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# China's 'new cultural diplomacy' in international broadcasting: branding the nation through CGTN Documentary

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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 enhancing its soft power amid global competition. This article examines how China's international broadcasting institutions respond to the policy initiative toward cultural diplomacy, through a case study of the China Global Television Network (CGTN) Documentary. It uses document analysis, in-depth interviews and participant observation, to explore the gap between the contemporary policy regime and its implementation in the international broadcasting sector, taking into account the interplay between broadcasters, political bodies, producers and international audiences. Situated in the interconnected global marketplace, this article examines the current condition of tensions not only between political control and commercial imperative, but also between the national regulatory regime and the need for global engagement. It argues that although the newly found political priority of promoting China's contemporary national values globally entails an increasingly assertive agenda toward nation branding, market disadvantages and the uncertainty of audience reception challenge the policy pursuit for using its state media as a means for public diplomacy.

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## Introduction

In November 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) announced a new direction for public diplomacy, underlining the promotion of what President Xi Jinping envisions as 'the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Xi 2014). The policy engenders the formation of a collective cultural self-image through the adaptation of traditional, national culture, to recompose a contemporary political discourse in the global arena. Although the promotion of arts and culture has been on China's international broadcasting policy as part of its diplomatic initiative since the 1940s, the emphasis on promoting national values suggests a more assertive approach toward contemporary cultural diplomacy. This shows what D'Hooghe (2015) describes as China's political belief that political power grows out of its culture and values as much as from its hard power (1).

The policy discourse around promoting national values globally engenders the diplomatic impetus to use state media as a means for nation branding. However, tensions increase not only between the tightening of control of a top-down production framework and the growth of commercial forces, but also between the rise of a national regulatory agenda and a policy goal of global engagement. China's media have been engaged in foreign markets since the 1940s, through a range

of platforms including international broadcasting and publishing (Madrid-Morales 2016, 79). Influenced by China's market reforms and global reintegration in post-1989, China's state media has been pragmatically deployed as an instrument for international propaganda, as part of China's soft power initiative in its pursuit of an improved global image (Huang 1994; Zhao 2008b; Wang 2011). In the interconnected, digital communicative space, the cultural projection of China has become increasingly important to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to the state in dealing with global competition across changing policy fronts (Hartig 2016). Still, there has been a conflict between the perception of China's socio-cultural transitions and China's political need for promoting a collective national discourse with international relevance (Ramo 2007). China's cultural diplomacy has been shaped by a constantly changing landscape of global cultural spaces, and, therefore, the policy relevance to international broadcasting needs to be reassessed in the changing audio-visual market.

Focusing on the production projects of China Global Television Network (CGTN) Documentary, this article seeks to explore the interplay between China's international broadcasters, political bodies and producers in negotiating an outward-facing media agenda. CGTN was established on 1 January 2017, from the merger of seven sub-channels of the CCTV international and news networks, aiming at blending cultural content with news in pursuit of global influences. This research uses document analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation as its main methods, to explore the gap between the national regulatory policy and divergent needs of the international marketplace, and how it has affected China's international broadcasting regime in the past decade. It begins with an analysis of the political impetus of President Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream thesis and how it has influenced the production priorities in China's international broadcasting channels. Then, it examines the ways in which a contemporary national discourse is given more primacy and tries to seize public spaces, associated with an increasingly assertive policy of cultural diplomacy. Drawing on evidence found in the negotiation processes between the broadcasters, the regulator, the producers and the audiences, it reveals a dilemma for China's international broadcasters between the diplomatic imperative and the market logic, associated with the mechanisms of regulation and control, which is translating into the tension between promoting national values and engaging with the global marketplace.

