Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China

Shuyu Kong

Routledge Contemporary China Series

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Since the early 1990s, the media and cultural fields in China have become increasingly commercialized, resulting in a massive boom in the cultural and entertainment industries. This evolution has also brought about fundamental changes in media behavior and communication, and the enormous growth of entertainment culture and the extensive penetration of new media into the everyday lives of Chinese people.

Against the backdrop of the rapid development of China's media industry and the huge growth in social media, this book explores the emotional content and public discourse of popular media in contemporary China. It examines the production and consumption of blockbuster films, television dramas, entertainment television shows, and their corresponding online audience responses, and describes the affective articulations generated by cultural and media texts, audiences, and social contexts. Crucially, this book focuses on the agency of audiences in consuming these media products, and the affective communications taking place in this process in order to address how and why popular culture and entertainment programs exert so much power over mass audiences in China. Shuyu Kong shows how Chinese people have sought to make sense of the dramatic historical changes of the past three decades through their engagement with popular media, and how this process has created a cultural public sphere where social communication and public discourse can be launched and debated in esthetic and emotional terms.

Based on case studies that range from television drama to blockbuster films, and reality television programs to social media sites, this book will be of great interest to students and scholars of Chinese culture and society, media and communication studies, film studies, and television studies.

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To Colin and Owen

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Introduction

> You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content.
>
> Neil Postman, *Amusing Us to Death*

> I don't think that I will ever get to vote (for) a president in this lifetime, so I'll elect a girl I like instead!
>
> A netizen's blog on the HSTV talent show *Supergirl Voice*

> The main aim of Liuliu (the scriptwriter) and I for this drama was to debate the major problems a society encounters in 30 years of rapid development. It's just like Song Siming [one of the main characters] says: "Underneath the bright colors, there are only shabby clothes." We wrote this series for the many Song Simings and Guo Haizaos in today's society. We hope that through this series people will begin to think and debate these issues, such as value systems and morality.[1]
>
> Teng Huatao, director of the TV drama *Narrow Dwellings*

Rethinking popular media

Neil Postman, in his influential work *Amusing Us to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, gives a rather negative view of the increasing penetration of TV culture and technology into American society. In particular, he laments how they have worked together to change the way that public discourse is uttered. Postman warns us that junk entertainment, trivial culture, and overwhelming amounts of useless information are replacing serious thinking and becoming the new agents of oppression, but "people will love the oppression, and adore the technologies that undo our capabilities to think" (Postman 1985: vii). A humanist who believes in the power of printed words and rational arguments, Postman's argument is built on an arresting metaphor derived from contrasting prophecies made in two famous literary works. As he declares in his foreword, the dystopia overtaking American society is not the terrifying dictatorship depicted in George Orwell's *1984* but the much

more insidious hidden takeover envisioned in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. While totalitarian control of people's lives and thoughts through blatant propaganda and brutal political campaigns cannot be sustained in the long term, people are more willing, indeed happy, to be "controlled by inflicting pleasure," and by "amusing [them]selves to death."

Since its publication in 1985, Postman's book has evoked much public discussion on the social role of popular media such as television. In 2004, the book was translated into Chinese and provoked an equally diverse reception in China as it did in the West. The Chinese translation of the title—"*Yule zhisi*" (Entertaining to death)—became a catchphrase among Chinese television culture commentators. Critics, scholars, and cultural officials found Postman's thesis to be a highly convenient weapon to attack the newly emergent entertainment programs, as well as commercial art and blockbuster films, accusing these "vulgar works" of ruining "social values" and public esthetic tastes, and calling for them to be curtailed. This kind of argument was also adopted in numerous Chinese government campaigns over the past decade aimed at "cleaning up the screens." The most recent example was the "Opinion on Strengthening the Management of Programs Broadcast on Satellite Television Channels," issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in October 2011, which ordered China's 34 satellite TV stations to dramatically cut back on entertainment shows that it considered to be vulgar or "overly entertaining," and instead add more news and cultural programming (SARFT 2011).

By contrast, on the book club forum on Douban—one of China's most active social networking sites (SNS)—discussion of the meaning of Postman's book and its relevance to China has been unusually sophisticated and confrontational, as demonstrated in one review by Ye Zifeng entitled "Entertainment is really a serious business":

> Our sublime government is replacing television entertainment programs with more "healthy" programs, and the elitists and intellectuals side with them to blame entertainment shows and to encourage the officials to strengthen their censorship and call for more "good works" to be produced to guide the masses … As if our previous TV programs were so wonderful that our "great" TV culture was destroyed only after entertainment shows appeared!
>
> Ye 2009

Ye then shrewdly argued that Postman was not really attacking entertainment programs as such: what concerned him most was the fact that "serious" programs were being trivialized and oriented toward entertainment, which he felt would have a harmful impact on public discourse. But in China, this reader claims, Postman's division between trivial entertainment and serious public discourse does not apply because it misses the complex reality of Chinese society and politics: "Postman was wrong to predict that entertainment would

replace censorship, because [in China] even entertainment cannot escape censorship, … indeed the anti-entertainment campaigns are really just an excuse to prevent serious public discourse" (Ye 2009).

Based on their responses to media experiences, Chinese audiences seem to adopt a dissenting perspective on the impact of entertainment media on TV culture and communicative space in China, and they emphasize the necessity of placing media experiences within a historical and social context that differs from the American context of Postman and his intended "Western" audience. Adapting Postman's analogy, these online debates force us to rethink how popular media really function in a post-socialist society undergoing its own historical transition from "1984" to "Brave New World," particularly one where the specter of Big Brother still lingers.

The changing media scene

This book takes as its subject two recent developments in the rapidly evolving media and cultural fields in contemporary China that have brought about fundamental changes in media behavior and social communication: the enormous growth of entertainment culture and the extensive penetration of new media (including the internet, mobile communications, and other social media) into the everyday lives and cultural consumption habits of Chinese people.

Over the past three decades, "cultural system reform" (*wenhua tizhi gaige*) has been a major part of China's state-led marketization project. Especially since 1992, a commercial logic has increasingly swept through the media and cultural fields, which had previously been under the state plan and state financial patronage, and China has witnessed a massive boom in the cultural and entertainment industries and correspondingly rampant media commercialization resulting from pro-market cultural policies. From television drama series to reality shows, from martial arts flicks to internet-based microfilms, and from shareholding media conglomerates to provincial satellite multi-channel television stations, these institutional and content reforms have profoundly changed Chinese media culture and formed a highly "fluid yet disjunctive media landscape" (Bai forthcoming). The following description of some of these key changes is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to provide a snapshot of the major developments in the fields of popular media that I will illustrate with case studies later in the book.

Television drama

The first noticeable changes occurred in the area of TV drama production. As early as 1990, when the huge success of *Yearning* (*Kewang*) introduced the concept of contemporary soap operas to Chinese audiences and media practitioners, the TV serial drama (*dianshi lianxuju*) began to develop into one of the most popular narrative forms in Mainland China and has spawned a huge cultural industry. By the early 2000s, some 70% of commercial revenues

for television stations came from advertising slots broadcast during television dramas (Shanghai TV Festival 2004: 20, 25). With their huge profit potential, short production cycles, and (initially) relatively loose censorship control on content and broadcasting compared with film production and exhibition, TV dramas and their associated industry witnessed their fastest growth in the late 1990s and throughout the first decade of the 2000s, and domestic private capital and non-state business organizations were increasingly able to participate in the media and culture area by producing such dramas. By 2002, there were over 700 television production companies in China; all held licenses issued by SARFT, and most were funded at least partly by private capital. Over 200 million yuan was being invested in producing 9257 annual episodes of 489 television dramas (Shanghai TV Festival 2004: 79). And these high production figures were maintained throughout the decade, with some 436 TV dramas totaling 14,685 episodes produced in 2010 (Li 2011). TV/film production companies, many of which were affiliated with advertising corporations, became the main productive force in the lucrative new cultural industry which was steadily transforming popular culture in China.

Chinese television drama also gained pre-eminence in terms of TV programming and television audiences. Often first shown at primetime on various TV stations, and subsequently repeated in the late evening and daytime on other channels, the more popular TV dramas in the early 2000s managed to maintain average viewing figures of over 100 million people, with the average Chinese person spending over 50 minutes per day watching them (Shanghai TV Festival 2004: 35). Almost all TV stations (from CCTV to provincial satellite TV networks) devoted one primetime slot in the evening to TV dramas (usually right after the CCTV national news at 17:30), plus two slots in the morning and afternoon. Based on data provided by CMS media research, in the period from 2007 to 2010, TV drama continued to take a share of the broadcasting market estimated at 24 to 30%, and its reception rate was 32 to 38%, with each drama series being broadcast on average five times (Li 2011).

With this exposure, it is not surprising that TV drama outgrew film and literature to become the principal form of storytelling in contemporary China, exerting a profound influence on the shaping of the social imagination and on mediating the contemporary experience of social change. From *Beijingers in New York* (*Beijing ren zai niuyue*, 1994) to *Passionate Years* (*Jiqing ranshao de suiyue*, 1999), *Black Hole* (*Heidong*, 2001) to *Narrow Dwellings* (*Woju*, 2009), and *Yongzheng Dynasty* (*Yongzheng wangchao*, 1999) to *Undercover* (*Qianfu*, 2008), we see a huge variety of narratives and genres crystallizing the fluctuating public sentiments and social concerns of the times: going abroad to seek a better life; official corruption; the politics of career and survival in contemporary society; and the social impact of rising house prices, to name just a few.

In fact, TV drama has regularly become a touchstone and trigger for public opinion and social emotions—so much so that in the past decade SARFT has frequently seen the need to step in and regulate its subject matter. For example,

in 2004, anti-corruption police dramas were completely wiped off the screen due to censorship, and remakes of red classics had to follow strict guidelines; and in 2009, dramas of bitter emotions were criticized for their unhealthy content and fixation on the suffering of ordinary people. The inordinate regulation focused on contemporary drama has had the effect of pushing production toward endless reversions and recreations of history. But even this approach was not risk free: in 2007, when a new historical fantasy genre became highly popular among a new generation of Chinese television audiences, with its playful and parodic ways of "escaping into history" to depict thinly disguised social problems, similar restrictions were applied to these so-called time-traveling dramas (*chuanyue ju*). In spite of, or maybe precisely because of, this official attention, TV drama has grown into one of the most influential forms of popular media, "State control, the agency of media producers, the profit imperative of private investors, and not least, an active television audience interact to create a highly dynamic and multi-faceted television popular culture" (Zhao 2008: 216).

Blockbuster films

Commencing slightly later than the TV industry, the reform of the film industry over the past two decades is another complex story demonstrating the gradual consolidation of commercial logic within a mutually constitutive state–market relationship. In 1995, to rescue the Chinese film market, which had been in steady decline since the early 1980s, the government used the import of ten international blockbusters (mainly Hollywood movies) to boost Chinese box office revenues. Chinese filmmakers soon followed suit and started to make commercial films with the box office in mind. During the ensuing decade, profit-making steadily became the mainstream "melody" in the reform of the film sector, which ranged from institutional reorganization to the "industrialization" (*chanyehua*) of cultural policy. As a result, Chinese film has experienced an unprecedented commercialization.

The formation of shareholding media conglomerates, both state and privately controlled, as well as the restructuring of the outdated studio system has replaced the previous state monopoly with a new kind of commercial monopoly based on capital—albeit frequently a mixture of political and economic capital. While state-owned media conglomerates, such as China Film Group, continue to use their state-sanctioned privileges and access to resources to monopolize certain areas of the market, private businesses, such as Huayi Brothers and New Pictures, have hired some of China's most talented filmmakers and ventured into newly opened commercial areas (Kong 2007; Nakajima 2010). With the government's loosening of production control in 2001, and the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) with Hong Kong in 2003, which ensures that the Chinese film industry is kept healthy by Hong Kong co-productions, the trend in cultural policy has been to encourage, and indeed for the state to become deeply involved in, a

market-oriented film industry developing films as commodities (Yeh and Davis 2008).

The logic of capital has also altered the way that films are conceived as cultural commodities rather than tools for "soul engineering." The rapid growth in Chinese style "megafilms" (*dapian*) has clearly benefited from the Hollywood "high concept" model. Since the success of Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, 2002), martial arts flicks have become the dominant genre in Chinese megafilms, and other entertainment-oriented genre films have been developed with great commercial success (Nakajima 2010). In recent years, besides Feng Xiaogang's New Year Comedies targeting the emergent urban middle-class audiences and their cultural consumption mania (Kong 2003, 2007; Braester 2005; Zhang 2008), another indigenous genre called "mainstream megafilms" that mixes official ideology, public sentiments, and Hollywood high-concept production has taken the domestic market by storm, albeit with the aid of the promotional and distribution resources of the state-sanctioned monopoly. Such films include *Founding of the Republic* (*Jianguo daye*, 2009), *Assembly* (*Jijiehao*, 2007), *Bodyguards* (*Shiyue weicheng*, 2009), *Aftershock* (*Tangshan da dizhen*, 2010), and *Confucius* (*Kongzi*, 2010). At the same time, many small budget urban films directed by younger generation filmmakers, including Ning Hao, Xu Jinglei, Teng Huatao, and Zhang Yibai, have made surprising inroads at the box office and filled some of the emotional gaps left by the megafilm spectacles.

