

## BACKGROUND

1 Set up in 1994, the Advisory Committee on Chinese Programmes ' (ACCESS) role is to advise and give feedback on Chinese programmes that are shown on Free-to-air Chinese TV channels so as to enhance the broadcasters ' role to entertain, as well as to inform and educate the viewers.

2 This is the second ACCESS annual report since the committee came under the purview of the Media Development Authority (MDA) or previously known as Singapore Broadcasting Authority. MDA also functions as a secretariat for eight other programme advisory committees.

3 The current committee was appointed for a two-year term with effect from April 2002. The new Chairman for the committee is Professor Wang Gungwu who is currently the director of the East Asian Institute. Besides Professor Wang, three new members were also appointed. They are Dr Chou Mei Ling, Dr Kwok Kian Woon and Mr Chua Tian Poh.

4 The list of members in the committee is as follows:

Chairman	:	<b>Professor Wang Gungwu</b> Director, East Asian Institute
Members	:	<b>Mdm Claire Chiang</b> Executive Director, Banyan Tree Gallery
		<b>Dr Chou Mei Ling</b> Deputy CEO, Care Corner Mandarin
		<b>Mr Chua Tian Poh</b> Chairman, Ho Bee Holdings Pte Ltd
		<b>Mrs Ho Woon Ho</b> Principal, Nanyang Junior College
		<b>Associate Professor Hao Xiaoming</b> Associate Professor, Nanyang Technological University
		<b>Dr Kwok Kian Woon</b> Sociologist and Managing Director, Cruxible Pte Ltd
		<b>Mr Lau Ping Sum</b> Executive Director, PAP Community Foundation
		<b>Dr Quah Sy Ren</b> Assistant Professor, National Institute of Education
		<b>Mr Yeo Guat Kwang</b> Director, National Trade Union Congress

## TASKS PERFORMED

5 Under Professor Wang ' s chairmanship, the Committee held four meetings in the period April 2002 to March 2003. Regular dialogue sessions were also held with MediaCorp and MediaWorks to update and exchange views on improving the quality of Chinese programmes.

6 The duties of the committee included the following:

- a Review and give feedback on Chinese programmes shown on Channels 8 and U;
- b Review and provide recommendations on the range and quality of Chinese programmes;

- c Review and provide feedback on censorship issues; and
- d Give recommendations to MDA on policy matters relating to Chinese programmes

## OVERVIEW ON RANGE AND QUALITY OF CHINESE PROGRAMMES

7 Since media liberalisation began more than a year ago, viewers saw an increase in the quantity of Chinese programmes on Channels 8 and U. This has translated into more choices for viewers in terms of local and acquired Chinese programmes.

8 There were commendable efforts to produce programmes that inform and entertain, such as “*Itsy Bitsy Singapore*” 《标出新加坡》 and “*The Mission*” 《创业无敌手》. In keeping with interest in reality dramas, the committee also observed a trend to produce re-enacted dramas based on true-life stories, adding realism and driving home the precautionary messages. Examples include “*Crunch Time*” 《转捩点》 and “*Tonight I Will Tell*” 《人生导火线》. The committee also noted that two of Ch U’s programmes, “*Youth Express*” 《天涯任我行》 and “*You’re Okay, I’m Okay*” 《今晚动口不动手》 were awarded the ‘Best Youth Programme’ and ‘Best Talk Show’ at the Asian Television Awards 2002. The results are encouraging especially for a relatively new channel like Ch U.

9 While choices have increased, there is still room for improvement in the quality and range of Chinese programmes. For example, the committee felt that there is a need for Chinese channels to be more conscious of our multi-cultural and multi-racial background when producing programmes.

10 As competition intensified between the Ch U and 8, broadcasters sometimes tried to push the regulatory boundaries. One example was “*SNAP- Sexiest Goddess Contest*” 《全星总动员之性感美女赛》 which featured women contestants with voluptuous figures. While these cases were more the exception than the rule, the broadcasters are advised not to overstep their boundaries to achieve short-term results.

11 On the subject of dialect programming on free-to-air television, the committee acknowledged that there are different opinions on this matter and ideally more research needs to be done to better understand the relationship between exposure to dialects in the media and how it affects the learning of the Chinese language and skill in the speaking of Mandarin. Meanwhile, the committee recognises that dialect forms a rich part of the Chinese culture and where appropriate, it encourages a more flexible approach in the exercise of the dialect policy over free-to-air television for cultural programmes. Nonetheless, the committee agrees that this has to be done without causing a setback to the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

## ACCESS 'S OBSERVATION ON CHINESE TELEVISION PROGRAMMES

### News Bulletins on Channel 8 and U

12 News bulletins on both channels have generally maintained a high level of standard and professionalism. Comparing the two channels' news, members felt that news on Channel U tend to feature more laymen topics and appeal to the masses, while Channel 8's news provide more in-depth financial analysis and appeal more to the professionals. Both channels have their specialities and appeal to different group of viewers.

