

Overview of Zespa's work with CCTV

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Background

China's growing economy is now ranked second in the world in terms of GDP, with signs of this also detectable within its TV industry: it currently has 686 TV channels, including 55 satellite channels serving 1.25 billion viewers. Daily TV viewing is around 151 minutes per person.

China's state television broadcasting organisation CCTV is the largest operator, with 52 channels across mainstream and specialist output, reaching 96% of all TV viewers, and enjoys an average 30% audience share. Its advertising revenue was **£1.7 billion** in 2010 (up 10%), against total radio and TV industry revenues of **£21 billion**, a rise of 20%.

The vast majority of the programmes broadcast by CCTV are produced in-house. However the station is increasingly open to partnering with international rights-owners and producers as it seeks to freshen up its programming in the face of fierce competition from provincial channels and Internet players.

Zespa's role

In early 2011, Zespa Media was enlisted by CCTV to scout for and recommend international media partners and TV programmes and formats suitable for the Chinese market. Zespa Media is now helping the broadcaster pick the right content and partners across its entire portfolio of broadcast channels, online and digital operations, says Zespa Media's managing director Jean Dong.

London-based Zespa Media, which launched last year, advises producers, rights-holders and distributors looking to position and sell their existing programmes and formats in China and develop new formats for China. In doing this, the company acts as a "cultural interpreter."

"CCTV has a huge appetite and demand to acquire and procure finished programmes and formats, as well as knowhow, expertise and partners for co-development projects," says Dong.

This appetite extends across CCTV and the 100s of local provincial municipal channels across China, forming "a huge market of definite opportunities," says Dong.

CCTV's TV channel portfolio includes 15 terrestrial Chinese channels, one high definition TV channel, 36 digital pay TV channels, plus 28 online TV channels, with content that "aims to cover every aspect of human life," Keyu Wu, CCTV's Director of Programme Research and Development, told delegates at the recent Edinburgh TV festival reception which Zespa Media organised for CCTV.

In addition to its domestic channel portfolio, CCTV operates 10 international channels across Asia, Europe and North America, airing in seven languages including English,

Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic and Portuguese. These collectively cover 140 countries worldwide, reaching around 80% of the world's population.

Despite its international footprint, CCTV has remained somewhat under the radar in terms of its profile, says Dong, a position that the broadcaster is keen to rectify.

As Wu put it, CCTV's aim is to develop into a leading international media organisation and "increase the scope of its international collaborations and push the internationalisation of China's TV industry."

"As an organisation CCTV has a very international ambition," says Dong. "They want to be outside of China as well, and having close external partners would enable them to do that and widen their horizons, both in terms of making new programmes and widening their distribution."

Zespa Media works most closely with CCTV's governing department, the Programme Control Department and its Research & Development Department, which Dong describes as the heart of the organisation.

"CCTV places great importance on research and development," said Wu. "2% of our annual revenue is dedicated to developing new programmes and pilot production (**CCTV's advertising revenue in the current year is approximately £1.4bn**). We also have a specialised department that supervises new programme research and development at every channel."

TV formats and external partnerships

In addition, it also monitors trends and developments in the global TV industry, "especially to identify interesting new TV programme formats and expertise," said Wu, as well as "actively communicating and working with leading international TV production companies, providing opportunities for CCTV to license suitable TV programme formats and facilitate international partnerships and creative collaboration."

This year, CCTV has met with a number of independents such as Shine Group, Zodiak Group, Eyeworks and Mistral Productions, and Wu announced that it has so far picked up two foreign format licences, including Shine Group's Clash of the Choirs developed by Sweden's Friday TV and Hole in the Wall from Fremantle Media.

On the formats front, CCTV's localised version of Clash of the Choirs is poised to launch on the broadcaster's flagship variety channel CCTV-1 later this month, in what Dong says could be the biggest show on Chinese TV. Earmarked for a primetime Saturday slot, it premieres on November 12. Zespa Media recommended the format to CCTV and brokered the deal earlier this year in March. Zespa Media is also acting as production consultant working alongside CCTV, Friday TV and a local independent production company during the production phase.

An important aspect of Zespa Media's role is its ability to culturally translate and adapt formats to the tastes and constraints of CCTV and the Chinese state.

These constraints can be difficult for outsiders to understand and navigate. A stark illustration of this was the recent ruling by the Chinese authorities limiting the amount of

entertainment programming on primetime TV in response to what the authorities regard as a growing wave of reality-driven pure entertainment shows with no 'social moral backbone'.

