

Robert Chua's healthy respect

Written by Patrick Frater
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HONG KONG When discussing the Chinese TV market, bizzers often talk in terms of "toxic" and "non-toxic," a reference to the kinds of programming that may be acceptable to Middle Kingdom media regulators. Thus natural history, animation and docu are generally OK, but shows and channels that dabble in politics and religion are broadcast poison.

Hong Kong-based TV entrepreneur Robert Chua hopes to give double meaning to the notion of non-toxic as he launches his Health and Lifestyle Channel. Not only will the net avoid sensitive subjects, it will promote washing out bodily toxins with a strong emphasis on good diet, exercise and medical matters.

Chua and his panel of medical experts make the case that with the rapid growth of the economy in China and Asia, many people now have the means to live well, but not the understanding. He suggests that the channel, with its mix of talkshows, how-tos and quizzes, can become a trusted partner to millions.

For someone not part of the Chinese establishment, Singapore-born Chua has come a long way. He was one of the founders of Hong Kong's dominant TV conglomerate Television Broadcasts (TVB) in the 1960s and later created China Entertainment Television, a channel that landed in China in a different era, enjoying some investment from Time Warner, but is now part of plutocrat Li Ka-shing's media collection.

Today, Chua is an enthusiastic, somewhat professorial type with a home that has been turned into an overstuffed museum full of antiques and Chinese curios. He is also a connected and incessant campaigner, who isn't shy about pulling out a scrapbook of press clippings or producing a letter of recommendation from some official as proof of his *guangzhi* (relationships).

Chua's Health and Lifestyle pitch seems to be working. Content from the net has recently been picked up by the giant Shanghai Media Group for carriage on its regional cable circuits, which reach an audience of 100 million.

Starting next month, Health and Lifestyle-branded content will be stripped in Mandarin on Saturdays and Sundays on SMG's Youth Channel.

Such play is a rarity. Most foreign channels are granted "landing rights" only in top-tier hotels and foreigner compounds, though some Hong Kong nets also get play in Guangdong, the Cantonese-speaking mainland region just over the border from the city.

Another unique feature of HLC is its emphasis on interactivity. During a medical show on surgery, for example, viewers may send a doctor or health consultant their questions about the procedure via text message or email. Questions and answers are visible onscreen, allowing other viewers to share the advice and feedback. This function of HLC is an extension of the Interactive Channel, a net Chua has been operating in Hong Kong for the past couple of years.

Interactivity and an accompanying web operation add up to a "cross-media" functionality that Chua says delivers revenue-generating options such as home shopping, banner advertising and premium-rate messaging services.

The carriage deal with Youth Channel is intended to be only the first stage of an expansion campaign that could spread HLC across Chinese-speaking parts of Asia. Chua, who is also negotiating the backing of a mainland investor, is free to sign deals in other parts of China with other network operators. He says Taiwanese and Singapore platforms are beating at his door.

In a nontoxic manner, of course.



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