradiction between policy initiatives and their enactment points to the difficulty, of national broadcasters and regulators alike, to claim legitimacy.

8.2 Negotiating national identity during digital globalisation

This section discusses the negotiation of a contemporary, national identity at both domestic and international level within media. It revisits the rationales and outcomes of the policy of taking a cultural approach to articulating ideological unity in the negotiation of a national production agenda. It then summarises the key challenges facing China's international broadcasting sector, with a focus on the gap between the diplomatic need for nation branding, amid a limited commercial production capacity, and a lack of global audience engagement.

8.2.1 Reimagining the mainstream

This thesis has examined President Xi Jinping's 'cultural confidence' thesis in terms of it representing a political initiative to enhance China's ideological coherence and to maintain social stability while at the same time keeping focus on international diplomacy. It has found that the misconception of the mainstream identity arises from biases inherent in the prevailing official knowledge of the nature of national discourse and how it has been mediated in the increasingly competitive public communicative space. In exploring the cultural production institutions – the territory where an official national discourse is mainly produced (Gerbner et al., 1982) – it sets out to deconstruct assumptions in the policy approach to recomposing a

national identity. Keane argues that 'while civil society might succeed as a descriptive device to indicate an increasing separation of government and society in China, the idea that interest groups significantly influence the formulation of cultural and media policy is a case of misplaced optimism about the nature of social change' (2001, p.783). The increasingly apparent interventive measures over media production and distribution suggest that the negotiating spaces for media professionals as well as Chinese 'netizens' (Lei, 2011) are closing fast in terms of effecting policy changes through political communication in the digital cultural sphere. The reinvention of a Chinese national identity is best analysed through a process of negotiation between the production sector and political bodies, focused on the complex and sometimes contradictory policy needs of enhancing ideological coherence internally and promoting the national image globally.

The contemporary cultural approach to ideological unity has meant laying out a set of traditional norms and rituals for the underlying political purpose of social stability. 'We're asked to believe that unity is inherently preferable to conflicts, or symmetry to one-sidedness' (Hendy, 2013, p.47). Regarding the relationship between politics and culture in policies framing the values and codes of a national broadcasting system, culture holds together the national discourse: 'it both conditions and informs our conceptions of national identity' (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007, p.71). The consensus of homogeneity and conformity, negotiated through a cultural approach, is relevant to the contemporary Chinese cultural sphere, where the reimagining of a mainstream identity is officially part of a policy goal of social stability. According to Gerbner (1982), the outcome of the mediation of cultural production is the consensual recognition of what is deemed as the mainstream identity. Gerbner's solution of seeing national media as a cultivator of ideological coherence for a national audience (1982) pertains to China's contemporary cultural sphere in terms of reimagining mainstream tastes,

values and identity as digital networks have displaced the centrality of traditional broadcasting systems.

Internally, tensions arise between the political imperative to cultivate ideological unity and maintain social stability and complex negotiations between media participants in the digital public sphere. This thesis has investigated the reinvigoration of a sense of collective identity by reconstituting a fragmented national discourse. Chapter 4 focused on how China's national image is regulated by means of administrative and legislative measures, as well as on self-censorship practices prevalent in the industry. This shows a transition from a model of regulation which required broadcasters to illustrate a diverse and balanced range of cultural images, to a model in which the imperative is to deliver a national discourse aiming to enhance ideological coherence and social stability. As Chapter 5 found, this initiative stems from the political need to reconcile ideological divisions among citizens and enhance national unity. The policy emphasis on a shared cultural identity comes from a recognition of ideological fragmentation in the public communicative space, driven by the rise of commercialisation and the impact of global media networks. Identity is 'decisively a question of empowerment', according to Friedman (1992, p.837). The negotiation between national cultural policy agenda and divergent politico-economic and socio-cultural needs of media participants in deciding the boundaries around national values can be seen as struggles for recognition and power.