These multiple developments and trends have resulted in a huge growth in the Chinese film market. Since 2004, the production budgets of "megafilms" have regularly broken new records, from *Hero*'s 30 million yuan to *Red Cliff*'s (*Chibi*, 2008) 80 million yuan, and *Aftershock*'s 120 million yuan. Likewise, box office revenues from domestic films have finally caught up with those of imported films, growing at a stunning speed each year: 250 million yuan in 2002 for Zhang's *Hero*; 325 million in 2006 for Feng's *If You Are the One* (*Feicheng wurao*); 420 million in 2009 for Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin's *Founding of the Republic*; 647.8 million for Feng's *Aftershock* in 2010; and 664.7 million for Jiang Wen's *Let the Bullet Fly* (*Rang zidan fei*) in 2010–11 (Re'ai 2012). While the actual value earned by these films in the domestic market still does not match that of top US blockbusters, especially considering China's population is three times that of the US, this steady growth of the film market has generated enough incentives and enthusiasm for both filmmakers and the government to further develop the film industry and expand its global reach.

This box office growth was assisted by a restructuring of the film distribution and exhibition industry in China. Starting in 2002, the introduction of the theater chain system was both a reaction to and reshaper of the expanding film market. Private and overseas investment poured in to construct thousands of multi-screen theaters and state-of-the-art venues, many with 3D and IMAX capabilities. By 2010, the number of theater screens had increased to 6200, including 2000 3D screens and 11 IMAX venues (Zhu 2011: 279–30). Total

box office receipts exceeded 1.0172 billion yuan in 2010 and China became the fastest growing movie market in the world. But at the same time, the box-office orientation of theater chains also directly led to the monopoly of screens by megafilms, and nowadays only a small percentage of films produced ever receive theater release.

Reality TV shows

Still more recently, the entertainment orientation of the film industry has been paralleled by an increasing focus on entertainment shows on television. While transmission technologies such as satellite, cable TV, and digital technology have expanded the possibilities for global circulation of many imported foreign programs (Hong 1998), and some Chinese-language TV products, in particular TV dramas, have been circulated overseas, most TV programs have targeted the domestic market, and thus the recent changes are largely motivated and shaped by competition for domestic audiences. The most noticeable factor behind these changes is the rapid expansion of satellite provincial TV stations and their challenge to the state-planned hierarchical system and propaganda-oriented pedagogical television culture.

When TV stations first started broadcasting in China in 1958, TV broadcasting followed a centrally planned model, with CCTV (originally Beijing TV) as the national network setting the tone and standards. In each province, provincial stations worked as "micro CCTVs" under the administrative control of provincial propaganda departments or broadcasting bureaus, an exact reflection of the Chinese government's administrative system and cultural hierarchy: "China's media is more like a mirror of politics than a mirror of society" (Hong *et al*. 2009: 52).

However, especially since the mid-1990s, this Party-State model of the TV system has been challenged under the new reform mandate of marketization. CCTV led the changes by implementing a "producer responsibility system" and "relying on advertising revenues as television's chief financial resource" (ibid.). Subsequent high-profile auctions for prime commercial time on CCTV demonstrated the commercialization of the media in glaring fashion, although ironically it still maintained its role as the official "party mouthpiece." In fact, CCTV has capitalized on its state-granted power and resources to corner profitable segments of the media market. In 2004, almost one-third of the total advertising revenue of Chinese television (30.9 billion RMB) was earned by CCTV alone (Miao 2011: 95).

Despite the dominant position of CCTV, media marketization has also brought opportunities for provincial TV stations to emancipate themselves from the previous state-planned hierarchical system, and these provincial stations have been among the fastest growing players, especially since they have established satellite channels (*shengji weishi*) and developed multi-channel networks over the last decade. By the end of the 2000s, there were 287 TV stations and 2262 broadcast channels in China (Miao 2011: 91–92). Recently permitted to broadcast

nationwide, these channels are now starting to vie for national market share. In this fiercely contested "eyeball economy," an effective shortcut to profitability and audience ratings that avoids the monopolized zones of CCTV has been to produce entertainment shows, including game shows, talk shows, lifestyle and infomercial programs, or entertainment news bulletins. Various Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Euro-American reality shows, à la *Survivor, Apprentice, American Idol, Take me out!* and *Dancing with the Stars* have provided the formats for fast and efficient production, and the pro-market cultural policies of the 2000s have loosened up the flow of domestic private capital and foreign capital into entertainment television programming. By making minor changes, adding local flavor and adaptations, and conforming to Chinese audiences' viewing habits and state censorship standards, many of these cloned programs have become extremely popular in China (Keane, Fung and Moran 2007).

One of the most successful early pioneers in the TV entertainment phenomenon was Hunan Satellite TV, a provincial satellite network established in January 1997, which aggressively championed entertainment and reality programs cloned from foreign models, in particular scoring an enormous success with *Supergirl Voice* (*Chaoji nusheng*), a talent show for young women loosely based on *American Idol*. More recently, other provincial TV stations have jumped on the entertainment bandwagon with their own imported and reinvented reality shows. The entertainment trend is not only demonstrated by the growing proportion of entertainment shows on Chinese television, which jumped from 20% in 1992 to 44% in 2000 (Bai 2005), but also in the "entertainizing" of other genres such as news programs and public service programs. For example, one recent trend among provincial TV stations has been to develop so-called "citizens' news programs," replacing the tedious and stiff reports on official conferences and Party achievements of CCTV national evening news with intimate local news of everyday street life (Miao 2011: 103–4).

Yet one of the biggest dilemmas faced by Chinese TV stations—which is shared by the Chinese film industry—is the continuing ambiguity of their identity, as part commercial businesses and part public enterprises, a situation of "disjunctive media order" that is rooted in the broader contradictions of the socialist market economy:

> On the one hand is the political will to exercise ideological control so as to maintain a stable symbolic environment for its political rule and the market reform. On the other hand is a globally oriented cultural industry, supported by private domestic and foreign capital, and strategically valued for its contribution to the market economy and the national GDP.
>
> Bai forthcoming

Though the entertainment turn in both the TV and film industries was as much a survival strategy of media practitioners to avoid political trouble as an attempt to profit in the current media market, the rise of entertainment shows has also challenged the elitist and paternalistic cultural hierarchy, and

often has nothing to do with CCP ideology,[2] thus generally it evokes a sense of moral crisis and anxiety: "Due to their visual excesses, [entertainment shows] are seen by censors, intellectuals and viewers in certain groups as both a manifestation and a source of the perceived disintegration of the social and moral fabric" (Bai, forthcoming). As a result, there have been constant "clean-up the screen" campaigns initiated by SARFT in the first decade of the 2000s, specifically targeting entertainment media, and popular media has become the new front line in the battle between the forces of rampant commercialization/consumer rights and government control/conservative fears about the "morality" of society being destroyed.

This tendency toward morality-centered TV regulation and censorship is best demonstrated by Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV), a highly innovative albeit squarely market-oriented TV station. In 1999, HSTV launched one of the first talk shows *Have a Good Talk* (*Youhua haohaoshuo*), and it became the most influential show in China for its bold and sensitive topic choices and relatively open discussion forum, but less than two years later it was terminated after an episode on homosexuals in China (Miao 2011: 96). HSTV also faced criticism of some of its other reality shows, most notably the highly successful talent show *Supergirl Voice*, which was attacked by cultural officials from SARFT and CCTV (its competitor) in 2005 for being "vulgar and manipulative" and spreading unhealthy ideas and values among young viewers (Meng 2009: 261). Under such pressure, the show ended in 2006 in spite of huge popular support and audience enthusiasm. After it was re-launched in 2009, *Supergirl Voice* was again suspended in 2011 for the apparently trivial offence of "exceeding the permitted time limit for entertainment shows," and at the same time SARFT introduced a new regulation to limit the content and the numbers of entertainment shows broadcast on satellite TV channels (SARFT 2011).

Despite these constant rearguard "clean-up" campaigns by SARFT, the opening-up of the Chinese media to market forces has irreversibly modified the character of Chinese television and film culture, as we will demonstrate in subsequent chapters. And the impact has been even stronger because this rapid development of entertainment media and popular cultural products has coincided with an explosive growth in information technology and the sudden emergence of the internet and new social media in China.

Internet and social media

With hindsight, it is clear that the launch of the internet in China was not just a technological revolution but a watershed in the opening up of a new public space, albeit a virtual one, within the tightly restricted Chinese public sphere. In the decade since 2000, Chinese ownership of computers and mobiles has grown exponentially, and by 2012, China had 513 million internet users including 420 million who go online via cell phones. The total number of Chinese web-hosting sites reached 2.68 million (CNNIC 2013).

Still more meaningful than these bare statistics has been the enthusiasm of Chinese internet users in exploring and utilizing this newly discovered cyberspace for social communication and self-expression (Hu, Y. 2008; Yang 2009; Yu, H. 2009). One such example is the stunning growth in personal blogs, especially microblogs (*weibo*). First introduced in 2009, the number of microbloggers had increased to 309 million by 2012 (CNNIC 2013), and these sites have become the most active social media for disseminating news and information and for the discussion of current issues. The internet and digital video have also changed the way people consume cultural products, especially since the introduction of web 2.0 technologies in 2007. According to a survey of online practices carried out by the China Internet Information Centre, in 2010 approximately 284 million people, 62.1% of all users, went online primarily to consume entertainment products (CNNIC 2010). And by the end of 2012, the number of Chinese watching entertainment programs online was expected to surpass 445 million (Davison 2012). This growth in online programming and communications networks made it very easy for TV viewers to share their favorite shows with their virtual friends through instant messaging (IM) and social network services (SNS). And through Twitter feeds and personal blogs/microblogs, viewers' comments about the shows could be immediately distributed to hundreds or thousands of potential readers.

This kind of interactive viewing of television shows and films is particularly common among students and young professionals, who make up the two largest groups of the 124 million users of social network services in China, representing 50.3% and 31.1% of the total, respectively (CNNIC 2009). The interactive features provided by the internet have also resulted in an enormous proliferation of fan websites, discussion lists, and personal blogs for various shows and films, and consequently have created new forms of social interaction about and around popular media texts in an instant and multi-directed way not seen in conventional print and electronic media.

McLuhan famously observed that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964). The introduction of any new form of media into a given culture radically alters the way that members of that culture mediate between the material world and the given values available to them. This observation seems particularly pertinent to the use of social and new media in contemporary China, which seem to many researchers to have "transformed the relationship between Chinese citizens and their government" (Magistad 2012). As Hu Yong put it, the internet has given Chinese people "opportunities to speak up," and "in a public space where the big loudspeakers (*da laba*) are still controlled by a chosen few, we now see emerging the voices of innumerable 'small loudspeakers'" (Hu 2012).

Significance of recent changes in popular culture

What is the social impact of these explosive developments in media commercialization and cultural industry growth, particularly on the way in which people make sense of the social changes occurring in contemporary China?

As researchers, how can we make sense of these new phenomena in mass communication and popular culture?

Although contemporary Chinese popular culture has long provided material for literary researchers, and it has been one of the central source materials for historians, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists (Link, Madsen and Pickowicz 1989, 2002), until very recently there was a lack of scholarly attention on popular media products as legitimate research subjects in themselves. For example, in the study of contemporary Chinese cinema, which has been a growing and productive field for decades, film scholars have tended to focus on auteur directors, independent filmmakers, and documentaries. Only very recently have more popular movies and "mainstream" films started to find their way onto the academic radar (Zhang 2008; Braester 2005). Part of the reason for this neglect is that "scholars are reluctant to leave the nuances of textual details for the more mundane world of audience comprehension" (Fleming 2000: 111). Yet new research agendas that address the question of how audiences produce meaning on the consumption end are needed to provide a satisfactory explanation of the multi-faceted social communicative role of popular film, and to give voice to the public sentiments and enthusiasm that have been generated during the viewing process.

When it comes to studies on Chinese television, scholars have begun to engage in this emergent research field. This is apparent from the growing number of both single-authored studies and edited anthologies on Chinese television, which reveal a diverse and stimulating range of approaches (Zhong, X. 2010; Zhu, Y. 2009; Zhu and Berry 2009; Zhu, Keane and Bai 2008; Donald, Keane and Yin 2002; and much earlier, Lull 1991). Aware that focusing on "texts" is not enough in dealing with mass media, researchers have sought to go beyond content and discourse analysis and venture into new areas of investigation. In this aspect, Florian Schneider's *Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series* (Schneider 2012) is an admirable attempt to explain the varied political content and cultural governance function of an entertainment media form (TV drama series) by paying close attention to both its visual/acoustic discourse and production context. Yuezhi Zhao's *Communication in China* (2008), though not exclusively dealing with popular media, sheds illuminating light on political economy aspects by locating the structural development of popular media within the nexus of state, market, and society. And the works of Lisa Rofel (1995) and Wanning Sun (2002, 2009) remind us of the "communicative/humane" issues surrounding the uses of popular media in Chinese society today and the importance of solid empirical ethnographical research in answering these questions. All these works contribute to enriching our understanding of Chinese media and popular culture as an emergent field where scholars are still exploring various possibilities for subjects, theories, and methodologies, while attempting to keep up with the rapidly evolving subject matter and technologies.

However, there are also major gaps to be filled. So far, much of the work produced on Chinese popular culture and mass media has overwhelmingly

focused on the political discourse and ideological messages of the end products, but few have noted the agency of audiences in consuming these media products and the affective communications taking place in this process. This results in a tendency to inadvertently view audiences as cultural dopes, and popular culture exclusively as a site for ideological domination. The simple but fundamental question of how and why popular culture and entertainment programs exert such power over mass audiences in China remains unanswered.

