



LIFE OF TRAGEDIES

A discussion of the production of a radio soap opera for HIV/AIDS prevention in Yunnan, China

Claudia Blume



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DRUGS, HIV/AIDS AND THE JINGPO MINORITY

Only a small brook separates Luliang, a village in China's remote Yunnan province, inhabited by the Jingpo minority, from neighbouring Burma, the world's second largest heroin producer. The area is close to the infamous "Golden Triangle" region, bordering Burma, Thailand and Laos. Burmese traffickers sell drugs cheaply along the long porous border with China.

Ma Meilan is a retired schoolteacher I met in Luliang during my field research in the beginning of 2005. The 76-year old widow was not able to enjoy her golden years in the care of her three sons, all of them intravenous drug users: one was too sick and weak to work in the fields; another one had simply disappeared; the third one had recently passed away. Two of her sister's sons, also heroin users, were dead as well. While the women did not know for sure what had caused their sons' untimely deaths, they assumed that they were somehow linked to the injecting of drugs.

When I was there early in 2005, the Jingpo considered the widespread heroin addiction among their community as the main threat for their members. HIV/AIDS, however, had not been on the radar screen of most people. More and more intravenous drug users in their village had become sick or even died, but until researchers arrived to Luliang to collect material for a radio soap opera, many did not know really why.

China has currently one of the world's most rapidly expanding HIV epidemics. Yunnan, the province where China's first major HIV/AIDS outbreak was detected in 1989, has one of the country's highest HIV infection rates. Most people living with HIV in the province are

intravenous drug users who inject heroin trafficked in from neighboring Burma.

Until recently, the Chinese government largely ignored Yunnan's AIDS epidemic. Yunnan, in the remote west of the country, has borders with Vietnam, Burma, Tibet and Laos, and is one of the country's poorest provinces, home to 25 of China's 55 ethnic minorities. These ethnic groups, who often do not speak the national language or have access to school education and therefore remain illiterate, have in many cases been cut off from what little HIV/AIDS prevention information and education has been available in the province. 80 percent of the infected persons in Yunnan are members of an ethnic minority.

The case of the Jingpo minority reflects a global phenomenon. The world over, the spread of HIV/AIDS mirrors the distribution of access to information and communication, and those communities most disenfranchised by the information society bear the brunt of the AIDS epidemic ^[1].

But a lack of HIV/AIDS information and education services –to which according to UNAIDS fewer than one in five people worldwide have access- is only one side of the problem. Even in those areas where HIV/AIDS communication campaigns have been launched, they often donot have the desired effect. While health communicators have been successful in broadening awareness of HIV/AIDS and how it can be contracted in a number of countries, all these efforts have so far failed to make an impact on overall HIV/AIDS rates.

Among health communication practitioners, there is little doubt that many HIV/AIDS information and communication campaigns have failed to change people's behaviour. A major re-examination of communication approaches led by UNAIDS and the Communication For Social Change (CFSC) Consortium was carried out a few years ago. The resulting UNAIDS Communication Framework For HIV/AIDS, released in 1999, concluded that most HIV communication programs were shaped around theories and models that did not meet regional or local needs. This led to the formulation of a new direction in HIV/AIDS communication, calling for a move away from individual-level theories to more multi-level, cultural and contextual interventions.

SOAP OPERAS FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

At the beginning of 2005, I spent about five weeks in China's Yunnan

province to study two radio soap operas for HIV/AIDS prevention: “Life of Tragedies”, produced in the Jingpo language, and “The weeping Jade Dragon Snow Mountain”, produced in the Naxi language. Both were specifically targeted at ethnic minorities and were part of a regional HIV/AIDS prevention project in the Mekong region, launched by UNESCO and financed by the Asian Development Bank.

The goals of this project are to address three of the major factors contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region: high-risk behaviours, trafficking in girls and women, and drug abuse among highland minorities. One of the main project components is the production of radio soap operas in Thailand, Laos and China.

Research-based, written in minority languages and using both traditional and locally composed music, the soap operas intend to appeal and be relevant to local people in these areas. They are based on real life-experiences, and written in the local languages by native writers to ensure that programmes are culturally and linguistically relevant to the audience.

The use of local languages is based on UNESCO’s assumption that one of the main barriers to preventive education in the region is the vast number of distinct languages from different language families. Many of these are unwritten languages without indigenous scripts. While many people in the region have considerable multi-linguistic skills, minority women are less likely to command either the national language or other minority languages [2].