The current discourse on national identity in China's domestic cultural sphere appears to be an attempt to dress its politics in a cultural outfit. Yet still, the quest for diversity contradicts any kind of fixed identity. The policy pursuit of a collective cultural identity may be seen as controversial in that such an identity is not something to be seen as an object to be controlled, but as an active and fluid subject to be negotiated, engaging with media production in a variety of political, commercial and socio-cultural ways (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). Whilst the

policy trend towards the recentralisation of political and regulatory power remains on the rise, the space for contestation has diminished for commercial and creative forces to challenge the existing remit of the officially defined mainstream identity. Despite the increasing pressure to achieve ideological unity, however, the vitality of attempts to contest power may suggest the policy needs to modify its 'dress code' to fit the public discourse around national values.

8.2.2 Nation branding and global communication

The cases investigated in this research, including CGTN's programming agenda and the co-productions between CCTV and overseas media organisations, show how cultural projections of the nation have become increasingly significant to China's policy on global communication. Understanding the contested international marketplace is key to any discussion of the internationalisation of China's cultural production. As discussed in Chapter 2, the conflict between the implementation of soft power, focused on facilitating intercultural dialogue and government practices driven by national interests, has led to increasing questions about the practical use of soft power by different countries in the international communication arena (Lee and Melissen, 2011; Ang et al., 2015). Concerning domestic and international perceptions of China's political and cultural power, such conflict shapes the policy debate around international broadcasting strategies and public diplomacy in China. In analysing the shifting dynamism of the soft-power initiative and the national production models, this thesis argues that China's international broadcasting policy has been constrained by tensions arising from political and diplomatic needs, a limited commercial production capacity, and divergent needs in the global audio-visual marketplace.

China's international broadcast network, having traditionally found it difficult to engage with the global marketplace, has taken a cultural approach to nation branding. In President Xi Jinping's envisioning of the 'Chinese dream', projecting the nation's past in a positive light is

'essential to making China great again' (Xie, reported in *South China Morning Post*, 2020). Recently, the focus of state media on public diplomacy has been sharper: a once reticent regime seems to be moving away from non-confrontation and more towards foreign entanglements (Zhang, 2015; Narins and Agnew, 2020). The CCP's newly found soft-power initiative aspires to develop an international broadcasting regime that is able to promote the contemporary Chinese identity globally. The projection of national ideologies across traditional cultures suggests an endeavour among policy-makers to associate China's contemporary, national 'brand' with its history and civilisation. Chapter 6 highlighted the link between the soft-power initiative and the formation of a contemporary, national image within the realm of China's public media, based on shared interests and cultural values. The emphasis on articulating national values coincides with 'an increasingly assertive Chinese diplomacy' (Zhang, 2015, p.5). As Chapter 6 illustrated, current cultural policy seeks to use state media as an instrument for the pursuit of diplomatic goals by engendering the promotion of a national discourse across global platforms. China's international broadcasting networks, including CGTN Documentary, have re-emphasised the construction of a national identity by repeating the cultural messages of traditional arts and culture.

However, a lack of perceived legitimacy around China's international broadcast network undermines its capacity to engage in and influence the global discourse in the contested cultural sphere. At an international level, for China's state broadcasters tension lies in the policy aspiration to improve the effects of global communication and the difficulties in commercial production and exportation associated with the lack of understanding of international audiences' needs and different editorial standards in nationally specific markets. Current cultural policy aims to bring China's traditional culture back on to the production agenda, in order to promote its national identity and create international rapport, only to find that China's officially permitted cultural narrative is hard to sell on the international market. The limitations of co-

production, for instance, have revealed the gap between Chinese media's perception of cultural advantages and the commercial imperative in international cultural markets. According to producers, culturally specific themes and topics may work well for domestic audiences, but they are unlikely to achieve the same international recognition as producers desire. Moreover, political and administrative constraints have compounded the competitive disadvantages that China's commercial production sector faces.