## **The new cultural diplomacy and international broadcasting policy**

Among the richness of academic and professional debates of China's international cultural policy, the terms of soft power, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and nation branding are often used quasi interchangeably. Notwithstanding the interrelated areas between the schools of communication, sociology, and international relations, this article takes the discussion of China's international broadcasting and cultural diplomacy as its starting point to unpack the different approaches taken in understanding cultural production and regulation in China's media sector. The emphasis on promoting national values while at the same time engendering global communication is much indebted to Nye's soft power theories in the late 1980s, which continue to develop in the early phase of digital globalisation in the 21st century, whereby public diplomacy is understood as a means of promoting a country's soft power and an essential tool in the arsenal of smart power (2008, 94). In her analysis of China's cultural policy and international relations, D'Hooghe (2015) maintains that 'China's political culture and its approaches to communication influence the way in which China conducts public diplomacy' (132). Influenced by China's domestic politics in the 1940s, Passin (1962) interprets China's 'cultural diplomacy' as a policy tool to improve the country's international recognition when it was marginalised in global politics. The contemporary search for national identity still much depends on the use of state media as an instrument for cultural diplomacy, 'by linking the nation to the outside world' (Lee and Melissen 2011, 5).

Given the intensity of culture wars taking place in the international arena, the emphasis on national values in media production is translating into China's international broadcasting policy – and its global communication network becomes the policy instrument to promote anew, a Chinese identity globally (Thussu, De Burgh, and Shi 2017). The new cultural diplomacy entails a clearer focus on taking the cultural approach to articulate contemporary national ideologies. The policy concerns on geopolitics lead to an increasingly explicit 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, 809). For instance, 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 on 'deep integration with, and openness to, the regional and international economies' (Kang 2007, 5). The concept of China's peaceful rise tries to reassure regional audiences of a 'mutually beneficial growth leading to co-prosperity' (D'Hooghe 2005, 90), and this involves a political need to rebrand the nation in the cultural sphere.

In 2016, the notion of 'great external publicity' (Da Wai Xuan 大外宣) was written into CGTN's policy agenda. The policy priority on national values has become more explicit in the regulatory guidelines of the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) (the state regulator for the broadcasting sector), characterised by increasingly tightened boundaries around political correctness especially concerning issues of national interests and sovereignty (NRTA 2020). The diplomatic significance of international broadcasting could be traced back to the establishment of China's overseas radio network in the 1940s (which predates television), when media organisations such as Radio Peking were officially seen as diplomacy tools by the party (He 2001; Gan 2004; Zhao 2008a). 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 (Ramo 2007; Zhao 2008a, 144). The policy emphasis on the promotion of national culture coincides with the political initiative to promote a non-confrontational national image globally (Zhang 2011) and to 'get its message out and convince the world of its benign intentions' (Hartig 2016, 655).

Globally, the resurgence of cultural nationalism in public spaces 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' (2015, 620). In exploring China's renewed nationalism in the early 21st century, Gries (2004) argues that national identity is not static, but 'shaped by the narratives we tell about our national pasts' (135). The reinvention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012) by the use of media power is concerned with the policy objective of what Hughes interprets as 'forging a post-nationalist identity' to mediate political conflicts in international societies (1997, 95). How cultural identity is (re)created by invoking traditional culture matters profoundly to its contemporary international broadcasting regime, considering the intensive international competition over political and cultural power. Some regard the tailoring of traditional cultural elements to a contemporary narrative as a modern rendition of national propaganda (Gan 2004; Guo, Wang, and Sang 2004; Chin 2017). Such political intention of reputation management can be attributed to what Rawnsley (2015) understands as a policy response to 'rectify perceived distortions in the global flow of news about China' (273).

Focusing on the social and rhetorical contention found during the 2008 Olympics, Latham explores how media institutions mediate the boundaries around what can be seen as the 'real China', amid 'a process of contestation between competing representations, understandings and identifications of China' (2009, 25). The recomposition of China's modern cultural identity is shaped by increasing pressures on media organisations to compete for audiences in the international arena. According to global public opinion surveys, however, China enjoys what Shambaugh describes as 'a decidedly mixed international image' (2015, 99). Situated in a competitive international marketplace, the reception of international audiences remains a key challenge to the political imperative for cultural diplomacy. As Ang et al. suggest (2015), the notion of cultural diplomacy has been

advocated as a more citizen-oriented form of diplomacy than the national-oriented model, 'whose "targets" are no longer other governments so much as diverse national and global audiences and publics' (368).

## Reimagining China's identity in global communication

With its newly branded ethos of 'see the difference', CGTN (2016) claims to 'promote communication and understanding between China and the world, and enhance cultural exchanges and mutual trust between China and other countries'. Drawing on the aims and claims of the institution, as well as evidence found in ethnographic observation and interviews, this section examines how CGTN Documentary produces a national narrative in its media products in line with the political aspiration to foster global conversation and influence world politics.