13 However, there were times when broadcasters may sensationalise stories in news reports. One example was Channel U's news bulletin that featured repeated shots of a Mexican who drove his car into a group of children. Broadcasters are advised to exercise discretion to ensure that news items are presented in a tasteful manner and appropriate for viewing at prime time.

### Current Affairs

14 The committee noted an improvement in "*Money Week*" 《财经追击》 which has veered away from its previous treatment and attempted to explore topics from an economic as well as a social point of view. For example, on the topic of entrepreneurship, the programme not only looked at the different financial models of starting a business, it also featured case studies of entrepreneurs who related their experiences in starting their own businesses. This adds human interest to the programme.

15 Members also commended Channel U's "*Inside Out*" 《非常透视眼》 which adopted an investigative approach to report on a range of societal issues. For example, there was an episode on "*Inside Out*" which featured an in-depth report on the proliferation of counterfeit goods in Singapore.

### Info-educational Programmes

16 In its previous report, the committee encouraged broadcasters to produce programmes that do not merely entertain but also inform and educate viewers. For the past year, the committee noted a commendable effort by the broadcasters to produce interesting and informative programmes like Channel 8's "*The Young Bosses*" 《新鲜头家》 and Channel U's "*Never Say Bye Bye*" 《病非末日》. The committee encouraged the broadcasters to continue to produce more of such quality programmes.

17 The committee is also pleased to note that Channel 8 has adopted its past recommendations to produce programmes on developments in China. "*Singaporeans in China*" 《打拼在神州》 was a quality production that featured the economic and social developments in China through case studies of Singaporeans living and studying in China.

## Dramas

18 Co-productions in dramas with overseas production houses continued to be a common trend with the two broadcasters. Examples include “*Romance of the Book and Sword*” 《书剑恩仇录》 and “*Innocently Guilty*” 《法内有情天》. Broadcasters are encouraged to make use of such opportunities to introduce our local programmes to overseas viewers. Broadcasters can also learn from their overseas counterpart and transfer knowledge and skill to our industry. This will allow local players to expand beyond the Singapore market and uplift Singapore’s position in the international media industry.

19 Despite the proliferation of acquired dramas, members observed that local productions remained most popular among viewers. This could be seen from successful local productions such as Channel 8’s “*Beautiful Connection*” 《九层糕》 and “*The Vagrant*” 《豹子胆》, which topped the channel’s ratings. Other local productions such as Channel U’s “*Crunch Time*” 《转捩点》 and “*Tonight I Will Tell*” 《人生导火线》 incorporated positive social messages and boast commendable acting from veteran artistes.

## Local Cultural programmes

20 The committee commended Channel 8’s “*Good Morning Singapore*” 《早安您好》 which incorporated info-bits about the local arts and cultural scene in its morning show. This enabled viewers to keep abreast with the latest developments in our arts and cultural scenes.

21 Another commendable effort is “*Common Art*” 《凡夫俗艺》 which featured disappearing traditional craftsmanship. Such programmes help to highlight to younger viewers our traditional heritage and culture and archive these crafts before they disappear. Beside Chinese craftsmanship, the committee hoped that a second series of the programme could be produced to feature other races’ culture. The committee also welcomed more programmes such as “*Beautiful Life*” 《亮丽人生》 which profiled one of our outstanding local artistes Goh Soo Khim.

## Teens and Childrens' Programmes

22 Teens programmes worth mentioning include “*Youth Express*” 《天涯任我行》 on Ch U. The committee acknowledged that it is more difficult to produce programmes for teens as they are constantly surrounded by other forms of attractions such as Internet or shopping. There are not many programmes like “*Youth Express*” which were both info-educational and entertaining for the youths.

23 Members are also pleased to note that Channel 8 has dedicated a programming belt “*Goggles*” to target the teens. Instead of carrying only acquired teens programmes and cartoon programmes, Channel 8 is encouraged to feature quality local teen programmes scheduled in the “*Goggles*” belt.

24 In terms of childrens’ programmes, Channel 8 continued to produce a good range of children info-educational and children’s drama series. Commendable programmes include “*Who Is No 1*” 《谁是No.1》, a children’s drama which reflected how students, in their bid to get good results, suffered from different forms of pressures. Another programme “*Kids Express*” 《Kids快车》 is a children info-

educational programme which educated children through different missions assigned to the host each week.

### **Variety Programmes**

25 There was still a heavy reliance on tested formulas such as “*City Beat*” 《城人杂志》 and “*Happy Rules*” 《开心就好》, “*Food Glorious Food*” 《大小通吃》 and “*Yummy King*” 《优选美食王》 which had similar presentation styles and dealt on common topics such as lifestyles and food. There was also an increase in the number of formatted gameshows such as “*Celebrity Squares*” 《名人Tic-Tac Toe》, “*Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*” 《百万大赢家》 and “*The Weakest Link*” 《智者生存》. While tested formulas help to guarantee a certain level of ratings, the committee cautioned that over-reliance on formats may stifle creativity. Hence, broadcasters are encouraged to think out of the box and engage in more creative local productions.