To address these gaps, it is necessary to fashion new modes of critical inquiry and adopt a new kind of methodology for researching Chinese popular culture that refocuses attention on the communicative practices of popular masses, which "would include not only decoding but also the cultural and critical work of responding, interpreting, talking about or talking back – the whole array of sense-making practices that are proper to a given medium in its situation" (Hartley 1996: 58). In other words, treating cultural products as not merely texts or institutions but also social practices and public communications, embedded within specific historical conditions of production and reception. This means opting for new frames of analysis and models of interpretation that include the whole social interaction that surrounds media texts. We need empirical research that pays particular attention to individual cases of entertainment media (whether popular TV shows or movies) within their social context; which begins from their cultural formation in a particular historical moment and social context and ends with their reception and reinterpretation by the audience. After all, popular culture and mass media are forms of social communication, and their meaning is largely realized in this process of social interchange.

Such empirically grounded contextual research can reveal the complexities of popular culture products, the double coding and discrepancies between text and intertext, the active "working" of culture within cultural production and consumption, and the polysemic tendencies exhibited at different levels of the media system and among "competing communities of discourse" (Ma 2000: 30). Such a critical inquiry/methodology can also begin to answer the broader question of why popular culture exerts such a powerful appeal on ordinary Chinese people today, and what emotional functions it serves for them.

In searching for a theoretical framework and analytical tools for an interdisciplinary approach to popular media that focuses equally on production, text, and reception, I have found three concepts to be particularly helpful. The first is the idea of "articulation" developed by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies. Using the double meanings of the original word—one being utterance and expression, the other connection—articulation theory emphasizes the different elements in a discourse and the contingent working of "connections" among them:

> The so-called unity of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because

> they have no necessary "belongingness." The "unity" which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.
>
> Grossberg 1996: 141

When we apply articulation theory to popular media, it not only allows us to focus on practices rather than ideas, but also opens up the possibility of locating and discussing popular media within its complex and contingent networks and relationships.

In treating popular media as forms of articulation, Lawrence Grossberg's conceptualization of affect is also useful to explain how and why these connections or links take place (Grossberg 1992, 1997, 2010). Grossberg declares that culture itself is structured through an affective field, and "affective relations always involve a quantitatively variable level of energy (action, enervation) that binds an articulation or that binds an individual" (Grossberg 1992: 82). He reminds us that "the terrain of commercial popular culture is the primary space where affective relationships are articulated; and the consumer industries increasingly appeal not only to ideological consensus, but to the contemporary structures of affective needs and investments" (Grossberg 1992: 85). In the case of Chinese popular media, this means we need to pay more attention to the affective dimensions of these articulations and go beyond merely cognitive functions or ideological meanings of popular media to understand people's active engagement with media texts. We must also realize that this "affective articulation" of popular media is essentially a sense-making process/practice involving many different social forces and agents, who together "struggle to fix meanings and define reality temporarily" (DeLuca 1999: 334).

Given the political potential of "affective communication" (Grossberg 1997: 156) to generate public engagement, and in particular the widespread popular participation in virtual public arenas on the internet and through mobile communications, inevitably the concept of the public sphere (Habermas 1989) comes into the picture as a possible category to describe and assess the function and role of Chinese popular media today. But instead of directly applying this loaded term, which has mainly emphasized political and cognitive dimensions, I propose to borrow Jim McGuigan's modified concept of a "cultural public sphere," which can be summarized as "the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication" (McGuigan 2010: 15). Expanding and updating the ideas of Habermas on the literary public sphere, McGuigan crucially observes:

> In the late-modern world, the cultural public sphere is not confined to a republic of letters and "serious" art; it includes the various channels and circuits of mass-popular culture and entertainment, the routinely

> mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life.
>
> McGuigan 2010

The emphasis on the cultural aspect of the public sphere is not only useful to understand the specific route through which popular media connects with everyday experience, but also to legitimate the cultural arena and its potential for creating civic value and fostering civil society. While I am fully aware that there is a fierce debate about whether popular culture and new media can generate a public sphere (for example, Judi Dean's argument that an internet that serves "communicative capitalism" cannot be a public sphere (Dean 2003)), this is essentially an empirical question that can only be answered through the examination of actual production/consumption practices in their specific historical context. So throughout this book, the idea of a "cultural public sphere" will be a recurring hypothesis against which the broader political implications and civic value of popular entertainment will be tested, especially within the context of the much-constrained official media and restricted formal public sphere in a society such as post-socialist China.[3]

The chapters in this book reflect my empirical investigation into popular media shaped by the above-mentioned theoretical approaches, and they are bound together by one central question: how do Chinese people seek to make sense of the dramatic historical changes of the last three decades through their engagement with popular media, and in particular, how is this process of making sense embodied in the "affective articulations" of popular culture products? My narrative approach is one of "thick description," as advocated by the cultural sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander (2003), which is perhaps the most engaging way to capture the Chinese media experience and integrate the cultural texts within their social contexts and audience reception. The six chapters of the book are thus individual case studies of the production, circulation, and consumption of representative Chinese television programs and blockbuster movies, along with their corresponding media events and social interactions on the internet. Together they demonstrate the multilayered "affective articulations" of social emotions and historical experiences, and the variety of virtual public arenas that have opened up around popular culture products for public discourse and social engagement in contemporary China.

The first two chapters focus on the emotional content and affective articulation of television drama and films narrating social changes in China. In Chapter 1, I use the recent box office hit movie *Aftershock* and its "sentimental" reconstruction of family to delineate the various social forces at work in producing an articulation about social trauma, and I show how sentimentalism became the "essential" link to bring together the familial and national, the commercial and political, and China's past and present suffering. In Chapter 2, I focus on the rise of the genre of "dramas of bitter emotion" (*kuqingxi*) in relation to the social emotions provoked by economic reform and its concomitant

social disruptions. Based on viewers' responses to TV drama representations of laid-off female workers, I identify two different layers of articulations of China's entrenchment issue in televisual discourses. On the one hand, many of these dramas appear to satisfy the propaganda agenda, and on the simple narrative level they could be easily decoded as a neo-liberalist fairy tale about self-transformation and entrepreneurship; on the other hand, the producers' attentiveness to public sentiments and appeal to emotional templates somehow undermines or complicates this obvious message. By looking into the affective dimension of these TV dramas, I reveal an emotional complexity and ideological discrepancy in the public discourse about contemporary social change.

The next two chapters examine the amorphous and accidental public spaces that have opened up with the commercialization of Chinese television, focusing on reality shows produced by provincial TV stations. I suggest that in their transformation from top-down propaganda engineering controlled by a cultural/political elite to a kind of entertainment/information service center for mass consumers, Chinese reality shows sometimes involuntarily facilitate many different kinds of articulation and test the boundaries of what is visually and morally acceptable. Chapter 3 traces the development of talk shows on domestic conflicts and emotional turmoil (*qinggan jiemu*) and their subsequent transformation into either psychotherapeutic or mediation shows. Such shows reveal how the social emotions of anxiety and insecurity can be mediated and manipulated by the different social forces that make up China's complex media environment. Chapter 4 then takes up the controversies and debates staged on the most watched Chinese dating show, *Are You the One?* and then continued online, to show how entertainment programs may be turned into a public forum for the articulation of the life politics of China's post-1980s generation.

The final two chapters focus on the role of the active audience and the formation of a cultural public sphere in consuming popular media in contemporary China. Using individual case studies on internet-based fan clubs of the popular TV spy series *Undercover* (Chapter 5) and the viral and varied responses to the blockbuster movie *Let the Bullet Fly* (Chapter 6), I note how Chinese audiences draw from their cultural resources and life experiences to create public discourses and forge social bonding around their media activities. They are not only active and creative in interpreting and sometimes re-creating the meanings of media/film texts but also on occasion become the driving force for forming a virtual civic communicative space where public issues and concerns are voiced and debated through sharing their esthetic experiences.

This is the kind of "mediation"—a complex, indeterminate process by which social meanings are created and circulated by social actors under the historical conditions of a given culture—that my book is ultimately trying to capture and describe. And this is the sense in which I use the term "popular media" in the book's title. Rather than referring simply to specific media forms, such as television, radio, film, popular newspapers, and so on, I

emphasize its broader meaning: media in the plural as intermediate forms, courses, actions, and agencies through which messages can be channeled and "crowds" and social movements formed. Seen in this light, the contemporary Chinese media experience not only involves the convergence of conventional media, such as television broadcasting, and mass cultural forms, such as blockbuster films, with new communication tools, such as the internet; more importantly, it embodies an affective articulation through which popular media and cultural products are constantly exploited/explored and reinterpreted by various social groups attempting to make sense of the immense changes occurring in Chinese society today.

Notes

1 Teng's quotation is from an interview (Yu, Y. 2009). The translation is mine.
2 A post on Tianya, commenting on the popular talent show *Super Girl Voice* declared: "Behind the wild celebrations, there is something that the observant person will notice – the Party and the government have vanished from sight. Historically, the Party and the government have been at the centre of everything, but they have been cast aside during *Supergirl Voice*. The media, which is supposed to be the mouthpiece of the Party, has also brushed the Party aside for the moment in order to provide entertainment information for the people. If there were government propaganda programs broadcast at the same time period, it would be easy to imagine how they might be received by the people who only want to know about the Supergirls. The absolute masters for several decades have been subjected to unprecedented omission and embarrassment" (Qiuwangqidan 2005).
3 Ronald Jacobs's idea of the "aesthetic public sphere" (Jacobs 2012) has a similar emphasis on the esthetic arena and everyday experience of audiences in forming a public sphere, and his suggestion of using the esthetic public sphere to "understand the civic impact of entertainment media" (Jacobs 2012: 320) is exactly what my book seeks to accomplish. However, I prefer to use the term "cultural public sphere" in this book as it encompasses a broader set of practices than the purely esthetic. I see the esthetic sphere as focusing mainly on stylistic and formal concerns rather than the equally important areas of content and discourse. I thank Wu Jingsi for directing me to the relevance of Jacobs's works.

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1 *Aftershock*

The sentimental construction of family in post-socialist China

Aftershock: Chinese cinema speaking in many tongues

On July 12, 2010, thirty-four years after the Tangshan earthquake, which claimed the lives of some 240,000 people, over 10,000 residents of Tangshan City were invited to a local sports stadium for the premiere of the "first made-in-China IMAX film," *Aftershock* (*Tangshan da dizhen*). Under the gigantic stadium screen, the audience, wearing orange and blue T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Tangshan moves the world," wept profusely throughout the 130-minute movie as they viewed an ordinary family broken up by a terrible natural disaster and struggling for three decades until another disastrous earthquake in Wenchuan helped them to reunite and sublimate their grief and pain (Liu, 2010). To wipe away the audience's tears, handkerchiefs were handed out as "souvenirs of the premiere" by the event's three organizers, Huayi Brothers, China Film Group, and the municipal government of Tangshan.

When the director, Feng Xiaogang, and his crew came on stage after the screening and proposed two toasts, one for the victims and another for the survivors, the four-hour ceremony turned into a familiar public ritual: an emotional media event where the nationalist discourse of the "Chinese millennium" and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation could be performed not only in the physical space of Tangshan stadium but also in the media space before an audience of millions on Central China Television's movie channel (CCTV-6) and on Phoenix Satellite TV.[1]

Dubbed a "tear gas canister" (*cuileidan*) by tongue-in-cheek commentators, *Aftershock* turned the summer of 2010 into a sentimental season filled with tears, nostalgic memories, and emotional odes to family values (Zhao and Cai 2010). Hailed by CCTV news as a masterpiece demonstrating "the great love of humanity and the warmth of family relationships" (CCTV Evening News, July 25, 2010), many ordinary people came to watch it just for a good cry. Indeed, all over the country tissues were handed out to audiences, with one local theater in Dalian offering its audiences specially made custom face wipes for the film. The "emotional power" of this film was compared to *Mama, Love Me One More Time* (*Mama zai ai wo yici*, 1990), a low-budget maternal melodrama imported from Taiwan, which caused a sensation near

the end of 1990 with its unprecedented 200 million yuan box office. In fact, *Aftershock* did even better, breaking first week box office records and eventually setting a domestic box office high of 644.7 million yuan.

However, for the more careful and discriminating viewers and critics, *Aftershock* was an incoherent mishmash in terms of its artistic quality and mixed ideological messages. They pointed out that the opening scenes of the film promise a spectacular disaster movie packed with big-budget special effects, directly inspired by the Hollywood entertainment model. Yet this outsized spectacle soon turns into a domestic family melodrama with obvious moral undertones, which in turn morphs abruptly near the end into a documentary-style propaganda flick complete with footage of CCTV's Wenchuan earthquake coverage in 2008. Muddying the messages still further are numerous obvious product placements throughout this "disastrous" film, which cause observant viewers to seriously doubt its sincerity.

For more politically adventurous critics, the biggest defect of the film is that it settles for a cheap sentimental solution to a massive historical trauma, unlike the hard-hitting messages of low-budget independent documentaries such as Wang Libo's *Buried* (*Yanmai*) and Du Haibin's *1428*, both of which offered unflinching depictions of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The numerous compromises and moral ambiguities of *Aftershock* represent a calculated but cowardly choice: by turning to focus on the domestic space of family relationships, the film overlooks key political/social perspectives that would reveal the "human failures" of the Tangshan earthquake, such as poorly constructed buildings, officials ignoring earthquake warnings, and the government's inadequate mobilization for recovery, particularly its decision to turn down foreign aid in the aftermath of the disaster.