As a state-controlled broadcaster operating in the global marketplace, CGTN needs to deliver national narratives while abiding by internationally acceptable editorials. According to the interviewees, the international channel is desperate to 'deliver the output with great captures of China's culture and traditions that the audience finds relatable' (Interview, I-37, CGTN, 31 December 2019). 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 comments on the wide distribution of food documentaries such as *A Bite of China* (the Chinese documentary television series on the history of China's food culture, which first aired in 2012 on China Central Television and gained international popularity thereafter):

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)<sup>1</sup>

This view informs the broadcasting objective of highlighting the emotional dimension to build international rapport through cultural narratives. In her case study of *African Chronicle* (Feizhou jishi 非洲纪事) (a TV documentary screened by CCTV-9 in 2011), Puppini (2017) argues that what unites China's self-identification and its reflection in global audience reception is the emotional bond rather than the political discourse. The focus on emotional connections is an essential part of the market pursuit as the stories employ an ambiguous, sometimes even abstract level of emotional affect rather than explicit political manifestations. As one interviewee comments, 'at least this kind of content does not seem to make people think, "Chinese government propaganda"' (Interview, I-33, 27 December 2019).

Evidence from fieldwork suggests that in the past decade, the level of cultural assertiveness has increased in CGTN's cultural output in representing China's contemporary national identity. Following the propagandistic tradition of state-controlled media (Gan 2004), it is nothing new that media professionals integrate social order with historical aesthetics in the reproduction of China's modern images. However, many producers have found that the current regulation draws tighter boundaries around what can be publicly represented as national. As an executive producer at a national broadcaster 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 costumes' – 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)

This engenders a tightly controlled approach to conceiving a cultural discourse. As Zhao (2008b) contends, the use of arts and cultural programming as a propagandistic tool is but a contingency policy to balance the struggle between political control and commercial initiatives. Given the

increasing political pressure, the contemporary discourse on national identity in China's arts and cultural programming appears to be an attempt to dress its politics in a cultural outfit. To achieve a sense of national solidarity in accordance with the official discourse, state media modify the national image through what Wodak describes as national identification focused on cultural similarity as a basis for political legitimacy (2017, 404). As a senior cultural producer in a national media group suggested, the reinforcement of cultural confidence aims at creating the image of a powerful player, as opposed to a passive participator in the global political discourse (Interview, I-12, 30 March 2019).

Another example to show how media institutions recompose national discourse is the production project of *The Tale of Chinese Medicine* (2006). It is a six-episode documentary series on the discovery and application of traditional Chinese medicine, co-produced by Shanghai Documentary Channel and iQIYI (China's streaming service), distributed across analogue and digital platforms domestically before it aired on international platforms. The producers initially attempted stories of handcrafts 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). According to the interviewees, the editorial orientation is deeply anchored within the value system of maintaining tradition and respecting national norms. A producer at a national broadcaster suggests that he has been doing the job of 'filling aesthetically pleasant audio-visual footages into written narratives' (Interview, I-29, 21 December).

The shift back to social conventions contributes to a top-down system in which a mainstream identity is formed. The consensus of a collective national image is a result of the interplay between national media, political bodies, and producers through a hegemonic production regime. Since Xi's Chinese Dream thesis became prevalent, cultural and historical elements in media have placed greater emphasis on rigour and discipline. Producers found that the media depiction of national identity has been reversed to one that values tradition over creativity, conservative norms over individualism and international broadcasters tend to showcase national culture in its conventional representations. Nakano and Zhu interrogate the unique cases in Japan and China and understand the promotion of cultural heritage as a feature of global competitions over the 'attainment of cultural and moral supremacy' that serves the purpose of nation branding (2020, 869). This justifies policy intervention in forming 'an ideologically legitimate national image' (Interview, I-34, producer in a national broadcaster, 28 December 2019).