26 For acquired programmes, the committee observed that there was still a strong dependence on Taiwanese acquired variety programmes and Hong Kong TVB dramas. There were times when both channels scheduled TVB dramas to compete head-on in the same slot, hence driving local dramas’ supporters to tune to acquired dramas. Members stressed that it is vital to have local programming with strong production values and local relevance to keep Singaporeans anchored and attuned to Singapore.

27 It was commonly believed that local productions are expensive and it is more economical to acquire programmes. However, competition has since driven up prices of popular acquired programmes like TVB serials. Instead of benefiting overseas programme suppliers, the committee felt that the monies could be better spent investing in quality local programmes that can appeal to viewers.

## ACCESS 'S KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### More Programmes that Promote Multi-Racial Themes

28 Members encouraged the broadcasters to produce programmes with cross-cultural and multi-racial themes.

29 From a social perspective, broadcasters have a social responsibility to help build inter-racial understanding and cohesion among Singaporeans, especially in light of the present social and political climate.

30 Commercially, broadcasters also stand to benefit as Singapore's multi-cultural environment provides the channels with a competitive edge to differentiate its services from other Chinese channels such as Phoenix and Power TV or the recently launched Asia Plus. Instead of competing with these channels by producing similar programmes, broadcasters should take advantage of our multi-cultural context to produce programmes that reflect the Singapore and Southeast Asia environment and that are of value to both local and overseas Mandarin speaking audiences.

31 As channels that reach out to the most viewers, Channels U and 8 are urged to take on a more proactive role to incorporate multi-racial and cultural themes within their programmes. This means going beyond featuring token multi-racial casts in programmes and producing programmes that incorporate multi-racial elements. Broadcasters should also consider the option of dubbing programmes such that quality content in other languages can be brought to the attention of Mandarin-speaking audiences. Similarly, broadcasters should provide subtitling for Chinese programmes so that more viewers, outside the Chinese community, could enjoy them.

32 Channels should also consider using bilingual presenters in their programmes. For example, "*The President Star Charity Show*" 《总统星光之夜》 which had bilingual comperes made the programme appealing to both English and Mandarin speaking viewers. Another way is to produce cultural programmes that go beyond topics on the Chinese culture to cover other cultures as well.

### Scheduling of current affairs programmes

33 It was felt that good programmes such as "*TR Report*" 《特写》 and "*Frontline*" 《前线追踪》 are scheduled too late, thus making it inaccessible for viewers. There is a common belief that current affairs and informational programmes can only appeal to niche audiences. Members felt otherwise and argued that these programmes could also be made interesting and scheduled at primetime.

### In-depth Current Affairs and Documentary Programmes

34 Members observed that while there is a concerted effort to increase the range of variety and mass entertainment programmes, there is still room for improvement in in-depth current affairs and documentary programmes. The committee acknowledged that current series such as "*Focus*" 《焦点》 did well in covering and providing analyses on socio-political events in the region in a timely and informative manner. However, to bring the quality a notch higher, it was felt that broadcasters can learn from foreign broadcasters like Phoenix TV which produced quality current affairs programme that conducts in-depth report on world affairs, for example, "*Sally Wu - Eye On World*" 《小丽看世界》. Similarly, a good documentary programme could

explore a wide range of topics such as nature, history and social issues and could reach a wider audience than dramas or sitcoms as they are less culture-bound. Our local production industry should take advantage of Singapore's competitive edge in knowledge, production expertise and proximity to the Asian continent to produce documentaries that look beyond Singapore, in particular at Asia.

35 The committee acknowledged that it is inevitable that broadcasters place their emphasis on ratings since advertising revenue is their main source of income. Having said so, the committee felt that this is a chicken-and-egg problem. If the broadcasters do not produce quality programmes, they will not be able to raise our viewers' appreciation level and the standard of our local programmes will stagnate. However, the committee acknowledged that this should not be the task of the broadcasters alone, but part of the government's overall initiative to encourage a creative and knowledge-based economy.

### **More Programmes that Promote Arts and Culture**

36 With the opening of the Esplanade, broadcasters are encouraged to feature more programmes on local and international arts performances. Programmes that profile both local and overseas artistes, such as their thoughts on arts and introduction to their works, are also encouraged as this will help to uplift the viewers' standard in the appreciation of arts.

37 The committee also reiterated its previous recommendation for broadcasters to adapt plays by local theatre groups. This requires working with local playwrights and performing arts companies in exploring how plays written for the stage can be put on television. One suggestion was to translate the late Mr Kuo Pao Kun's works into TV programmes. It was felt that many of Kuo's works such as "*Ma Ma Looking For Her Cat*" 《寻找小猫的妈妈》 are commendable works that are multi-racial in theme and can be shown on different channels.

### **Conclusion**

38 Since the liberalisation of the media industry, competition between the two channels has intensified. Rather than being overly engrossed in the war for ratings, the committee advised the broadcasters to embrace competition in a positive light and strive to compete on quality and not ratings. Increasingly, competition is not only between the two broadcasters but also coming from foreign Chinese channels. Instead of competing head-to-head on ratings, broadcasters should focus on improving their programmes so as to counteract external competition. Only then, the industry can progress and the viewers benefit from the healthy competition.