As one commentator put it:

> *Aftershock* certainly isn't a challenging film, beyond the rather gruesome nature of the disaster it depicts. Nor is it a particularly honest film. Problems, ambiguities and unpalatable complications in China's recent past are neatly airbrushed out to show a society that has suffered greatly through "hand of god" calamities, but has overcome these cruel turns of fate to build an ever-improving, ever-more-prosperous China. It's a vision of the past thirty years that meshes nicely with the contemporary emphasis on nationalism and "looking to the future" rather than dwelling on the divisions of the past.
>
> Edwards 2010

By contrast, for more sympathetic critics like Shelly Kraicer, this artistic "incompleteness" and moral compromise is an ingenious balancing act among many different social forces and ideological demands:

> A film can't be this overwhelmingly successful in contemporary China without simultaneously working as irresistible commercial cinema, crafty propaganda, subtle national-historical mythmaking, cathartic weepie and

> subtly incisive social critique. Feng's brilliance is to make it all happen together, inside one movie.
>
> Kraicer 2010

Critic and blogger Li Chengpeng also appreciates the efforts of Feng Xiaogang to create an emotionally relevant film when so many Chinese directors have turned their backs on contemporary life:

> At least Feng's film still deals with contemporary reality and he manages to find some sentimental cure for social despair with the family genre … people can still be moved by his films, and the characters in his films can still be moved. … This is the only affective space available today, and unfortunately this is the only ground on which current Chinese film can be built.
>
> Li 2010

In a similarly positive vein, Ruijie Wang reads *Aftershock* as a sign of the emergence of

> a civic society that responds to human suffering and natural disasters quickly, spontaneously and emotionally … [The film] compensates for the harsh and bleak reality of China's present, a reality in which ordinary people are often left to fend for themselves and are at the mercy of the powerful.
>
> Wang 2011

Indeed, while independent filmmakers in China insist that their cameras don't lie, and use them to expose a society torn apart by countless social conflicts and moral dilemmas, Feng Xiaogang has chosen a different route to engage his mass audience. He manages to stay focused on contemporary society through a subtle moral balancing act and stylistic patchwork, forging or "articulating" a kind of emotional unity among disparate communities in a society undergoing violent transformation. Feng's "canny" film is thus a perfect entry point for discussing the cultural formation of Chinese commercial films, the peculiar relationship between Chinese popular media and social agency, and the affective articulation of popular media in making sense of contemporary history.

The "social contract" in the production of *Aftershock* and the re-branding of Tangshan

To understand the many tongues in which Feng's *Aftershock* speaks, we need to examine the production conditions of the film in particular and the broader complexities and contingencies of the Chinese media production environment in general during the first decade of the new millennium.

Surprisingly, in view of its later commercial success at the box office, *Aftershock* was initially conceived by Tangshan Municipality, its promoter and co-producer, as a propaganda film or public re-branding of the city. Sitting between two powerful municipalities (Tianjin and Beijing), Tangshan is a county-level "third-tier" city in North Hebei, and has long had a reputation as a center of heavy industry, dependent on natural resources like coal and mining. With the development of a new Economic Rim around the Bohai Sea, and the aggressive expansion of its two powerful neighboring municipalities, this in-between city is engaged in a structural transformation of its industry from a resource-based to new technology and tourist-oriented economy that is more "sustainable." Like many other provincial cities and regions that are desperately seeking to raise their cultural profile in order to shine in an increasingly competitive national market for investment (Kong 2010), Tangshan's officials and urban planners believed that the city needed a new branding and marketing campaign. This campaign took concrete shape in early 2008 when Yao Jianguo, the director of the Tangshan TV Station, proposed a government-sponsored "main melody film"[2] about Tangshan. Yao argued that a film based on the idea of rebuilding a home after a natural disaster would not only create a positive image of Tangshan and shift people's focus away from the disaster and destruction that was normally associated with the city; it would also crystallize the local government's idea of making Tangshan into a "cultural superstar city" (*wenhua mingcheng*).

Yao's film proposal received approval and support from officials at the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). Zhang Hongsen, an associate director of SARFT, helped Tangshan to negotiate a co-production arrangement with two film industry partners: Huayi Brothers, a private production company behind several blockbuster films in recent years; and China Film Group, a flagship state-owned Chinese media corporation (Kong 2007). These three strange bedfellows would now work together under a new film production business model with distinct Chinese characteristics: the Tangshan government would invest half of the 120 million yuan total production budget, with the other two firms together making up the difference. Yet even though it was putting in half of the money, the Tangshan government agreed that only 15% of its contribution would be treated as investment capital, and the other 85% as non-refundable "sponsorship" funds.

This investment structure clearly did not involve equal sharing of the risks of loss, yet the Tangshan government was happy with the arrangement, calling it "a money-making subsidy" plan! Clearly, the primary purpose for the government's investment was not to maximize its short-term profits but to reap long-term political/economic benefits and to ensure that the local government would have a say in how to represent the city.

China Film Group's contribution of 6 million yuan was mainly a token investment to acknowledge its role in facilitating external relations for the film, especially exhibition and distribution work. It was Huayi Brothers, with

its 54 million yuan investment, that really cared about the film's profit potential (Li, W. 2010).[3]

Director Feng Xiaogang would thus have to simultaneously burnish Tangshan's public image while filling the pockets of the shareholders of Huayi Brothers, and keeping a wary eye out for the obvious potential political minefields along the way.

Like other major controversial episodes in recent Chinese history, the Tangshan earthquake still haunts the collective memory but has remained largely taboo for artistic representation, apart from a small handful of officially approved accounts. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, no visitors were allowed into the city, and no reporters except for the official Xinhua news agency were permitted to take photos or write about the event. As a result, the death toll and extent of destruction remained a closely guarded secret. The official reports of the period focused on how the Tangshan people, led by the Party and saved by the People's Liberation Army, behaved like heroes, worthy members of the extended socialist family. This focus was shared by the only contemporary film featuring the earthquake, *After the Blue Flash* (*Languang shanguo zhihou*, 1979) directed by Fu Chaowu and Gao Zheng, which was released three years after the disaster.

In the following three decades, Tangshan grew into a myth in the social imagination. On the one hand, the city and its survivors were trotted out as convenient heroic models, symbols of the power to rise courageously from the ashes and rebuild their homes and the nation, evidence of the achievements of Chinese people under correct leadership. On the other hand, the true extent of the disaster, including the number of deaths and the depth of feeling of the survivors, remained a mystery and always a subject of unusual curiosity. In 1986, a reportage piece by the military journalist/writer Qian Gang, which for the first time exposed the severity of the mass destruction, sold out immediately upon publication.

Yet after falling into relative obscurity for many years, Tangshan re-entered the public's awareness in 2008 when another equally disastrous earthquake struck Wenchuan in Sichuan Province, and inevitable comparisons were made with the events of 32 years earlier. At first, the strong impact of Wenchuan and the controversies surrounding the government's response to the earthquake threatened to derail the entire Tangshan film project. The Wenchuan earthquake in many ways reminded people of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake in its severity and unexpectedness, and the sheer scale of the damage. It also involved a collapse of trust, especially due to the corruption that meant most school buildings were too weak to withstand the shock of the earthquake.

People's attitudes toward the government were extremely ambivalent. On the one hand, many praised the government for its quick reaction to the disaster, including mobilizing national and international aid and solidarity (Hui 2009); but on the other hand, the school construction scandal caused much public anger and protests against official corruption and the professional negligence of construction companies who were often allied with local governments. Thus

the Sichuan earthquake proved to be a rather sensitive issue and made the production context for *Aftershock* highly problematic (Yao 2010).

Feng and his creative team finally found a solution by "connecting these two disastrous events, to highlight their shared main melody themes, in spite of the fact that it damaged the artistic coherence of the film" (Li, W. 2010: 50).[4] Feng's team instinctively realized that exploiting the accompanying nationalist sentiments and the populist desire for a civil society to create a rousing conclusion to the movie would be crucial for the success of the film, because "presenting mainstream sentiments and 'correct' social values is the lifeblood of commercial films (in China)" (Li, W. 2010: 50). Still, in order for this "propaganda" film to touch the hearts of mass audiences, it would need to venture beyond the scrubbed clean official version of the national myth of Tangshan while at the same time avoiding any too negative allusions to Wenchuan that might result in the film being restricted.

According to the film's screen writer, Su Xiaowei: "After much discussion, the three investing parties decided that this should be a warm-hearted main melody film that celebrated Tangshan people's rise from the ashes" (Li, W. 2010: 47). Feng Xiaogang now had to try to work within the parameters of this unusual political/business partnership and pre-determined theme to produce what many would say is a contradiction in terms: a box office blockbuster propaganda film.

The sentimental construction of family/home in *Aftershock*

The novella on which *Aftershock* is based centers on a middle-aged Chinese immigrant, Fang Deng, who lives in Toronto and suffers from persistent headaches. These headaches exacerbate her sense of self-loathing and her tendency to entertain suicidal thoughts, which in turn cause her to act in a distant and manipulative way toward her husband and daughter. In a desperate attempt to find relief as her marriage breaks down, she sees a local psychiatrist who suggests that the headaches originate from suppressed memories of her childhood. Fang Deng's subsequent psychoanalysis involves returning many times to her past where she is still trapped emotionally: memories emerge of being abandoned by her own mother during the Tangshan earthquake when she was six; of sexual molestation by her foster father as a teenager; of betrayal by her boyfriend when she was pregnant, and eventually dropping out of college. These accumulated effects of the original trauma of the Tangshan disaster have left Deng with constant feelings of fear and insecurity. She has not only lost her faith and trust in humanity, but also her ability to feel and receive intimacy from her loved ones: "To her, houses were not the only thing that came tumbling down suddenly on that day; there was also her faith in the world" (Zhang 2010: 228).

This novella by Chinese Canadian writer, Zhang Ling,[5] is obviously influenced by Freudian and other modernist literary themes. It is a bleak psychoanalytical analysis of the difficulties of human relationships and life's many hidden black holes.

By contrast, in Feng's film, we see a significant shift of narrative focus from the psychological trauma and its paralyzing effects on an individual woman to a sentimental story of a family broken but ultimately reunited. The emotional pain and moral dilemma of the mother who has to choose which of her two children to save after the earthquake is retained, but only because it provides the convenient structuring element of a lost daughter spending years trying to find her true family, and it brings home the personal impact of the tragedy, drawing audiences in to a more intimate emotional connection with the victims. The narrative approach also differs from the novella: instead of being one individual's solitary mental journey through her past, the film splits into three interwoven accounts of the journeys of the different family members over three decades, with much more focus on the mother as the fundamental linking thread.

Feng also idealizes and simplifies most of the characters in the film, in contrast to the original novella, where they are typical flawed people struggling and often failing to deal with their psychological problems. The most drastic alteration is to the character of the mother, Yuanni. She is very different from the vain and shallow mother in the novella, who loves to flaunt her charms and flirt with other men. In the film she is transformed into the most loving and responsible mother imaginable. Burdened with guilty feelings toward her dead loved ones and determined to keep them alive in her memory (not realizing that in fact her daughter survived), she is like the voice of conscience of the earthquake survivors. Da, her surviving son, turns into a paragon of filiality and generosity, not only toward his mother but also to others, including eventually the victims of another terrible earthquake in Wenchuan in 2008. As a business entrepreneur, he becomes one of the first volunteers to offer his firm's resources and join the relief efforts, and this results in him meeting up with his long-lost sister, who has returned from Canada to help out too. Perhaps the most controversial change, in terms of the artistic integrity of the novel, is the transformation of the foster father from a shabby middle-aged man who sexually abuses his adopted daughter to a loving, responsible PLA soldier who does his best to provide a physical and spiritual home for the traumatized abandoned girl.[6]

By transforming the characters and having them embody such uplifting values, Feng finds a moral justification for the grown-up Deng to want to reunite with her mother and brother. They overcome the trauma of separation and find a reason to persevere through their familial relationship and their deep sense of family values. As Su Xiaowei acknowledged, the result of these modifications is a totally different story from the novella:

> Besides changes to the structure of the story, the movie also performed major surgery on the theme in order to bring some warm color to this too bleak story. … The basic tone of the story was altered from one of darkness and pain to one of warmth and hope.
>
> Chen, Y. 2010

Beyond these major character and plot revisions, Feng also makes extensive use of sentimentalist elements in the movie to transform Zhang's repressed modernist story of destruction and despair into a no-holds-barred emotional extravaganza. The melodramatic situation is set up right from the start by locating the Fang family as helpless innocent victims of an overwhelming sudden natural disaster. The audience would have hearts of stone not to feel deep sympathy witnessing their terrible plight. To ensure that these sympathetic feelings are maximized, the first seven minutes of the film are devoted to idyllic scenes of this ordinary but happy family; the intimate interactions between the two children and their loving parents are shot in a highly filtered golden light, thus producing an effect of dreamlike nostalgia for a family/home soon to be broken. When the earthquake hits with its gruesome and spectacular special effects and sudden descent into fire, dust, noise, and darkness, it seems all the more violent and jarring for ruining the perfection of familial and maternal love that we have only just witnessed.

The prolonged scene that lingers on Yuanni, the heartbroken wife and mother, mourning for her husband who sacrificed himself for the family, and for her daughter whom (she wrongly believes) she has abandoned to her death, are perfectly captured by the over-the-top performance of "melodrama queen" actress Xu Fan, and give full rein to the audience to indulge in their first bout of emotional excess.