## The mediation of a collective national discourse

Cultural nationalism arises with the conviction that a collective national identity is defined by a shared culture, civilisation, and language (Guo 2004; Meng 2018; Li 2015). Given the increasingly apparent political need for cultural diplomacy, China's current cultural policy emphasises the ideological role of national broadcasters in an international marketplace. A producer with CGTN says 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). CGTN Documentary has developed the cultural approach to representing the official line on national values in its programming agenda, wherein the manifestation of culture, arts and heritage in national content seeks to target wider audience groups and improve communication effects.

In the past decade, the government has decided to tighten its regulatory grip on the audio-visual sector and the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), the state regulator have issued a range of legislative and administrative measures focusing on the ideological aspects of digital regulation, particularly concerning the representation of national unity and sovereignty (NRTA 2020). Situated in the interconnected cultural sphere, the tightened boundaries around national ideologies,

associated with the reinvigoration of traditional culture, can be seen as a policy attempt to recompose a national discourse that 'offer[s] a compelling alternative to Western liberalism' (Li 2015, 80–81).

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 six-episode documentary series on the discovery and application of traditional Chinese medicine, *The Tale of Chinese Medicine* (2006), the National Health Institute took part in the production, distribution and regulation process, because 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 interplay between a centralised broadcasting agenda and administrative intervention shapes and sustains the notion of a collective cultural identity in the international media. Currently, the policymakers intend to link the modern national image with the aesthetics of traditional culture and civilisation, while avoiding the depiction of ideological struggles related to various historical conditions. As a documentary producer at SMG reveals about his experience in producing a medical documentary:

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 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 rebranding the national image as modern and harmonious. This exemplifies the changes in producers' perception of what is to be included in the narratives of national discourse and what is not tolerated.

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. This pertains to the renewed cultural nationalism, where ideological doctrine is implicitly inserted in the narratives of cultural and arts programming. In the broadcasting schedule set by CGTN, the symbols and objects displayed in cultural content are consonant with, and manifest, the historical coherence of Chinese civilisation. For instance, in *History in the Frame* (a documentary series distributed in 2021, featuring historical and archaeological exploration), 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). Confucian culture, arts and traditions are recast to make a shared, national identity within history but outlives the historical circumstances which gave its birth. According to Li, the resurgence of Confucian discourses in the public domain started in the 1980s is an approach advocated by socio-cultural scholars to deal with the pressure for social and political change (2015, 80).



The policy orientation places an expectation on international broadcasters to improve their role in promoting an assertive national discourse, but the tightened political control, coupled with divergent needs of the international marketplace, increases the market disadvantage of the state broadcasters' cultural outputs. As an executive producer at CCTV suggests:

When documentaries are used for nation-building and/or nation branding, the content must be about China. Official documentaries must focus more on the big picture, such as nation, civilisation, 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)

A collective national discourse depicted in international broadcasters is not an uncontested achievement; rather, the consensus over it is a contingent arrangement of continuing negotiations between media organisations, political bodies, and nationally specific audience groups. This leads to the questions of international audiences' reception of a media-led national discourse that highlights China's traditional culture and national ideologies.

### The media's pursuit of an international audience

CGTN has enhanced its cultural approach toward promoting a contemporary national discourse. This evolves from Zhang Xiaoling's earlier observation (2016) that 'China has chosen its newfound economic strength rather than its political values to appeal to the target audience' (5). As many cultural producers agree, the narratives around contemporary China have also been a demonstration of the country's economic development and urbanisation, such as in the documentary series, *China's Mega Projects* (produced and distributed by CGTN, 2019), which showcases the major infrastructure projects China has taken on, both past and present. It has been the case that cultural products made for exportation tend to 'avoid politically controversial stories and focus on more positive narratives' (Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 94). However, this is often criticised by international audiences as the straightforward illustration of the country's economic power and the intended 'positive energies' are mocked as 'shouting out slogans'. As one screenwriter says: '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).

To evaluate how China deploys its soft power through international broadcasting, one needs to understand 'who China's target audiences are, and how its soft power is received' (Zhang 2016, 4). The key challenge for CGTN is to find a receptive audience before trying to cultivate international audience tastes. Audience trust in broadcasters, as an issue, is right in the eye of the storm of controversy around the operation of global communication power via cultural output. Not surprisingly, CGTN's market survey suggests that audiences with high education, in their mid-30s, account for the majority of international consumers for its documentary content (due to the absence of an effective multi-platform measurement system, however, CGTN's market survey only covered audience ratings of Asian and African markets in both analogue and digital services at the time of the fieldwork). 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). Despite the broadcaster's intention to appeal to the global marketplace, the complex formation of divergent audience groups is a challenge to the exportation of China's national discourse.