At the time of my research, soap operas had been produced in Shan and Lahu languages in co-operation with Radio Thailand Chiang Mai [3]; in Hmong language in co-operation with Lao National Radio; and in Jingpo language, in co-operation with Yunnan’s People’s Broadcasting Station [4]. The Jingpo radio drama *Life of tragedies* also targeted the Kachin in Burma, who are basically the same ethnic group as the Jingpo in China. It was actually a Kachin official who had originally requested the production of the soap opera after he had heard the Shan program on Thai radio. UNESCO later set up a similar project in Yunnan in the Naxi language.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

While I did investigate both radio soap operas that were produced in Yunnan, I will focus here on only of them: the Jingpo drama *Life of tragedies*.

My overall research goal was to contribute to the discussion about effective HIV/AIDS communication by exploring a case study belonging to the entertainment-education genre.

I decided to focus on the production process of the soap opera, because it was my assumption that without careful, step-by-step, research-based planning, implementation and monitoring communication efforts can not be successful. I was greatly inspired by the detailed description of the production process of an episode of the successful South African *Soul City* TV series ^[5]. I also felt that while a lot of research had focused on audience effects, much less had been done about program design.

A review of the relevant literature allowed me to summarize what researchers and practitioners consider to be the main characteristics of the production process of successful entertainment-education projects: research-based interventions; on-site familiarity with the intended audiences; cultural sensitivity and relevance for the target audience; formative evaluation; professionalism and high-quality production; dedication and good co-operation of team members; spin-off activities and combination with other information and education activities.

As from my field research, I evaluated the production process of the radio soap opera I studied according to these criteria. I also wanted to find out how the soap opera related to the key principles outlined in the UNAIDS communication framework ^[6], the second theoretic pillar of my study. More precisely, I wanted to find out if:

- the individuals and communities targeted by the radio soap operas owned the process and content of communication;
- the projects empowered the community, gave a voice to previously unheard members of the community, and were oriented towards local content and ownership;
- emphasis on outcomes went beyond individual behaviour to encompass social norms, policies, culture, and the supporting environment.

FIELD RESEARCH

As part of my field research, I conducted 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews with the key people involved in the production process of the radio drama. These included radio staff at Yunnan's People's Broadcasting

Station in the province's capital, Kunming, the writer of the drama, and the leader of the research team – a sociologist and a specialist on Jingpo culture, who acted as an advisor to the project.

The second part of the research was carried out in the Dehong Dai Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture at the border with Burma. In the prefecture's capital, Mangshi, I interviewed other members of the research team, and had background meetings with government officials.

In Longchuan county, where the radio soap opera team had carried out its research and pre-testing, and where part of the target audience lives, I did 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews with members of the target audience in two villages. I also talked to local officials and the head of the district's Disease Prevention and Control Centre.

Back in Hong Kong, I conducted a telephone interview with the project's medical advisor, who now lives in the United States. I had previously interviewed the UNESCO-co-ordinators of the project in Bangkok, as well as a project officer of the Asian Development Bank, which finances the project, in Manila.

Most of the interviews were carried out with the help of an interpreter. While I speak and understand Mandarin Chinese, I needed help for greater accuracy.

LIFE OF TRAGEDIES

Life of tragedies is a soap opera that tells the story of Ko San and her childhood sweetheart and fiancé, Gam Ja. The two young people leave their village to open a shop in a nearby town. When Ko San gets sick and needs an operation, she is told in the town's hospital that she needs a blood transfusion. To obtain it cheaply, she agrees to buy blood on the black market. When she later finds out that she contracted HIV/AIDS through the blood transfusion, she hides her illness from Gam Ja, her family and friends for months. She pretends she does not love Gam Ja anymore, and urges him to marry someone else, because she does not want to infect him. Only after Gam Ja gets married to Bok Nan she tells everyone the truth, and finds acceptance and solace. Bok Nan, jealous, leaves Gam Ja, and him and Ko San finally get married and adopt a child. But a few years later, Ko San gets sick and finally dies. The drama ends with her funeral. Besides telling Ko San and Gam Ja's story, the drama shows the disastrous effect drugs have on their village. Drug users steal from others and get arrested; families are distraught. Several drug users – such as Ko San's brother- contract HIV/AIDS after having shared needles,

and die. The drama also tells the story of other minor characters –like that of a young girl who contracts HIV/AIDS after having been lured to work in an unspecified entertainment establishment.