Over the next two hours, as the plot revolves around the three surviving family members and their separate journeys, the audience is exposed to numerous further emotional travails of this broken family: their loss of loved ones, their mental suffering, and their struggle with the guilt of being among the few survivors. As Yuanni, who declines several marriage proposals and refuses to move from their old home, puts it: "If I live a colorful life, how could I face your father who died to save me?" Even the grown-up daughter Deng's courageous decision to be a single mother rather than have an abortion sounds more like a kind of duty than a celebration: "As a survivor of Tangshan, a life means more to me than to any other people."

With each of the characters, the healing can only come when they all find their way back home—to the humble yet morally pure house that Yuanni insists on keeping and looking after through all those decades, despite all the massive social changes taking place around her. The home becomes enshrined as almost a sacred place—and indeed, we see a small altar set up in Yuanni's house beneath the pictures of her dead family—full of precious memories and sentiments. As Yuanni explains to her son when she burns paper money on the street in front of the house: "If I moved to the new place (that you bought me), the spirit of your father and sister will get lost and they won't be able to find their way home."

Not surprisingly, the film also introduces a much more cathartic narrative closure (in melodramatic terms) than that of the original source text. In Zhang Ling's novella, Fang Deng does return to China, but it is mainly to collect the documents required for her upcoming divorce. While there, she

sends a letter to her psychoanalyst mentioning that she plans to visit her former home in Tangshan, and that this may give her a sense of closure. But she still cannot release her pent-up feelings: as she puts it, "one simply cannot cry," and it will take much longer to truly resolve the emotional trauma. But at least she is making the choice now to start putting it behind her.

In the film, this subtle and ambiguous revelation, that spiritual freedom only comes from liberating oneself through individual effort (with the help of a Western-trained psychoanalyst), is totally transformed. Now we see Deng watching news reports about the Wenchuan earthquake on TV, and impulsively deciding to return to China and join the rescue efforts. There she is reunited with her brother and finally learns of her mother's unbearable pain at the decision to abandon her in order to save her brother's life. She realizes how much she has been loved all along, and how wrong she was to feel such resentment against the mother she lost. In the climactic scene at her mother's old house, the long-lost daughter kneels down to ask for her mother's love and forgiveness. Three full minutes are devoted to the single shot of the daughter weeping uncontrollably in her mother's arms, and this allows the characters and the viewers to finally release all the pent-up emotions that Feng has expertly built up throughout the movie. What appeared at the start to be an impossible ethical dilemma, highly reminiscent of the tragic movie *Sophie's Choice*, ultimately turns into a feel-good, family affirming sentimental resolution.[7]

Peter Brooks has commented that "Melodrama is most centrally about moral legibility and the assigning of guilt and innocence in a post-sacred world where moral and religious certainties have been erased" (Brooks 1985: 20). Feng Xiaogang's sentimentalist resolution of a terrible trauma through family reunion and reconciliation is an excellent illustration of this search for moral legibility in a post-socialist society. When asked about his motivation for altering the original ending of the novella, Feng has repeatedly emphasized his determination to give the audience a sense of warm hope and an opportunity to cry. He believes that evoking pathos and sympathy for these fictional characters will release the kindness and love buried in the depths of people's hearts. Thus he sees the sentimentalist approach not only as an effective way to attract and communicate with mass audiences, but also to intervene in social reality:

> I don't agree with people who think crying only shows weakness and despair, and only leads to mourning and escapism. Why can't "touching the heart" (*zou xin*) release the power to intervene? The social criticism [in elitist independent films] does not necessarily move people, but the power of emotion can.
>
> Ma 2010b: 56

Feng particularly notes that compared to previous eras, the current age is marked by the deterioration of human relationships and lack of shared moral

standards, which he concludes is a result of the dramatic social changes of the last few decades: "So everyone feels a sense of insecurity." In this context, "I believe that family is extremely important for us: if families cease to exist, then we will completely lose our sense of security" (Ma 2010b: 54).

We see here an excellent example of affective articulation through popular media, and specifically through a commercial film. By using sentimentalist techniques to transform Zhang Ling's story, Feng links together previously disparate themes of natural disaster, Confucian family ethics, self-sacrifice, and the inseparable mother–child bond into an emotional potboiler, with the aim of "intervening" in society and emphasizing the crucial importance of families as the source of security in an unpredictably changing world. In this way, Feng's film satisfies the deep collective desire of a society torn by social conflicts and moral cynicism.

Family and nation in the popular discourse of change

Feng Xiaogang's sentimentalist re-construction of the family/home is certainly not an isolated case in contemporary Chinese film and popular culture. In fact, Chinese writers, artists and intellectuals had long used the affective power of the family to articulate their visions of society. In explaining the long-lasting influence of the May Fourth melodramatic tradition on Chinese film, Paul Pickowicz argues that it is due to the fact that "the crisis of nineteenth and early twentieth century China was experienced by common people, in large part, as a family crisis" (Pickowicz 1993: 308). Berry and Farquhar also point out that Chinese family melodrama not only emphasized the ethical dimensions of family affairs but also utilized "an allegorical mode" in which the fate of the nation was indirectly depicted through the fate of a family-clan (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 80).

For centuries, the basic social and ethical unit of the family has been central to and constitutive of the nation and state in Chinese culture. From Confucian teachings to socialist propaganda, the interchangeable and interdependent relationship between nation/state (*guo*) and family (*jia*) has been exploited for various moral and political agendas. Even in the extreme revolutionary period, the aim of the Maoist regime was to replace the bourgeois individualist family with a "greater (socialist) family" with people united by ideology rather than blood ties.

From the late 1970s through the early 1980s, there was a reaction against the Maoist denunciation of "individualistic" and "bourgeois" families built on blood ties. In works later categorized as "scar literature" (e.g. Lu Xinhua, *Scar*), reform camp literature (e.g. Yang Jiang, *Six Chapters on Cadre School Life*), and reflective literature (e.g. *Human, oh so human!* by Dai Houying), the revolutionary model of betraying one's family in the name of correct ideology is depicted as a source of acute mental suffering, and filial affection and romantic feelings are cherished as a humanistic rebellion against the prevailing political insanity.

Similarly, the most representative films of that period are melodramas directed by Xie Jin, such as *Legend from Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi*, 1980), *The Herdsman* (*Mumaren*, 1982), and *Hibiscus Town* (*Furong zhen*, 1986). Fashioning his works within the melodramatic tradition of leftist films in the 1930s and 1940s, Xie "arouses viewers' emotions" by showing how families were ruthlessly undermined and family members persecuted because of their so-called "counterrevolutionary" tendencies (Pickowicz 1993). Xie Jin's films gave voice to the painful and confused experiences of Chinese audiences. His family melodramas thus wielded emotional and critical power comparable to their leftist predecessors in the 1930s and 1940s, yet this time squarely aimed at "undermining the moral legitimacy of the Communist Party" and "seriously subverting its prestige and reputation" (Pickowicz 1993: 322–23).

Another earlier articulation of the family as a victim of political upheavals is Zhang Yimou's 1994 film *To Live*. In this melodramatic epic covering several decades of modern Chinese history, an unlucky yet resilient family is depicted as "the site of strength and self-fulfilment" (Larson 1999: 189), and Zhang revives the traditional/Confucian idea that a strong family can act as a buffer against the inhuman misery and humiliation inflicted on individuals during China's violent civil wars and revolutions.

On the surface, Feng Xiaogang's *Aftershock* resembles the family melodramas of Xie Jin and Zhang Yimou by depicting the family/home as an emotional and moral haven from trauma. However, Feng is reluctant to put family in opposition to the Party-State, partly because he understands the political constraints under which he must work: "This nation has suffered all kinds of natural and human disasters. But I could only talk about natural disasters, because it is not permitted to mention human ones. So a natural disaster has to be the villain here!" (Ma 2010b: 54).

While steering away from the family versus state approach in Xie Jin's and Zhang Yimou's films, Feng nevertheless exploits another narrative tradition of family melodrama drawn from popular narrative, especially TV drama series, as a kind of affective shorthand to link the family in the film with the nation through the audience's broader political and social experiences. Since the 1980s, numerous Chinese TV dramas have adopted the distinctive narrative pattern of family chronology whereby personal and family lives are delineated as parallel to or embodying a historical process of change. The narratives are so strictly organized in chronological fashion, often recording the events of exactly one year in each episode, that some producers even named the form "yearly chronicle TV dramas" (*biannianti dianshiju*) (Li 1999). While generally focusing on only one or two families, the dramas also clearly indicate the social changes occurring in each period.

Yearning started this trend in 1990 by encapsulating the political and social impact of the Cultural Revolution years in a family story. In a similar fashion, subsequent popular TV dramas, such as *Growth Rings* (*Nianlun*, 1994), *Passionate Years* (*Jiqing ranshao de rizi*, 1997), *Coming and Going* (*Lailai wangwang*,

1999), *Ten Years of Married Life* (*Jiehun shinian*, 2002), *Year after Year* (*Yinian you yinian*, 1999), *Golden Wedding* (*Jinhun*, 2008), and *Women Factory Workers* (*Nugong*, 2009) have all tried to build a generational or national memory of the past three or even five decades through depicting ordinary people's lives, whether they are sent-down youths, laid-off workers, business entrepreneurs (*getihu*), military officials, regular married couples, or young urban professionals.

At first sight, such dramas appear to focus, in a typical melodramatic soap opera fashion, on a single family or group of interrelated characters. But on closer viewing, one cannot help noticing that the personal lives of the characters are surrounded and strongly influenced by their underlying historical context. In other words, the lives of the characters run eerily parallel to the social changes of the nation, and one can never escape from the fundamental assumption that history constantly changes the lives and fates of individuals. Typical examples include *Year after Year* and *Golden Wedding*, both series produced by Beijing TV Arts Centre, the creative force behind *Yearning*. While *Year after Year* traces the history of two families over two decades of reform from 1978 to 1998, *Golden Wedding* is more ambitious, recounting a single family history from 1957, the year when the two main characters get married, to 2007, when they celebrate their fiftieth anniversary. The overall chronological structure and the constant juxtapositions between the panoramic national scene and zoomed-in everyday scenes of ordinary people's lives point to the parallels and correlations between collective and individual fates, and between family and national identity (Kong 2008).

The major appeal to audiences of such a chronicle drama format is that they can strongly identify with the social and personal changes through which the characters are going, because they themselves have experienced very similar events and changes in their real lives. Yet in creating this identification, the producers of the dramas are clearly trying to use TV drama (and by extension, film) to articulate a shared historical experience and collective memory of the recent past. The chronicle is thus a discursive way to mediate the nation as a symbolic family and, from the present vantage point, to look back and make sense of social changes, build a group consensus and national identity, and reorganize personal and collective memories within a radically transforming (yet steadily progressing) society. As Lisa Rofel observes of *Yearning*: it "produced a powerfully seductive knowledge of viewers' lives that led them, in part, to view themselves as the program portrayed them" (Rofel 1995: 315).

Of course, the ideology and discourse of family and change voiced in these dramas is not monolithic, and has varied significantly from one period to the next. On one side we see more populist sentiments that try to shift the locus of faith away from nation/state/party to family, an inherent political critique, as discussed earlier in relation to the work of Xie Jin and scar literature. Rarely explicitly stated but always implied is the disastrous effect of political experiments that uprooted families and set them against each other. In these

works, art and entertainment become venues for channeling grievances for past wrongs that resulted in millions of deaths and ruined lives and have never been properly acknowledged or received redress: the Great Leap Forward, the Anti-Rightist movement, the Cultural Revolution, even the Tiananmen massacre of 1989. On the other side, the interchangeable and interdependent relationships between *guo* and *jia* (nation/family, state/family), or the sense of "family-nation-ness," are now regularly exploited by producers of popular films and TV dramas to promote their various moral and political agendas, and to revive national solidarity in the face of natural or social calamities.

For Feng Xiaogang, the narrative mode of family chronicle is thus a well-tested approach to building an emotional connection with the audience. By focusing in chronological fashion on a family first torn apart by the 1976 earthquake and then further devastated by displacement and estrangement over the following three decades, he is able to exploit the contentious relationship between family and nation in popular film and TV drama narratives.

In *Aftershock*, the linking of family with nation comes first when the film depicts people mourning the death of Mao, which happens right after the initial disaster sequences. The scene of the mourning masses in their dark uniforms, seen through the terrified eyes of recently orphaned young Deng, inevitably reminds viewers of how the Tangshan earthquake is always associated with the massive political upheavals that occurred that same year. The death of Mao Zedong and the sudden political sea change that occurred soon afterwards make the earthquake seem like a heavenly sign of the end of the imperial mandate. And the ritualized weeping for Mao by the masses reminds us of the traditional Confucian respect paid to an authoritative father–ruler. In this way, a single family seeking to recover from the trauma of the earthquake is affectively connected with the national family, struggling through the unsettling transformations of the post-socialist era and, equally important, coming to terms with its violent past. This is where Feng's real story begins, a story that uses the life trajectories of three members of Fang family to dramatize the changes a nation has undergone in the last three decades.