In their case study of CCTV 9 (the previous name of CCTV's English language documentary channel, renamed as CGTN Documentary in December 2016), Guo et al. have examined the communication power of CCTV's international broadcasting network in terms of its reach to the global audiences, its perceived legitimacy and its commercial capacity (2004). Although China's media



network has expanded the global infrastructure to increase audience exposure, a low level of audience trust in state-controlled broadcasters inevitably challenges the perceived credibility of China's international broadcasters (Guo, Wang, and Sang 2004, 8). As Rawnsley has found in his research in public diplomacy of China and Russia (2015), China's international broadcasting assets, mainly constituted by its digital media presence, have yet to 'demonstrate any tangible evidence of furthering dialogue with their audiences' (274). As discussed above, the state-controlled nature of China's international broadcasters increases the difficulties facing the production sector in negotiating a collective national discourse in overseas markets. Madrid-Morales and Gorfinkel (2018) have explored how the cultural politics of government control, censorship, and cross-cultural collaboration in the filmmaking process may lead to the issues of audience trust in international broadcasters.

Issues of global trust and audience engagement increase the market disadvantages of China's cultural production. As the head of a production company admits:

Personally, I think Chinese documentaries are hard to sell because of their cultural values. Even those productions with overall high quality can hardly be linked to the universal value 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-14, 31 March 2019)

This concerns language not as simply a tool for communication, but more with the implications of language systems embedded in consumption habits, tastes and preferences. The perception of cultural relevance influences audiences' reception of cultural content that is not locally produced. According to the interviewees, the promotion of cultural symbols is an alternative to propagandistic content and the key challenge lies in finding a receptive audience, given the acquired differences in language and cultural backgrounds. 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 culture to symbols such as Kung Fu and Pandas. [...] Chinese stories are not a necessity for global audiences in their daily consumption habits, but we have 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 production into divergent propositions. The division between the acquired tastes of domestic and international audiences forces CGTN into making hard decisions in its broadcasting orientation and editorial strategies. In Nye's words, 'all information goes through cultural filters, and declamatory statements are rarely heard as intended' (2008, 103). Despite careful self-censorship on politically sensitive elements, CGTN still encounters criticism for the 'national propaganda' of a state-controlled media firm. As a Scottish producer who involves in international documentary distribution suggests:

People have certain tastes, and audiences 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, 28 July 2019)

The lack of audience engagement hinders the role of state media in developing a globally acceptable narrative and fostering an aspirational culture (Gorfinkel 2018). In an era of 'post-globalisation' (Flew 2016), there are indicators of increasing ideological divisions between 'West' and 'East', pointing to new challenges facing the global communication agenda (Shambaugh 2015; Wodak 2017; Brands 2018). The uncertainty in global politics increases the difficulty for CGTN to perform its institutional role as an agency of public diplomacy while a lack of audience trust impedes the broadcaster's performance as a credible international media provider.

## The division between national and global stories

In the interconnected international marketplace, seeing China's international broadcasters solely as 'propagandists' (Latham 2009) can be misleading, as the commercial imperative plays an essential part in determining the communication effects in terms of audience reception. Influenced by the national cultural policy, CGTN Documentary's programming agenda is negotiated between diplomatic interests and global audience needs. 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, 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, 2) in approaching its editorial lines, has undermined its ambition to find its legitimacy in engaging with international audiences, amidst controversies around the rhetoric of soft power in global cultural contexts.

Despite CGTN's non-confrontational propositions, 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 the 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 (2021) (a journalist at *China Daily Global*) reported on 5 March 2021, despite Ofcom's decision to revoke CGTN's license, the company is allowed to operate on the continent across Europe. 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 impartiality and credibility as an international content provider.