In Chapter 7, by way of a case study, I examined the use of an international film festival to expand China's global distribution platforms. Offering international co-production and global distribution, Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (GZDOC) was an initiative associated with the broader policy aim of integrating trade opportunities into nation branding. Industry participants have noted the growth in the market value of international cultural goods whilst maintaining that political control plays a dominant role in setting the production agenda. The establishment of transnational distribution networks was intended to facilitate global cultural trade, but tensions found in co-production and IPR trade, illustrated in Chapter 7, revealed the pragmatic and necessary negotiations that were needed between Chinese and international production companies.

The gap between China's policy goal of nation building and the limitations of market capacity has become more evident. Evidence found in fieldwork interviews pointed to the constraining effect of rapidly shifting policy trends and a lack of transparency in how policy guidelines are communicated. The administrative cost may remain affordable in the domestic marketplace, but it can be problematic for the policy goal of producing exportable cultural goods to serve the purpose of nation branding, considering the intensification of ideological and commercial competition in the international and regional cultural markets. Moreover, the struggles in co-production practices suggest a need to finesse the understanding of the

commercial and policy needs in nationally specific markets to overcome the difficulties found in China's cultural exportation regime. Situated in the global competition for political and cultural power, however, this conclusion leads to the question: who, if anyone, can mediate the tensions between political, commercial and creative needs in the intercultural communication network?

8.3 Future areas for production research

Understanding the cultural politics of media production is crucial to analysing the mechanism of political control, the formulation of a national discourse and the current condition of China's international communication policy. Through ethnographic observation, this thesis has examined the aims of policy initiatives and their implementation in the cultural production sector. The examples provided show how content production and regulation play out in the interactions between the production sector, political authorities, the regulator and domestic and international audiences. The CCP's aspiration to restore control, by focusing on ideological coherence and stability, is an increasingly explicit part of China's digital regulatory agenda facilitated by administrative and legislative measures.

For reasons yet to be understood, however, studies of China's cultural industries by media and communication analysts have taken little interest in public discussion of the power dimensions of the production culture and there has been limited conceptual analysis of the changing power dynamics in China's contemporary broadcasting scene. Some interviewees attributed this lack of interest to the social psychology of Chinese society, which prefers harmony to confrontation (Hall and Ames, 1995); others see it as a result of a fluctuating political climate that draws boundaries around sensitive areas and therefore inhibits public discussion on the cultural politics of media production (Carlson et al., 2010). Sectoral evidence gathered in this research revealed a decreasing willingness for political discussion across the

production sector, potentially due to the professional experience of a more controlled atmosphere. Yet beneath the surface of silence and compliance to the official discourse, producers and audiences continue to explore new areas that allow flexibility in negotiation. Chapter 3 illustrated how conflicting views coexist, compete with each other, and are moderated into a mediated mainstream production culture. This may entail media institutions' further departure from the current policy framework, which sets out new agendas for micro-level production research.

There are notions and agendas in China's domestic policy framework where further clarifications and transparencies are called for. Understandably, some of the entrenched notions in the Chinese broadcasting industry, including the common acceptance of governance of mainstream ideologies, account for a resistance to change which has been identified across the production sector. However, theories of media and communication need to keep up with the shifting power structures in the digital era. For instance, the recognition of a national identity formed during a process of mobilisation and contestation has been absent from the policy framework, which is crucial to analysing the rapidly changing regulatory regime in the competitive digital cultural sphere. To that end, a timely reassessment of industry patterns is necessary in order to capture the current condition of the production sector and the public communicative space. Given my personal background and experience, the empirical data collected in this research focuses heavily on the production sector. Further sectoral evidence is needed from the regulator, particularly regarding the policy response to the issue of regulatory transparency.