Yet compared with the films of Xie Jin and Zhang Yimou, Feng's message about the relationship between nation and family in *Aftershock* is ambivalent. Like Xie and Zhang, he does reveal the displacement and separation of families and individuals due to turbulent disruptions in the nation, both natural disasters and, by implication, political/social sea changes. Yet drawing from the TV drama mode, rather than treating nation and family as implacable opposing forces, he ultimately tries to show how they might be reconciled in their united response to another disaster, the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

To fully assess the narrative significance of the Wenchuan earthquake in the film, we must recall the moving social response to this disaster from Chinese people and non-governmental civic organizations and the way in which the Chinese media framed this response as a new form of nationalist "Chinese millennium" discourse (Hui 2009; Yi and Wang 2010). This discourse provided the immediate social and cultural context in which domestic audiences

of the film were located. So the filmmakers rewrote the ending of the novella to make both the daughter and son rush to join the Wenchuan relief efforts, and to transform this new disaster into the cataclysmic event that would reunite their family. In a nod to the film's local government co-producers, the final shots then show scenes of a renewed and highly developed Tangshan, ending with a long shot of the Tangshan Memorial Wall on which are carved the names of over 240,000 earthquake victims. The clear implication is that even though the suffering was great and should never be forgotten, we can recover and rebuild our lives once again if we focus on the public good and national solidarity.

Despite its stylistic inconsistency—with the last 30 minutes turning into a strange mixture of fictional melodrama, documentary television footage, and propaganda—this ending/closure is nevertheless a clever strategic device to realign Feng's family melodrama with official media representations of the Wenchuan earthquake as evidence of a people-centered "rising China", enthusiastically embraced not just by the government but by ordinary Chinese people too (Yi and Wang 2010).

The Wenchuan earthquake thus offers the perfect narrative closure to Feng's ambitious project to inscribe a family/national history. By linking these two earthquakes together, the film creates a synergy between the collective memory of a natural disaster and the current national project of building a "Chinese century." Wenchuan not only gives a satisfying sense of closure to Feng's account of the Tangshan earthquake, but also lends broader moral legitimacy to his populist family values.

The public and "publicness" in mainstream megafilms

With its massive media exposure, record-breaking box office performance, and overwhelming emotional responses from audiences and critics, the emergence of *Aftershock* at the end of the first decade of the "Chinese millennium" is both phenomenal and symptomatic. It indicates the coming of age of mainstream megafilms, wielding their "soft power": a new, highly successful, collaborative attempt to engage the public, produced by an "unholy alliance" of political and economic interest groups. The film's incongruous mixture of genres and ideological expressions embodies the various social, economic, and political forces that shape today's Chinese cinema and film industry in general and this family melodrama in particular.

Over the past decade, Feng Xiaogang has become the most successful director of commercial films in China, assisted by the financial backing and business management skills of Huayi Brothers.[8] Despite their esthetic and ideological compromises, his series of brand name productions dubbed "Feng Style Chinese New Year Films" are all imbued with a unique affective quality which has re-engaged Chinese audiences. Made for release during the Chinese holiday season, these feel-good films (including *Party A Party B*, *Be There or Be Square*, *Big Shot's Funeral*, and *Cellphone*) tap into current social problems and trendy social topics but without political confrontation. Feng purposely

adopts the perspective of the average Chinese person on the street, turning their dreams and frustrations into lighthearted comedies with the popular message that good people will be rewarded in the end. At the same time, Feng also shows admiration for the political savvy and survival strategies of ordinary citizens and underdogs in a drastically changing society, particularly their ability to view their difficulties with sardonic wit and inside jokes couched in Beijing dialect (Kong 2003). Thus he is one of the few Chinese directors to pay attention to ordinary viewers' emotional needs, and his films have been enthusiastically received by domestic audiences (Zhang 2008).

In recent years, Feng has increasingly developed the moral idea that "films should help audiences to release the kindness and warmth in their hearts" (Ma 2010b: 54) and a sentimentalism appealing to positive feelings and social norms runs throughout his work, from *A World without Thieves* (*Tianxia wuzei*, 2004) to *The Assembly* (*Jihehao*, 2007). *Aftershock* is another work where sentimentalism and its projection onto the family/home provides a crucial touchstone for audiences in a society where the prevailing moral order is being questioned, and where conflicts caused by social stratification have re-emerged in the last three decades.

In a special issue of *Sanlian Life Weekly* dedicated to *Aftershock*, the editorial mixes satire and adoration in describing the film as a "tear gas canister" of sentimentalism co-produced by many diverse interest groups. Through the affective power of sentimentality in family narrative, *Aftershock* resonates deeply with the Chinese collective memory in the broader context of post-1976 Chinese history, providing a channel for the emotional catharsis of a nation (Zhi 2010: 42).

In similar vein, the American Chinese scholar Wang Ruijie also praises *Aftershock* for offering an alternative moral vision to the cutthroat and relentless competition that pervade contemporary China: "By staging the recovery of one family from disaster, Feng successfully manages to reawaken the moral conscience and gentle soul of a nation with many painful and disturbing memories" (Wang 2011). Wang argues that the film provides catharsis in two ways: first, through the daughter Fang Deng's painful experiences, the viewers' negative feelings and grievances are purged and addressed as they relive all the pain and suffering inflicted on them through those decades of revolution and reform. At the same time, the surviving characters ultimately learn to embrace and exemplify positive civic virtues of familial love and selfless devotion: "The natural disaster strikes indiscriminately, but it brings out the best in people and serves to forge a civic society nonexistent under normal circumstances" (Wang 2011).

Does this mean that *Aftershock* exemplifies a revival of the "publicness" of Chinese cinema after a prolonged focus on the private and personal and the profit-driven turn toward entertainment by Chinese filmmakers? If so, how does the new "publicness" differ from the propaganda films of Maoist, or post-Maoist times?

Indeed, the publicness of Chinese cinema used to be one of the trademarks of the socialist legacy, playing a key role in the modern transformation of the

Chinese culture and the Maoist mobilization of the masses (Clark 1987). Both in terms of its institutions and content production, cinema was a national enterprise centrally planned and controlled to "produce revolutionary consciousness" and instill in the masses the sense of "belonging to a shared historical narrative" (Donald and Donald 2000: 123).

However in the last few decades, with the collapse of the state studio system, the importing and pirating of cultural products from capitalist societies, the commercialization of the media and film industries, and the general privatization of cultural consumption, the political power of national cinema and its public and collective character have been seriously eroded. In the slightly exaggerated words of one scholar, cinema underwent a metamorphosis from "a collective public event to piracy-privacy activity, from highly controlled modes of production and distribution to an underground operation with numerous sides of power and systems of distribution" (Pang 2004: 101). Not only did cinema audiences plunge, but few Chinese films could attract and move large swathes of the population as they used to. Instead, during the late 1980s and the whole decade of the 1990s, popular culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and then Hollywood blockbusters in VCD/DVD format, together with locally produced entertainment forms such as TV dramas, supplanted Chinese films, providing urban middle-class audiences with "an inventive, creative and mundane engagement with the dense symbolic world (in which they now lived)" (Pang 2004: 121), but leaving a large gap where Chinese film used to be.

The state did not abandon the public function of film completely: in fact the government invested significant amounts to produce "main melody" films for various public occasions, from Party anniversary celebrations to patriotic educational programs and memorial events. But the outdated political propaganda format of these films seemed increasingly irrelevant and they were commercial failures. Audiences only attended screenings when pressured to do so by their work units. At the other end of the political spectrum, some independent filmmakers and documentary producers also tried to engage the public on sensitive political and social issues (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006). Yet due to unrelenting state censorship, financial pressures and the filmmakers' own artistic elitism, the reach of these films in China was limited and thus their attempts to involve the public was negligible.

In the new millennium, with China's economic and consequent political rise to power, the film industry seems to have regained some of its past status and possibly also its social function, though its messages are much more mixed than they used to be. The turning point came in 2002 with Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, which premiered to great fanfare in the Great Hall of the People (normally a center for political meetings and official celebrations), and after monopolizing domestic theatres throughout China, it then also achieved great success on the international stage. With its political narrative of "unifying all under Heaven," *Hero* signified a new era for Chinese film to re-engage with the public and present its social imaginary to the world (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2010).[9]

In the following years, Chinese film regained both its market power and its public presence, not only through costume dramas and martial arts flicks unleashing China's "soft power" on the world, but also through successful domestic "mainstream megafilms" promoting a new "national spirit" within China. A string of films from the last five years, including *Founding of the Republic*, *Assembly*, *Mei Lanfang*, *Red Cliff*, *Bodyguard* and, of course, *Aftershock*, were not only commercial blockbusters, but rather megafilms created and produced by the Chinese film industry that reflect mainstream culture and mainstream values and whose historical and esthetic value can be tested.

Yet as we saw from the production background of *Aftershock*, the former homogeneous state-controlled political propaganda approach has now dispersed into many different agendas and sites of meaning, and the dynamic between the various powers shaping these cinematic spectacles is much more complicated than before. There is a commingling of ideas and jockeying for position between the commercial/profit incentives of private investors, production companies, and even state enterprises. There is also a range of competing agendas, including the state's continuing efforts to maintain ideological control through censorship, the economic and reputational interests of local governments, and last but not least the need to appeal to popular tastes and public sentiments. These "mainstream megafilms" have therefore spawned into multipurpose projects in which commercial forms are appropriated to rejuvenate propaganda; but at the same time, main melody themes and political authority are appropriated to ensure commercial success for their makers.

The result is that mainstream Chinese films must now learn to speak in many different tongues simultaneously and to articulate many varying interests. They exemplify the incongruous hybrid identity of the Chinese popular media industry today. Directors and producers like Feng Xiaogang must find some kind of glue to join these different interests together, some kind of articulating thread that will keep audiences coming back for more, while satisfying the demands of local government sponsors and central government regulators. The sentimentalism or deep affect associated with the intermingling of family and nation in the Chinese cultural imagination is one such articulating thread, a way to make sense of the political and social changes of the past three decades. In this process of making sense, emotion has been used in both liberating and manipulative ways, allowing people to experience catharsis while channeling them toward a positive emotional identification with the difficult growth of their nation.

Notes

1 Yu Haiqing's discussion of media events and their ritual significance is helpful to understand the cultural function of the public screening of the film. Yu argues that media events such as China's millennium celebration play an important ritual role in the state's narrative, and that the media often purposely exploit post-socialist nostalgia in promoting a state narrative of history and a nationalist discourse. See Yu 2009: 36–60.

2 First advocated in late 1980s by leftist cultural officials to counterbalance the emergence of entertainment trends, "main melody" (or leitmotif) films and TV dramas (*zhuxuanlu yingshiju*) are those works that disseminate the Party's version of revolutionary history, as well as make sense of contemporary changes according to official policies and guidelines. Through the 1990s and well into the 2000s, the Party-State continuously called for emphasis to be put on "main melody" in all cultural production. The impact of this "main melody" policy on TV drama and the film industry manifested itself on two levels: first, "main melody" works that are directly under state sponsorship and support and are made for specific educational and propaganda aims continue to be part of TV firms' production requirements. Second, more broadly, all TV dramas and films that wish to gain official approval for broadcast, whether they are "main melody" or not, must stay in line with the official ideology surrounding China's reforms and social transformation.

3 The agreement between the three producers stated that "the total income from this film will be equally divided between Huayi Brothers and Tangshan Corporation, after subtracting distribution fees and returning the capital investment of the China Film Group's production subsidiary plus the specified amount of profit, as well as Huayi Brothers' capital investment and 15% of the capital investment made by Tangshan Corporation." Based on this method of calculation, if the film made 400 million yuan at the box office, taking account of revenues from advertising and product placement, Tangshan Municipality could only make around 30 million yuan in profit but Huayi could make 80 million yuan. If the box office reached 500 million yuan, Huayi's profits would be more than 100 million yuan, double the amount of its initial investment. Of course, Tangshan would get a promotional advertisement in the form of a movie, which may also have some indirect economic impact.

4 Even the publicity poster for *Aftershock* drew attention to the parallels between the two earthquakes, with its terse phrase: "23 seconds [of the Tangshan earthquake] and 32 years [in between the Tangshan and Wenchuan earthquakes, and also the time it took for the main characters to overcome the emotional trauma of Tangshan].

5 After graduating in English Language and Literature from Fudan University in the early 1980s, Zhang Ling left China for North America in the late 1980s. While making a living as a therapist for the hearing impaired, Zhang has continued to diligently write fiction in Chinese in her spare time. A devoted and prolific writer who has published most of her works in mainland China, Zhang did win a few literary awards as an Overseas Chinese writer, but popular recognition didn't come until the film *Aftershock* was released. So unlike many mainland Chinese writers who have been swept up by the marketization of literary publication and quickly changed their writing style to pander to popular tastes, Zhang was able to maintain her literary pursuits in a relatively quiet and isolated environment, and to avoid many of the pitfalls that commercialization has inflicted on many other contemporary writers. Her exposure to modern Western literature and culture and her life experience as an immigrant have also shaped her writing through the years. Many of her later works, such as *Lamb* (*Yang*) are dominated by distinctive modernist themes, such as isolation, displacement, redemption, and religious reflections, often with a Christian undertone.

6 The performance by well-respected actor Chen Daoming as the loving father only added to the convincing depth of this character, as noted by many viewers and critics.

7 The difference between the film and its fictional source can be seen indirectly by comparing them with another classic: the 1982 holocaust film *Sophie's Choice*. In fact, Sophie, the middle-aged Polish American woman haunted by nightmares of her experiences in the Nazi holocaust, shares much more similarity with Zhang

Ling's Chinese immigrant narrator/character Deng than Yuanni, the mother in Feng Xiaogang's film, in the sense that the huge mental and emotional damage from the disaster have disabled their ability to rebuild intimate and familial relationships. Yuanni in the film, however, with her conventional moral virtues and maternal love, is a typical figure from the pantheon of Chinese family melodrama.