DISCUSSION OF THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

Research-based interventions and on-site familiarity with the intended audience

The production process of the radio drama included a collection of baseline information, as well as extensive formative research conducted with the intended audience, focused mainly on finding out what problems the target audience was facing and collecting stories for the soap operas.

Most of the members of the research team were from the same ethnic group as the target audience, which not only gave them a deep understanding of the community they studied, but also much easier access to the people they talked to. Jingpo team member Shi Ruifang, for example, said: “The people felt we were from the same family, shared the same opinions. They felt that we sympathise with them. They felt close to us because we speak the same language. If we had spoken Mandarin, we would have been less close”.

In hindsight, however, the UNESCO project coordinators considered it a disadvantage to have given Han Chinese ^[7] researchers the lead, since they could not communicate with some of the villagers. They mainly kept a supervising role. But the Jingpo members of the team had no trouble getting in-depth information from the community, whose members knew about the urgency of their problems, had a strong desire to share them with the researchers, and wanted help to improve their situation.

Similarly to how *Soul City* was produced, the results of the research were “translated” into a dramatic form. Project members emphasized the importance of basing the radio dramas on research. Because *Life of tragedies* was based on real life stories, the characters and the story felt familiar to the target audience when they listened to it during the pre-testing.

A very weak point of the formative research was not to include an analysis of the media usage and preferences of the target group, which might have led to the decision to give up the production of a radio drama and to choose a different medium and/or format instead.

During my visits, I found out that very few people in the villages own a radio. There were not many TV sets either, but people tended to come together in the houses of those that owned one to watch Video Compact Discs (VCDs) in the Jingpo language, which are often bought in Burma. Unlike TV, radio was not very popular in the villages, especially with young people.

The research also lacked questions about the audience's preferences regarding the time of the broadcast, or about broadcast reach and the technical quality of transmissions. I was told while in the field that the reception of radio programmes is very bad.

Cultural and linguistic sensitivity and relevance for the target audience

Cultural and linguistic sensitivity was a strong feature of the radio soap opera. It was written by a minority author in the target audience's language; it was based on research conducted mainly by members of the same ethnic group as the target audience; and it made extensive use of local traditions, including traditional music.

Up to then, information and education on HIV/AIDS and related issues in Yunnan province had been mostly given in Mandarin Chinese –if at all provided- and many members of the target audiences did not understand the information or could not relate to it.

Although project members underlined the importance of using the target audience's local language, such choice is not entirely without problems.

The Jingpo radio broadcast, for example, can only be understood by a part of the Jingpo living in China; many of them speak other, completely different, dialects. The Jingpo dialect is, however, the main language spoken by the Kachin in Burma, who are a much larger group.

The author and other project members emphasized that the objective of the soap opera was not only HIV/AIDS prevention, but also education about, and the preservation of, their culture and traditions, which are seen as being under threat. The dramas include numerous references to Jingpo cultural, spiritual and social traditions. Music also plays an important role.

The team believed that it was very important that the producers of the drama belonged to the same ethnic group as the audience for the radio

soap opera in order to have an impact. “We have the same nationality... They will accept us better than the Han Chinese because we care about them from the bottom of our heart,” said Sha Mingbao, an actor. “If the Jingpo people are getting educated, they listen to the family’s advice, not to outsiders. People from the same ethnic group are like one big family. The Jingpo are very stubborn, they can only accept criticism from other Jingpo”.

Formative evaluation

The pilot-testing of an episode of *Life of tragedies* showed that the target audience liked the soap opera and understood the information on HIV/AIDS it contained. Based on comments of the target audience, the production team made changes to the drama.

The monitoring of the program’s reach and getting feedback from the audience –especially from listeners in Burma - during and after the broadcasting was, however, a weak point in the production process. It was unclear to the radio staff, when asked, how many people actually listened to the program. When I visited the villages and the district capital, I was surprised to find out that not one single person I talked to had listened to the soap opera, which by then had been broadcast several times. The reasons varied: people did not have radios or did not like radio programmes, the transmission was too bad, they did not know when the programme was on, etc.

Spin-off activities and integration into broader health campaigns

The Yunnan people’s broadcasting station planned to produce CDs and tapes of the Jingpo radio soap opera and distribute them through various channels, but I had the impression that the distribution and subsequent use was not very well thought-through.

There was no co-operation with other HIV/AIDS information and education initiatives in Dehong prefecture, although good opportunities existed, especially since the prefecture had recently been declared a national model in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Poorly trained government officials sent to the villages to educate people about HIV/AIDS are in desperate need for educational materials in minority languages, and various activities in the prefecture could have complimented the radio project.