This research also offers wider implications on the discussion of media regulation at an international level, focused on the tensions between the rise of nationalist views and the diplomatic, commercial and cultural needs of global communication (Keane et al., 2007; Ang

et al., 2015; Flew et al., 2016). In China's contemporary media culture, the power dimension has shifted due to endeavours to recast media cultivation and the national discourse for national and institutional players and to impart the rules and orders needed to best fit the stability of social structure in a digital, globalised, cultural sphere. As the policy initiative moves from regulating the national cultural sphere to the global promotion of China's national cultural image, relevant case studies are needed in East Asian and western markets to examine the specifics of audience reception patterns and the regulatory needs of different nations and regions.

What implications might be drawn from this discussion? How best to analyse national identity – discern ways to produce, communicate and promote it as a unity – is a tall order. The development of a cultural policy agenda is discursive. Much depends on what the administrative bodies decide to do with the new digital regulatory regime. Nations and states, geo-politics, and media intervention shape the present condition of the discourse and variations in the politico-economic and socio-cultural contexts need to be addressed in order to understand any problems and tensions as well as ways to accommodate them. At the core of the policy discussion, however, the question of who regulates what and on whose behalf continually arises, pressing on policies that promote individual cultural rights, cultural diversity, national pride and global engagement.

Appendix I: Interview guide

Pre-interview

Before the interview takes place, participants' demographic information will be collected via communication sheets, including their educational status, job title, party affiliation, and the media sector they work for.

Section A (Participants' Background)

1. What brings you into documentary production and/ or distribution industry?
2. How long have you been in this industry?
3. What are your main responsibilities?
4. What do you like the most about working in the documentary sector?

Section B (International co-production and global distribution)

1. How do you choose the themes and topics of a particular documentary or series? Has the primary concern changed in the past years?
2. How do you interpret traditional Chinese culture in your work? And what do you consider to be most relevant? Does this change over time?
3. Can such interpretations reflect Chinese national identity? If so, in what ways?
4. To what extent can cultural documentaries circulate in a global market?

Section C (Commercialisation and public attributes)

1. Who do you think are the main audiences for the cultural documentaries? Have you noticed any changes in recent years?
2. Has the notion of 'cultural industry' influenced your working initiatives?

3. What are the most effective ways of presenting documentaries to capture public interest?

Section D (Policy intervention)

1. Do you get funding from the government? If so, how do you apply for the funding? If not, how much do you know about the public funding and financing system?

2. How is content regulation for cultural documentaries carried out in practice, on traditional television and/ or digital platforms? Any noticeable changes in the past years? If so, to what do you attribute these?

3. Do you feel the influences of policy intervention on the production and distribution of your own work?

Appendix II: Ethics consent form

CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that Yanling Zhu is collecting data in the form of recorded interviews and in-house documentation for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

These data are being collected as part of a research project on broadcasting and cultural policy in east China for a Ph.D. thesis in the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow. Semi-structured interviews are used as one of the main research methods in this research for data collection. Verbal data recorded in the interviews will be transcribed and stored in a secure and appropriate environment during the full course of the research project, and for 10 years after the research has been completed. Additionally, in-house legal and legislative documents may be involved as part of secondary data analysis of policy documents. In-house policy documents may include laws, government administrative regulations, department rules, judicial interpretations, local regulations, local government rules and group provisions that are not in the public domain.

I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:

- I have the choice to leave any question unanswered.
- Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
- The materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for up to ten years for archival purposes. Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.
- The materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.
- Any material that is noted as off-the-record will be treated accordingly.
- I understand that once the data collected has been anonymised, then in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation I have no rights relating to the processing of the data unless I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from it.

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's name and email contact: Yanling Zhu

Supervisor's name and email contact:
Philip Schlesinger,
Melanie Selfe,

Department address:
Centre for Cultural Policy Research
University of Glasgow
13 Professor Square
Glasgow G12 8QQ

Appendix III:

Plain Language Participant Information Statement (PIS)

Title of project and researcher details

Title: Broadcasting and Cultural Policy in east China

Researcher: Yanling Zhu

Supervisor: Prof Philip Schlesinger and Dr Melanie Selfe

Course: PhD, Media and Cultural Policy

Why have I been chosen?