8 The partnership between Feng and Huayi Brothers, the sole investor and producer of his films since 1999, which generously offered him a share of the media corporation, represents a new relationship that Chinese film and film artists have developed with the marketplace. Film directors now often see themselves as cultural brokers and business partners, and their work is no longer solely an esthetic expression of an individual or likeminded group of artists, but more a product which must appeal to the public and make as big a profit as possible for its investors. See Braester 2005; and Zhang 2008.

9 The reception of *Hero* itself was not without ideological ambiguity: see the summary of the critical divide around the film: Lee V. 2007.

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2 *Crying Your Heart Out*

Laid-off women workers, *kuqingxi*, and melodramatic sensibility in Chinese TV drama

In the previous chapter, I argued that *Aftershock* speaks in many tongues in order to maximize both its profits and its chances for survival in the commercialized yet still regulated film market. I also suggested that Feng Xiaogang's popular success lies in his willingness to incorporate elements from popular narrative forms, in particular TV drama, in order to establish an affective communication with his audience. There is no doubt that over the past three decades, Chinese TV dramas have long surpassed Chinese film in addressing the emotional needs of ordinary viewers and representing their everyday experiences, and TV dramas have become the dominant form in narrating contemporary social change (Zhong 2010; Zhu, Keane and Bai 2008; Zhu 2008). While it is true that the state's "multi-faceted regime of control" still permeates every aspect of TV drama production and distribution, from the planning of subjects to regulations on broadcasting times and lengths, when compared with news, current affairs programs, and even movies, TV drama "has been able to address popular sensibilities and social conflicts in a unique way … because of its fictional character and its more popular social basis" (Zhao 2008: 216).

This chapter will use recent TV serial dramas on the controversial topic of laid-off female workers, focusing especially on the 2004 drama *Crying Your Heart Out* (*Youlei jinqing liu*), to demonstrate the emotional complexity of TV drama in representing socially deprived and disadvantaged Chinese citizens, revealing the layers of controversial meanings that lie beneath the official "harmonious" ideological message. Through close readings of the melodramatic presentation of "crying women" and the acoustic/visual devices employed to elicit social emotions, supplemented by accounts of audiences' viewing experiences, the chapter demonstrates the ambivalence and complexity of the "affective articulation" found in this drama. I conclude by placing this drama in the broader context of the proliferation of "dramas of bitter emotion" (*kuqingxi*) in recent decades, and their implicit challenge to the official discourse on the painful consequences of China's economic reforms.

Before proceeding to detailed discussion of the affective content and reception of *Crying Your Heart Out*, I will briefly recount the media's efforts to write the issue of laid-off workers into an aspirational story of neo-liberalism, since this

ideological practice of "masking" and "whitewashing" a huge social scar provides the immediate context for the discussion of social emotions and the affective "re-articulation" of this issue as manifested in TV drama series.

From female laid-off workers to re-employment stars: working women in Chinese media discourse

Since the late 1980s, the steadily increasing masses of workers laid off by China's restructuring state-owned industrial sector have come to represent the dark side of China's dramatic transition from a planned socialist system to a free-wheeling capitalist economy. According to official statistics, by the end of 1997 there were 11.51 million laid-off workers in China's cities, of whom 7.87 million were from state-owned enterprises, and 6.8 million (or 59.2%) were female workers (Wang 2003:161). These "gendered layoffs" (ibid.), in other words, the disproportionate laying off of middle-aged female workers and, more crucially, their subsequent difficulties finding new jobs in a ruthless capitalist employment market, have been one of the most divisive and painful consequences of China's economic reforms.[1] These unemployed women are not only fighting a losing battle in the job market against younger and better-educated applicants, but in many cases have also encountered serious disruption in their family lives as well. Many have been forced by their circumstances to work on the bottom rungs of the newly developing service sector, especially in roles such as domestic service workers.

As laid-off workers and their survival grew into "one of the most explosive issues in China and a highly contentious subject ideologically" (Zhao 2002: 121), the Party-State realized it had a serious problem on its hands and a nationwide re-employment program was launched in the mid-to-late 1990s, mainly consisting of the establishment of re-employment service centers and attempts to create a re-employment market. The core spirit of this project, however, as Jaeyoun Won points out, was not so much helping laid-off workers to find stable jobs but rather instilling in them the principles of survival in a market economy and advocating "self-reliant" employment. "Thought work" was "re-deployed to create a new set of social beings for the market economy" (Won 2004: 72), challenging laid-off workers' old ways of thinking and their habitual dependency on the state and the work-unit for job security.[2] And in this "subject reforming" approach to the unemployment issue, the media and related cultural forums have played an extremely important role, and "managing media discourse on this issue [became] the Party's top propaganda priority" (Zhao 2002: 121).

Prior to the mid-1990s, the media generally tended to ignore the existence of this problem of "retrenchment" and its impact on laid-off workers and their families. While the official media often explained the official line about the necessity for systemic reforms and increased efficiency in the former state enterprises, rarely could one find any discussion of the human costs of these reforms: the material difficulties and emotional plight of laid-off workers, and

their sense of betrayal by the state (Yu 1999). By the late 1990s, however, media coverage of the retrenchment issue took a different turn: "Official guidelines emphasized the need to acknowledge the problem, to promote non-sensational and constructive reporting, and to supply the media with information about government re-employment efforts" (Zhao 2002: 121). Stories about laid-off workers started to appear in great numbers on television and in the press. While the media interpreted the difficulties of some unemployed workers in finding work "as due to 'lack of skills', 'lack of training', and 'lack of flexibility'" (Dai 2002: 228), they also featured other laid-off workers as "re-employment stars," people who had managed to turn their lives around and achieve new success in the job market.

For example, in 1996, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) aired a special program called "The Story of Autumn," featuring a former textile worker, Zhuang Hongwei, from Shanghai. After completing a re-employment training program organized by the local government, Ms. Zhuang borrowed 30 thousand yuan to set up Mother Zhuang's Vegetable Cleaning Service with four other laid-off workers. This eventually expanded into a successful business with over a hundred and forty employees.

Mother Zhuang's transformation story and others like it inspired a new model for media accounts of female laid-off workers. National and provincial state-controlled newspapers, radio, and television stations poured out heart-warming stories of laid-off workers who had bravely taken unemployment as a new opportunity to realize their dreams of owning their own businesses and eventually turn themselves into self-reliant employees and even entrepreneurs. In these media stories, laid-off middle-aged women often featured as heroic protagonists as well as eloquent narrators, creating a positive image of model workers who had embraced the spirit of capitalism.[3]

In this way, "the discourse of women's re-employment [became] a new transitional narrative to facilitate China's current socialist transformation" (Yang 2007: 78). It used former laid-off women workers to promote the officially approved concept of economically rational individuals who succeed through their competitive and entrepreneurial spirit, a concept that is diametrically opposed to the old socialist model of worker cooperation and egalitarianism. Through this "reemployment star discourse," the massive failure of socialism is thus transformed into an inspirational story of self-salvation, and painful retrenchment is welcomed as an opportunity for regeneration and new life. Female laid-off workers, far from being victims of the dismantling of socialist relations of production and the welfare state, are now seen as the "cultural vanguard of millennial capitalism" (Lee 2006: 515).

While the official media have extolled the stories of laid-off workers turned re-employment stars, the bleak reality is that the "majority of unemployed workers have become desolate and degraded as probationary part-time workers in the informal service economies or jobless non-workers" (Won 2004: 85).[4] Indeed, contesting voices have emerged in the popular media, literature and other cultural forms that have offered powerful critiques of the social stratification,

injustice, and moral corruption caused by the "broken socialist promise." For example, one popular rhyming saying (*shunkouliu*) pithily expressed the reality of many laid-off women's experiences: "Laid off women, cease your cries! Bravely advance into night clubs and dives. There you can eat, drink, make lots of money. That's how you'll stop relying on the Party!"[5] Here the socialist discourse of women's liberation and the Party as the savior of common people are mocked by the predicament of laid-off female employees who become sex workers just to make ends meet.

More serious and sustained criticism of the human price of retrenchment can be found in some realist literary works which find ways of addressing the reality of class division. The novella *Internationale* (*Na'er*, 2004) by Cao Zhenglu is a moving account of the collapse of the state factory system. Cao describes the powerful few making illicit profits from selling off state assets under the cover of economic "restructuring," while ordinary workers are completely stripped of their jobs and of the ownership of the factory where they have worked all their lives. The novella gives a bleak depiction of the prospects of this sacrificed social group, especially through the story of one female worker. In order to support her family, and especially to pay for the medical costs of her disabled child, this middle-aged woman has to sell food at a street stall during the day and sell her body to occasional customers during the night. It is the predicament and fallen state of this woman that motivates the hero, a union leader who once loved this woman in her youth, to expose the corruption of the factory leaders, ultimately at the cost of his life. Contrasting sharply with the female heroes of CCTV news reports, this socially-engaged literature in critical realist tradition depicts a woman and her suffering as an indictment of social injustice as well as a call for political action.

It is important to realize that such highly contentious public expression on economic reform and its social consequences is not confined to underground or "alternative" cultural products, but also exists within many mainstream films and television dramas. Beyond or behind the bland positive official messages of these works we find a multilayered, polysemic discourse that leaks through the narrative cracks, allowing marginalized or alternative voices to express their concerns. This ambivalence is particularly noticeable in television dramas due to their extended length and the consequent necessity of focusing on the concrete details of ordinary people's lives, which generates a potent "affective articulation" of the grievances and suffering that they experience. While these textual details are supplanted by the official discourse in the end, to Chinese audiences accustomed to reading between the lines and discerning hidden meanings, this underlying subtext is sufficient to allow them to emotionally identify with the characters and to "reinterpret" the dramas as articulations of their own personal experiences. The following sections demonstrate how TV dramas about laid-off women workers manage to combine a superficial official message about self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit with a much more emotionally powerful melodramatic undercurrent of grievance about injustice, corruption, personal tragedy, and the loss of a shared sense of community, all

of which are the direct result of the economic reforms so loudly promoted by the government.

Female laid-off workers and "main melody" dramas

Starting in the late 1990s, female laid-off workers and their stories of survival became a central subject of many TV dramas. The first drama of this type was *Women through Winter* (*Zouguo dongtian de nuren*) which was initially shown in 1997. Produced and broadcast by Shanghai Dragon TV Station, this six-episode TV series dramatized the difficulties faced by many people from Shanghai in the late 1990s following the closure of large numbers of state-owned textile factories. Most of the predominantly female textile workers remained unemployed for an extended period due to their poor educational backgrounds and their age disadvantage. At the same time, this TV drama was also directly related to the local media's promotion of "the Shanghai experience" (Won, 2004: 75), which provided a model for the subsequent nationwide re-employment project, and especially its method of solving the retrenchment problem through promoting the emerging domestic services industry.

The female protagonist in this drama, Ah Zhen, who not only loses her job at a textile factory but also loses her husband to an extramarital affair, seems to embody a common bitter experience of many textile workers who have shouldered a whole series of difficulties brought about by "systemic reform." To survive, Ah Zhen tries a range of different odd jobs and endures various difficulties, including a highly emotional resignation from a Taiwanese clothing factory to protest against its blatant exploitation of the workers. Through this process, Ah Zhen learns that she can rely on no-one but herself. Eventually, she sets up a modest but successful handicraft business with her former boss, a Taiwanese businesswoman, and hires her former co-workers to come and work for her.

Similar to Mother Zhuang's story on CCTV, *Women through Winter* set the tone for TV dramas to promote the orthodox version of the struggles of laid-off workers as a journey of self-growth and self-reinvention. Since then, the retrenched female worker story has featured in numerous other TV dramas, especially those intended to promote "leitmotif," or main melody, themes.[6] Particularly since 2003, when new guidelines for propaganda work under Hu Jintao's leadership emphasized the "three closenesses" of propaganda (close to reality, close to life and close to the masses) and the need to build a "harmonious society," TV dramas dealing with retrenchment and the re-employment of laid-off women workers became a niche genre. Among the most prominent TV dramas of this genre were *Crying Your Heart Out* (*Youlei jinqing liu*, 2004), *Women Factory Workers* (*Nugong*, 2007), and *Starting All Over Again* (*Congtou zailai*, 2009). If we look purely at the narrative formulas of these dramas—their settings, characters, and basic plotlines—they all seem to closely imitate the media stories of re-employment stars that we discussed above, and present a story of aspiration with a happy ending.

At the narrative level, the 2004 drama *Crying Your Heart Out* clearly illustrates this point: a thirty-something woman, Ma Xiaoshuang, is initially over-dependent and immature, spoiled by her husband's unconditional love and her secure job as a saleswoman in a state-owned grocery store. But her luck runs out soon after the TV drama starts. First, she loses her job after the city government closes down this unprofitable retail business; then her husband dies in a work-related accident. Despite receiving some help and consolation from former colleagues, from good friends, and from her neighbor, Qiu Yiping, who was a co-worker of her late husband, Xiaoshuang is left in a desperate situation. She must try to look after her young daughter and her old mother-in-law with virtually no money. Lacking skills and connections, Xiaoshuang tries many different menial jobs, including waitressing, hourly cleaning for an intellectual family, saleswoman for adult toys, and even illegal matchmaking services, for which she is arrested. She finally finds work in a food services business that specializes in takeout lunches and is owned by her capable sister-in-law, Bai Yuping. When Bai decides to leave the business to work in the civil service, Xiaoshuang steps up to buy the business using her 60,000 yuan survivor's compensation, plus loans from family and friends. With guidance and encouragement from Bai and a charming businessman, Xu Linfeng, she overcomes fierce competition in the industry and the resentment of her former friends and colleagues (now her employees). She not only survives but expands the business into a thriving chain providing food services for numerous white collar professionals. During this transformation process, Xiaoshuang grows into a confident and mature businesswoman who completes a continuing studies program at college and finally becomes a role model for her young daughter to emulate. The final episode sees the self-confident and assured Xiaoshuang telling her daughter "Now I have grown up!"