"If we look at it in terms of how the state sees programmes and TV, it's very much like parental control, and just as parents don't want kids to watch TV after 10pm, or they put a lock on the internet, the state want people in China to watch shows with a positive social message and a degree of humanity, not playing on the vulgar, base or ugly side of life, however fascinating that may be," Dong explains.

However, Dong goes on to say that adapting Clash of the Choirs is a good example of how to steer through the cultural, regulatory and political hurdles in the Chinese TV market. "What I want to get across to people here is that it's not such bad news. It actually opens up a range of other avenues for Western media companies to interact with China, and the new opportunities are still plenty."

"It is quintessentially an entertainment talent reality show, with auditions and studio-based competition, but we have steered away from government sensitivities to make it work.

"There are macro and micro levels of adaptation of a format," Dong continues. "Firstly, at a macro level, it's about how to match the programme up with the government's line to promote strong moral values. Secondly, at a micro level, it's about what particular channels want, their style and position in the market (such as family entertainment, etc.)."

Arguably a show that is culturally enriching, Clash of the Choirs is resonant at both levels, says Dong. "It presses all the right social buttons, at the same time as underplaying the so-called entertainment element," she says. "It's really a celebration of your affection for your hometown." The format, in which eight celebrities each return to their home town, conduct auditions and form a choir, then compete with each other for the big prize, a donation to the charity of their choice in their home town.

"It's impossible to bring something off the shelf and just chuck it at China. It will never work. A lot of fine-tuning is needed to make it fit at both macro and micro levels (or cultural, social, and political levels), so it's as much about how you adapt it as the format itself, to make it work in China," says Dong.

"At one level TV audiences are quite similar worldwide, and the Chinese are just as interested in human-interest stories. But Chinese viewers have their own unique tastes and preferences too. It also involves how to pass Chinese government censorship as well as giving the broadcasters what they want. Those are the nuances, if you're considering the Chinese market.

"We don't want to be as bold as to say any format would work, but with sufficient adjustments, a lot of them could (with some obvious exceptions, such as Big Brother). This is not to overplay our importance, but you do need to have someone on your team who can provide this kind of cultural interpretation and a local TV producer partner to make a successful programme out of a format in China," says Dong.

As well as straight acquisitions and licencing formats, Dong says that CCTV and Zespa Media are exploring opportunities to co-develop brand new formats with external partners suitable both for China and international markets.

“We’re recommending the right partners to the various channels to co-develop new programmes and formats that could be internationally popular as well,” says Dong. “It means a closer partnership, and not just straightforward sales, and is an approach that applies to many other areas of business in China. The cultural and political differences mean it can’t just be a straight sell.”

“Being a company between East and West, to Western clients we say, ‘Let’s look at what Chinese companies are looking for and then co-develop and build it together rather than sell what you’ve already got. The standpoint needs to be shifted.’”

Dong says Zespa is also helping specific specialist CCTV channels that are now looking to revamp their content and brand. “The more obscure channels have the bigger demand for new ideas, says Dong. “They’re more keen to work with overseas partners to develop their brand and develop specific programmes.”

CCTV’s speciality channels include Finance & Economy, Military & Agriculture, Science & Education, Documentary, Musical & Opera, Society & Law, News, Children’s, Music, Sports, Movies, alongside its more mainstream Variety (CCTV-1), Entertainment channel, TV Drama, and international Chinese-language channel.

“What these channels want are programmes that are entertaining and engaging, but that are not necessarily entertainment shows, so they need a lot of expertise from outside China,” says Dong.

The Beijing Opera channel, for instance, has “a big appetite for new ideas as they’re dying to have a breakthrough show,” she says. “Instead of showing opera back-to-back, they’d like to develop their own programmes, with reality elements, game elements, fun elements.” There’s a similar challenge for the agriculture and military channel. “What kinds of programmes can they show? That makes it interesting,” says Dong.

A whole area of untapped programming here is factual entertainment. “It’s definitely going to have a bigger and bigger potential,” says Dong, “but factual entertainment is not yet an established genre in China; we hardly have anything like that in China.

“There are some excellent factual entertainment shows in the West that CCTV has found interesting

“The reason they’d be popular is that they’re entertaining, they’re about real people and have heart, but they’re also shows that enhance family values, and or society values. These are all relevant to China. However, other shows which undermine people or may be seen as negative may not work in China, because they don’t celebrate much in the eyes of the Chinese government.

“On the one hand the government has told TV channels to tone down their popular entertainment and, on the other, these channels have to supply popular and engaging programmes, so it’s a very interesting moment for Chinese TV,” says Dong.