You are being invited to take part in a research project into broadcasting and cultural policy in east China. A research project is a way to learn more about something. You are being asked to take part because of your expertise knowledge and experiences on the production and distribution of cultural documentaries.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What will happen if you take part?

The purpose of this study is to find out the development of cultural documentaries in China and the policy influences on broadcasting industries and cultural heritages. If you decide to take part, I will ask you some questions about Chinese national cultures, the ongoing changes in public service broadcasters, and the cultural policy intervention practices.

You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to.

This will take about 60 minutes.

I will record your answers on a voice recorder so that afterwards I can listen carefully to what you said.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this study, and if you decide not to, you will still be free to visit the venue. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me.

Keeping information safe and private

I will keep the information from the interview in a locked cabinet or in a locked file on my computer.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

When I have gathered all of the information from everyone who is taking part, I will write about what I have learned in a thesis, which I have to complete for my postgraduate research studies.

I will keep you and other participants updated with what I have found out about what you think about broadcasting and cultural policy in China.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow

Contacts for further information

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask…

- me, Yanling Zhu
- or my supervisor, Dr Melanie Selfe
- or the Ethics officer for the College of Arts, Dr James Simpson

Thank you for reading this!

Appendix IV: Interview list

SI: Semi-structured Interviews, based on the interview guide (Appendix I) and open-ended questions.

UI: Unstructured or In-depth Interviews, where informants are approached for the discussion of a limited number of topics in great detail.

Code	Date of Interview	Location	Nationality	Year of Birth	Gender	Job Title
SI-1	4 December 2018	Online	Chinese	1993	Female	Producer at SMG
SI-2	5 December 2018	Online	Chinese	1996	Male	Director
SI-3	16 March 2019	Glasgow	Chinese	1990	Female	Former producer at CCTV
SI-4	20 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1993	Female	Producer at SMG
SI-5	21 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1985	Male	Head of a production company
SI-6	23 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1991	Female	Producer and screenwriter
SI-7	23 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1989	Male	Senior producer at Youku
SI-8	24 March 2019	Suzhou	Chinese	1981	Female	Producer with SMG
SI-9	25 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1984	Female	Head of Documentary department at Bilibili
SI-10	25 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1954	Male	Senior producer at Bilibili
SI-11	27 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1977	Male	Senior producer at SMG
SI-12	28 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1968	Male	Senior producer at SMG
SI-13	28 March 2019	Suzhou	Chinese	1976	Male	Senior director, local broadcaster
SI-14	30 March 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1956	Male	Former director at SMG
SI-15	31 March 2019	Suzhou	Chinese	1983	Female	Head of a production company
SI-16	31 March 2019	Suzhou	Chinese	1983	Male	Producer

SI-17	2 April 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1992	Female	Producer, local broadcaster
SI-18	6 April 2019	Suzhou	Chinese	1983	Female	Senior producer, local broadcaster
UI-19	N/A	Suzhou	Chinese	1970s	Male	Producer
UI-20	N/A	Suzhou	Chinese	1960s	Male	Senior Producer, a local broadcaster
UI-21	N/A	Suzhou	Chinese	1960s	Male	Producer and manager, a local broadcaster
UI-22	N/A	Suzhou	Chinese	1970s	Male	Senior producer, a local broadcaster
SI-23	10 May 2019	Glasgow	Chinese	1979	Female	Producer and Marketing Director at Tencent
SI-24	28 July 2019	Edinburgh	British	1990	Male	Curator
SI-25	5 September 2019	Glasgow	French	N/A	Female	Producer, head of Scottish Documentary Institute
SI-26	10 October 2019	Glasgow	Chinese	1988	Female	Senior Copywriter
SI-27	18 December 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1992	Female	Producer and IP specialist
SI-28	18 December 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1993	Male	Producer
SI-29	21 December 2019	Shanghai	Chinese	1994	Male	Director and producer at SMG
SI-30	24 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1988	Male	Former producer at CCTV
SI-31	26 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1979	Male	Senior producer
SI-32	27 December 2019	Online	Canadian	1958	Male	Former producer at Discovery
SI-33	27 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1992	Male	Producer at CCTV