Most of those involved in the production of the Jingpo drama believed

that radio alone is not enough to bring about change. The medical advisor in particular emphasised the importance of combining media with face-to-face education and with school education.

Professionalism and high quality production

Quality production was ensured through co-operation with professionals and experts –broadcasters, social scientists, cultural experts, medical advisors, writers and members of community organizations. The cooperation with a medical expert ensured the accuracy of HIV/AIDS information used in the drama.

The Jingpo drama was produced in a professional way and seemed to be of high quality. The recordings of sound and music were done with great care to underline the importance of Jingpo tradition and to increase the close-to-life feeling.

Dedication and good cooperation of team members

The Jingpo team seemed very enthusiastic and motivated. In my opinion, this was due to the fact that they knew about the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS and drug abuse on their own community even before the research started, and were aware that action had to be taken urgently. They felt that the problem concerned them directly, as they all originally come from the areas where drug abuse and HIV/AIDS are a big problem. Even their relatives were affected.

The Jingpo team had one main champion providing leadership –the young project co-ordinator of the Yunnan broadcasting station. Highly motivated and enthusiastic, he ensured a smooth cooperation between the project's various stakeholders.

Cooperation among project members in multi-disciplinary teams seems to have been smooth, and all parties involved seem to have complimented each other with their respective expertise.

THE RADIO SOAP OPERA AND THE UNAIDS COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

Audience ownership and empowerment

Did the individuals and communities targeted by the soap opera own the process and content of the communication project? To a certain extent, the answer is “yes”.

The Jingpo drama can in a way even be seen as a demand-driven project, since the initial idea for the broadcast came from a member of the target audience -the Kachin- and, to some extent, from the broadcasters.

Like the *Soul City* series, the drama was designed with the active involvement of those most affected. As discussed before, an orientation towards local content and ownership was one of the project's strongest features. In my opinion, the project empowered the community members and gave a voice to previously unheard members of the community. The participation of the local community in the formative research and the testing of a pilot episode were key elements of the production.

But despite many empowering and participatory elements, the content and the process of the project were not fully owned by the targeted community.

Although it was a member of the Kachin/Jingpo minority that had approached UNESCO with the wish to produce an educational radio soap opera for HIV/AIDS prevention, this was not followed up with a thorough assessment of the needs and preferences of more members of the targeted audience. This should have been done before negotiating a co-operation with the radio station. Such an early assessment might have shown –as my findings suggest– that the Jingpo would have preferred other media, like television or VCDs, instead of radio, and/or might have even chosen other formats rather than educational drama. In my opinion, another shortcoming of the Jingpo project was not to involve the local disease control centre or other relevant local organizations in the planning process. The county and prefecture where the Jingpo live are currently launching numerous HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment campaigns, and it is likely that local experts probably would have had good ideas about what kind of HIV/AIDS communication projects would be useful and complementary to other initiatives in the area.

Several of the researchers voiced concerns regarding the effectiveness of radio programs when they returned from the field. Despite these concerns, UNESCO did not budge from its original plan –to produce educational radio soap operas for HIV/AIDS prevention in the Mekong region. My observations in the field confirmed the early concerns of the researchers (which would have been more grounded had they asked more questions about media preferences): very few people seemed to have listened to the radio soap opera when it was broadcast.

Context

The radio drama not only addressed individual behaviour change, but also the cultural, spiritual/religious and social context of individuals –one of the key principles listed by the UNAIDS communication framework.

Besides HIV/AIDS education, the objective of the drama was also to preserve traditional culture and language, and educate younger people about them.

The radio drama operated within two units of change: the individual and the community. It showed that individual actions have an impact on the family and the community as a whole. The soap opera also indicated that the community should address problems jointly. One of the key scenes in *Life of tragedies* is a community meeting where the village leader addresses the problems they are facing. The drama also shows how the community is taking care of HIV-positive people. In that way, the soap opera not only emphasizes prevention but also other aspects of the HIV continuum, like care and support.

While the emphasis on the outcomes of the project was not explicitly on policies and the supporting environment, it seemed to have a certain impact in that respect. UNESCO cooperated in both cases with several government-controlled organizations like radio stations, local governments, communist mass organizations and cultural institutions, and a certain impact on these organizations can be expected. An example is that the Jingpo cultural adviser for the project recommended entertainment-education as an effective HIV/AIDS prevention tool to China's leaders at an important nationwide conference.