The attempt to internationalise China's cultural production inevitably involves the localisation of communication strategies regarding the needs of culturally diverse audiences. It is crucial to understand the target audience, yet according to the interviewees at CGTN, market research on international consumption patterns is absent and only supplied by producers' empirical knowledge. As the producers admit, 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 the overseas distribution of the documentary series, *Post-00s* (first released in 2017 by CCTV-9, focusing on the growth of China's younger generation born after 2000), as an example:

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, producer for *Post-00s*, I-31, 26 December 2019)

There are, however, tensions between the pursuit of an internationally acceptable narrative and the inherent need for promoting national ideology. Producers, meanwhile, express concern over how censorship may impede the international competitiveness of original Chinese cultural production as they try to avoid the propagandistic storytelling that inserts political ideology into narratives. Yet the ideological constraints of self-censorship practices and administrative

measures confine the programming capacity of the international broadcaster. According to the director of *Hello AI* (5-episode documentary series that explore the story of artificial intelligence and human life, first distributed in 2019):

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 conflicts and tensions 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)

The 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, 12). CGTN Documentary follows the communication strategy of CCTV network and promotes a contemporary discourse characterised by harmony and social progress. The government has decided that the international broadcasting network must be 'culturally confident', as in President Xi Jinping's (2016) words, to 'enhance international discursive power and tell China's story well to the world'. 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, 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, CCTV, 26 December 2019)

As discussed, the policy thinking on international broadcasting is an outcome of the compromises made between media institutions, government intervention, and divergent needs of the audience market. In Iosifidis' words, 'the media are located in civil society but operate in the marketplace, and meanwhile are linked to state institutions' (2011, 13). Effective audience engagement with content is built on an audience's perception of the legitimacy of the broadcasting outlet. CGTN needs to understand better what is going on in the minds of global audiences and what values are shared. As noted above, the key is to find a receptive audience and develop their tastes.

## Conclusion

In the introduction, this article has set out to investigate the rationales and the outcomes of a more 'assertive' policy of cultural diplomacy in China's international broadcasting under President Xi Jinping's administration. In examining the policy guidelines in the past decade, this article shows the policy focus on the representation of a collective national discourse manifested in the prevailing cultural approach, which intends to draw tighter boundaries around what can be represented as 'national' in international broadcasting. For China's international broadcasting sector, the key tension between national/global regulation has been translated into a balancing act between its primary aim of promoting a contemporary national discourse in line with the officially recognised political values while at the same time seeking to accommodate the divergent needs of the international marketplace.

However, evidence found in ethnographic observation, as well as in-depth interviews, suggests that China's international broadcasters perform a limited role in promoting China's national values globally. Drawing on the production practices of CGTN Documentary, shaped by its interactions with

government bodies and the global audiences, this article maintains that the promotion of China's cultural values beyond borders is not simply driven by political bodies and media institutions; rather, cultural activities with diplomatic significance are best understood as taking place in a contested audience marketplace (Ang, Raj Isar, and Mar 2015). As media exportation and consumption in the international spaces are primarily driven by the market logic, the key challenge for broadcasters lies in the diverse composition of audiences and the uncertainty of international reception.

Such tension has been sharpened by policy discourses that focus on using international media as a means for cultural diplomacy. China's international broadcasters have increasingly integrated the official ideologies with traditional culture to recompose a contemporary national discourse, which coincides with the model that D'Hooghe (2015) has put forward. However, the gap between the policy need for nation branding and the lack of perceived legitimacy of China's international broadcasters remains an issue for the media sector. Further research, including audience research in nationally specific contexts, is needed to finesse the understanding of the changing patterns of audience reception of China's international broadcasting.

## Note

1. During my fieldwork in China and the UK in 2019, I spoke to 46 cultural producers (including 36 semi-structured interviews) about the ongoing challenges facing China's international broadcasting sector and different solutions being canvassed. An interview guide was provided, outlining questions about the new policy guidelines to deal with the tension between national and global interests, and further interview questions were tailor-made according to participants' background and experience. The sample includes 36 interviewees who took part in semi-structured interviews and 10 more informal interviews. The participants are documentary directors, producers, and distributors (Chinese and other nationalities) with national broadcasters, streaming services and production companies.

Where issues of sensitivity may be a concern, the interviewees and contributors are anonymised and assigned numbers with, as a prefix, I (for interviews), as in '11'. For clarity and consistency, I will specify participants' job title, organisation, and interview date, where relevant.

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