SI-34	28 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1972	Male	Producer
SI-35	28 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1993	Male	Producer and distributor at A&E Networks
SI-36	30 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1979	Female	Senior producer at CCTV
SI-37	31 December 2019	Beijing	Chinese	1967	Female	Senior producer at CGTN
SI-38	7 January 2020	Online	Chinese	1967	Male	Head of a provincial broadcaster
SI-39	8 January 2020	Shanghai	Chinese	1977	Female	Producer at SMG
SI-40	8 January 2020	Online	Chinese	1985	Female	Senior producer at Youku
UI-41	N/A	Guangzhou	Chinese	1970s	Male	Vice chief executive officer at Youku
UI-42	N/A	Guangzhou	Chinese	1968	Male	Independent director
UI-43	N/A	Guangzhou	Chinese	1950s	Female	Independent director
UI-44	N/A	Guangzhou	Chinese	1975	Female	Independent producer
UI-45	N/A	Online	Chinese	1979	Female	Senior director at CCTV
UI-46	N/A	Shanghai	Chinese	1991	Female	Producer

Appendix V: List of cases and institutions

A&E Networks	An American multinational broadcasting company, a joint venture between Hearst Communications and the Walt Disney Company
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BBC Studios	A British content company and commercial subsidiary of the BBC Group
BBC World News	An international English-language pay television network, operated under the BBC Global News Ltd division of the BBC, which is a public corporation of the UK government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Bilibili	A Chinese streaming service based in Shanghai, featuring videos, live broadcasting and mobile games
CCTV	China Central Television
CCTV 9	A television channel operated by Chinese state broadcaster China Central Television, broadcasting documentaries in Mandarin Chinese
CGTN	An international English-language cable TV news service based in Beijing, China, owned by the Chinese state media China Central Television
China's Greatest Treasure	A documentary series subsidised by CCTV and co-produced with BBC World News and the UK-based Mustang Films
CICC	China Intercontinental Communication Centre (China Intercontinental Press), a state-funded media agency operated under the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China
Discovery	An American multinational pay television network
GZDOC	Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival, a state-endorsed documentary film festival held in Guangzhou, China

Hello AI	A Chinese 8K documentary on artificial intelligence and human life, invested in by Intel and produced by News Reels Production
iQIYI	A Chinese online video platform based in Beijing
National Geographic	An American television network and flagship channel owned by National Geographic Partners
NHK	Japan Broadcasting Corporation
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration, China's regulator for radio, television and film industry
Ofcom	The government-approved regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications and postal industries of the United Kingdom
One Cup, A Thousand Stories	Documentary series co-produced by BBC Studios and Migu
Planet Earth	Documentary series produced by BBC
Post-00s	Documentary series directed by Zhang Tongdao, based on the experiences of young people born after 2000
SAPPRFT	The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, replaced by the NRTA in 2018
Seven Worlds, One Planet	Documentary series, produced by the BBC
SMG	Shanghai Media Group, a Shanghai-based publicly owned institution
State Council	The chief administrative authority of the People's Republic of China
Tencent	A Chinese multinational technology conglomerate holding company
Tencent Penguin pictures	A Chinese film distributor and production company owned by Tencent
The Forbidden City	A Chinese documentaries series on the Palace Museum, directed by Zhou Bing, produced by CCTV
The Tale of Chinese Medicine	A Chinese documentary television series on the culture and history of traditional Chinese medicine, directed by Gan Chao and Zheng Bo
Youku	A video hosting service based in Beijing, China

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