CONCLUSIONS

What, then, are the characteristics of the production process of educational serial dramas that can empower audience members to make informed choices regarding HIV/AIDS –particularly those living at the periphery of the information society?

In order to enable the audience to make informed choices about HIV/AIDS, I believe that it is important that an entertainment-education project is tailor-made; that it is relevant and meaningful to the target audience; that the health information given is accurate and relevant, and

that solutions offered to solve health problems can be applied realistically; that it not only targets individuals but also the community; and that those targeted are actively involved in the planning and production processes.

To achieve this, the production process of educational serial dramas needs to fulfil the following criteria:

- An intervention should start with an initial assessment of the problems, needs and preferences of the target audience –including media usage and preferences, choice of language etc. – before deciding on a co-operation partner.
- From the start, the project should work closely with health and social services on the ground.
- The people involved in the planning, research and production of the project need to have profound local expertise, be trained in qualitative research methodology, speak the language of the target audience and, ideally, have the same ethnic background.
- The project team should include professionals with a wide range of backgrounds like health professionals, media professionals, writers, cultural experts and members of relevant local organizations. An HIV/AIDS expert needs to be part of the team to make sure that the information provided is accurate and relevant to the target audience.
- In some cases, research spread out over a long period of time might achieve better results, especially when working with risk groups or with communities where HIV/AIDS is not yet seen as an imminent threat.
- The script of the entertainment-education program needs to be based on the ‘real stories’ collected during the research to make the drama as life-like as possible. The drama should not only address health issues but also the cultural, social, political and spiritual context of the target group.
- The production of the drama needs to be done professionally and include local elements to make the stories as realistic and relevant to the audience as possible.
- The drama needs to be pre-tested with the target audience and changes should be made according to their comments. Evaluation research during or after the broadcast can help programme-makers to find out about programme reach and the audience’s comments in order to make further adjustments and changes.

Like many communication scholars, I strongly believe that entertainment-

education projects will be more successful if they are part of multi-media campaigns or are combined with other promotional and educational activities.

A radio soap opera alone is not enough to bring about behaviour change. In my opinion, spin-off activities or the cooperation with other initiatives or organisations should already be addressed during the planning stage. Start-up meetings should therefore include members of local health and social services or other relevant organisations. Ideally, an entertainment-education project should be integrated with other HIV/AIDS prevention projects that target the same audience to increase its impact. It is advantageous to include members of organisations that are working with HIV/AIDS at the local level in the project team. There is a potential that those individuals and organisations will follow up the entertainment-education project with other educational activities or health services.

Finally, even the best-researched and best-produced educational radio soap-opera has no effect if no-one listens to it – as it sadly seemed to have been the case with the Jingpo soap opera, at least in the area I visited.

What went wrong? In my opinion, one of the main problems was the fact that a ready-made existed. Instead, it would have been better to start with a more open and flexible approach: “What is the best communication tool to enable the targeted community to make informed choices regarding HIV/AIDS?” The people answering that question should have been members of the target audience, but also experts working for local health, social or other relevant organisations.

I believe that this kind of open approach, and the community ownership of a communication project right from the start, would surely increase the chances of a project having an impact, reaching the target audience and contributing to education on how to make informed choices regarding HIV/AIDS.

Claudia Blume is a German radio and TV journalist. She worked as a communication adviser for a SIDA-financed project in Vietnam for a few years. She has spent the past ten year in Asia, and currently works as a reporter for Voice of America's Asia News Center in Hong Kong. This article is based on her Master thesis in Communication for Development of the same title (Malmö University, June 2005). claudia_blume@hotmail.com

[1] Scalway, Thomas (2004) “Democratizing HIV Communication” in *Development Outreach* (World Bank Institute).

[2] UNESCO (2004) "Twelve months project report".

[3] Additionally, an audiotape with Lahu songs and music aimed at HIV/AIDS prevention was released by UNESCO in October 2004. In November 2004, UNESCO supported a hill tribe pop concert against HIV/AIDS, trafficking and drugs in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The concert was broadcast live across the Mekong region, reaching hill tribe people in China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand (UNESCO 2004 "Press release", November 11).

[4] UNESCO Bangkok's website "Latest happenings in project components".

[5] Usdin, S., Singhal, A. et. al. (2004) "No short cuts in entertainment-education: Designing Soul City Step by Step" in Singhal, A. and Rogers, E. Entertainment-Education and Social Change.

[6] UNAIDS (1999) Communications Framework For HIV/AIDS.

[7] Han Chinese are the most dominant ethnic group in China.