Ma Xiaoshuang is not the only female character in these TV dramas who finds her melodramatic salvation through reinventing herself by investing in a service industry. It is a familiar choice for many other characters too. For example, in *Crying Your Heart Out*, Ma's much older girlfriend (and former co-worker) Sister Zhou ends up managing an old people's home after attending her disabled husband for many years. There, her female virtues of patience and compassion finally find their market value. Likewise, Pu Xiaoti, the heroine in *Women Factory Workers*, who is laid off despite being a model worker in a state machinery factory, finds a new career helping others by becoming a nanny. With the help of her US-educated daughter, she then builds this into a domestic services company applying modern methods of business administration. Indeed, there is a whole subgenre of TV dramas on nannies or maids featuring retrenched female workers, including *Professor Tian and His Twenty-eight Maids* (*Tianjiaoshou jia de ershiba ge baomu*, 2001), *Chinese Maids in Foreign Families* (*Shewai baomu*, 2002), and *Maid* (*Baomu*, 2007).

In these television dramas, the female private entrepreneurs with their domestic service businesses seem to represent the ideal transformation of former state workers in China's new economic order. While preserving

traditional female virtues such as hard work, motherly care, and patience, they combine these virtues with some modern professional training in business administration, thus developing the "personal quality" (*suzhi*) that is required for women to take up their new positions in contemporary Chinese society. Moreover, because of their successful transformation into "enterprise selves," these female characters are then "charged with the responsibility of thought work" (Sun 2008: 98): educating and inspiring others to change their mindsets too. Thus, in *Women Factory Workers,* Pu Xiaoti with her motherly love shows her daughter that being a nanny is not degrading but an opportunity to help others and at the same time make a successful business out of it. Similarly, in *Professor Tian and His Twenty-eight Maids*, Huijuan's patient guidance and encouragement help Yiwen change her hostile attitude and happily become the "twenty-eighth maid" of the title. As Sun Wanning observes, these popular TV dramas "not only articulate an adjusted subject position of national women, they also present a powerful discursive space in which to educate national subjects and turn them into useful citizens" (Sun 2008: 97). It is in this sense that these TV dramas function as vehicles for remodeling female subjects for the new social order, in other words, as an agent promoting change.

Women's tears and the affective space of *Crying Your Heart Out*

Yet while the above understanding of the social and ideological functions of TV drama is valid up to a point, it results from a critical exercise practiced by scholars with astute "political consciousness" but limited emotional engagement in the dramas. Furthermore it is based on the assumption that ordinary Chinese viewers either lack the interpretive skills to reflect on the "hegemonic" ideological message in these dramas or are so naïve that they are easily turned into "ideological subjects" while watching them.

In fact, as cultural anthropologist Lisa Rofel has observed, in China "the operation of popular culture as a site for the constitution of national subjects … [is] one that offers complicated possibilities for oppositional practices" (Rofel 1994: 700). Television dramas are more often than not "a place where audiences, producers and critics shape a variety of potentially conflicting ideas" (ibid. 703). Indeed, many Chinese viewers are highly suspicious of the cognitive uses of TV drama and clearly aware of the ways in which propaganda twists reality.[7] They have, nevertheless, immersed themselves in the fictional world and identified with the characters through the route of affective investment, thereby creating a very different set of meanings from the surface ideological message. A closer examination of audience responses to one representative TV drama reveals some of the affective states and decoding practices that scholars have previously overlooked.

Crying Your Heart Out was directed by Kang Honglei, a veteran director famous for his populist approach to the lives of contemporary Chinese and his attentiveness to the visual language of TV drama. Through his dozen influential TV serials, including the hit drama *Passionate Years* (*Jiqing*

ranshao de suiyue, 2001) and more recently *Soldiers' Sortie* (*Shibing tuji*, 2007), Kang also gained a reputation for his ability to empathize with and evoke ordinary viewers' feelings and emotions. *Crying Your Heart Out* received very high ratings (8.4% of the viewing audience) when first broadcast on Beijing TV4 in 2004, and it was subsequently rerun on various other provincial TV stations. Both official critics and ordinary viewers enthusiastically praised it, though for starkly different reasons. Critics and cultural officials held it up as a model of the latest government cultural policy of "three closenesses" and as an inspirational story for those needing to adjust their mindsets to the new economy (Ni 2005; Zhong 2005; Dai 2005). By contrast, ordinary viewers were more impressed with the sentimental qualities of the drama and praised it for resonating with their own life experiences and emotional responses.

According to the scriptwriter, Ni Xueli, when it was still at the approval stage, many ordinary viewers, including laid-off workers, were invited to the screening by the review committee, and they all wept profusely as they watched the difficult journey of the heroine Ma Xiaoshuang. They considered the series successful because it celebrated "human life, harsh reality and true feelings" (Ni 2005: 68). This account is corroborated by online discussions of the drama in reviews on Tianya forum and on the "Crying Your Heart Out" fan club on Baidu.[8] The predominant reasons these viewers gave for recommending the drama are that "it so resembles our lives" and "it gives me a good cry." Some claimed that they started watching the drama at their father's urging or to accompany their mother who experienced similar problems as the characters in the series. Through watching the drama together, they felt they gained a better understanding of their parents' generation and a sense of family feeling (*qinqing*), thus connecting with their parents on a deeper level (Yematianfang 2004; Daijunting 2004).

Other viewers were equally moved, despite not having experienced retrenchment or unemployment themselves. The drama seemed to resonate with these viewers' own job situations, their family lives, and their general outlook on life and the difficulties of survival in a rapidly changing society. Interestingly, several viewers dramatized the subjects of their own life stories in their posts in a melodramatic way inspired by the plot of *Crying Your Heart Out*. For example, one netizen related the heroine Ma Xiaoshuang's struggles to her own difficult experience of helping her old-aged parents to find medical services in Beijing, including dealing with the high costs of medical treatment, relying on personal connections to get them into a decent hospital, and even just finding a place to live for herself. Another netizen related Ma's lonely suffering to her own experience of leaving home:

> Every time I hear the theme song, I can't stop myself crying. The first time I saw this TV drama was just after I had left my cozy family home to live on my own, and seeing Ma Xiaoshuang all alone, secretly shedding tears under her bed covers, it was like seeing myself on the screen.
>
> http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=16674901

Clearly, for these viewers, the reason for watching this TV drama was to experience the bitter-sweet vicarious pleasure of weeping along with the characters, releasing the tensions, frustrations or sorrows in their own lives, rather than engaging in an inspiring educational or ideological learning exercise.

The empathy toward the suffering female characters in *Crying Your Heart Out* and the communal online sharing of viewing experiences centered around weeping and emotion point to the affective dimension of TV drama, through which Chinese audiences connect to the fictional world. This affective dimension adds another layer of meaning to the discursive space of popular media and complicates the mainstream discourse on economic reforms and the new dominance of capital in society. In the following pages, I will analyze how this affective dimension is developed through formal devices of TV drama and how this affective state works to mediate the experience of social change.

In his study of visual political communication in Chinese TV drama series, Florian Schneider calls for a more detailed visual discourse analysis—including visual cues, symbols, codes, genre conventions, etc.—to transcend the simplified conclusions of previous TV drama analysis that focused mainly on narrative and verbal elements. This kind of investigation helps us to become aware of how "layered visual and acoustic signs" relay emotional import, and ultimately how TV dramas actually engage audiences. Schneider also finds that despite the fact that Chinese TV discourse is "indeed highly effective at collapsing various ideas and concepts into an overarching discourse, … TV entertainment content is full of ruptures" (Schneider 2012: 211, 220). He suggests looking for these kinds of ruptures in the various visual arrangements in TV dramas and the ways in which visual and verbal statements complement or contradict each other.

Schneider's argument is highly relevant in the case of *Crying Your Heart Out*, where the affective dimension is primarily built on the visual/acoustic devices that appeal to the audience's sentiments. The first example can be found in the title sequence of the drama. In less than two minutes, highlights from different episodes display the emotional facial expressions of all the main characters, with close-up shots of the heroine Xiaoshuang's weeping face viewed from several different angles leading the sequence. This visual treatment of emotion is further strengthened by the acoustic impact of the theme music, a haunting melody with the following lyrics:

> Because you are still with me, seeing everything that I see:
> But it's too late to be happy, because it's just a past memory.
> Because you are still with me, sighing whenever I sigh:
> But there's no time to be heartbroken, because the dawn lights up the sky.
> Only in my dreams can my tears fully flow,
> No need to hide them as they fall onto your clothes,
> That is the most beautiful cry I've had in my whole life.
> How much happiness is in my heart? If I try to express it, I cannot make it clear,

> But your strong support gives me the strength to go on here …
> Because you are still with me: In my dreams I can embrace you,
> And I know that I still live deep within your heart too.

Sung by Sandy Lam (Lin Yilian), a Cantopop singer famous for expressing the loss, sorrow, and self-pity that women experience in their romantic lives and marriages, the melancholy tune and lyrics, which are supposed to be the heroine's ode to her dead husband, convey the "sentimental longing" and "pathos of the age" common to many songs composed for Chinese TV dramas (Zhong 2010: 144). They evoke broken dreams, lost love, anxiety about the uncertain future, and a "yearning" for genuine care and lasting relationships. This theme song, repeated at the start of every episode and frequently replayed at moments of extreme emotion, functions as an affective marker throughout the serial. It powerfully conveys the melancholic tone and unsettled mood that run through the whole 21 episodes of the drama, and establishes an affective space where sentimental engagements between the viewers and the characters come into play. Indeed, this song is most frequently mentioned in viewers' comments as one of the main factors that moved them to tears, and fans on Baidu's net bar frequently provide the lyrics or links to the song along with their appreciative comments.

Director Kang Honglei employs many other stylistic and visual devices to elicit emotions, and to ensure an emotional connection between the audience and characters in the drama, in particular through carefully edited "scenes of empathy." One such scene frequently mentioned by fans depicts the morning after Xiaoshuang's husband dies. Xiaoshuang, while brushing her teeth in front of the mirror, recalls that just a couple of days earlier the two of them were teasing each other and playing together, a flashback shot cuts in to indicate the mental state of Xiaoshuang back then, and then it cuts to a lengthy close-up shot of Xiaoshuang's weeping face reflected in the mirror.

Such subjective shots that deliberately set up the performativity of emotion occur frequently in the drama. Another "scene of empathy," where we see a whole group sobbing and crying at length, is the closure of the state-owned grocery store where the women work, which is extensively played out throughout episode four. First we see the administrator coldly announcing that the store is shutting; then under the anxious gaze of the staff, a truck arrives to take away the inventory in the store. With the emotional theme music playing in the background, we see a series of shots of the four main female characters trying in vain to stop the truck drivers, their twisted faces shouting and crying, and then their bodies lying on the ground in front of the truck's wheels, all displayed lyrically in slow motion. The expressive technique of slow motion and the melodramatic tour de force of weeping last over three minutes, and convey a wrenching sense of the catastrophe and trauma as experienced by these women.

Added to these visual and acoustic techniques, the exaggerated melodramatic narrative mode is clearly manifested in *Crying Your Heart Out* through its

narrative situation and characterization, as well as through its acting and visual style, heightening the emotional tension and the sense of sympathy for the vulnerability of women in a time of social change.

To start with, *Crying Your Heart Out* quickly sets up a melodramatic context through a series of traumatic incidents in the first five episodes, and their emotional and psychological consequence: a situation of loss, mourning, and pain. We see the naïve and apparently incapable Xiaoshuang unexpectedly hit by unemployment; and while she is still trying to recover from the shock, a further crushing blow comes with her husband's sudden death in an accident. Here, personal loss is unambiguously entangled with the collective experience of retrenchment and social change. The emotional tension and psychological stress continue to accumulate in the following episodes when this single mother has to deal with further difficulties in her struggle to survive: the physical exhaustion of begging for work and being constantly humiliated; the everyday chaos of looking after her young daughter and difficult mother-in-law, punctuated by conflicts with her sisters-in-law; and especially the mental challenges of her changing identity from a "paid laborer" to a "ruthless boss" when moving upward under the new social codes dominated by capital and competition.

Crying Your Heart Out also depicts the moral conflicts and changes in human relationships that result from economic reform and cause tension, frustration, and confusion, especially among friends, family members, and other intimate relationships. A clear example is the conflict between Xiaoshuang's aspirations for upward mobility and her attempt to maintain her prior relationships with her "sisters" (her former work colleagues). At first, the members of this sisterhood are bound together by their common experiences and past, and the group serves as an emotional shelter for Xiaoshuang. They stand beside her as she deals with the pain of losing her husband, and they come to her when she needs help to cope with her many daily struggles. However, later we see this relationship endure severe trials when Xiaoshuang acquires the food services business from Bai, and her "sisters" now become her "employees." Misunderstandings, jealousy, and even resentment develop among them, and they frequently run into conflicts due to their differing economic interests and changing social status. One of the telling dramatic scenes is in episode twenty when Xiaoshuang tries to discuss the profits that the business is making with her former close friends (now employees) and encounters cold and satirical reactions. After this awkward episode, her three friends decide to leave the business, and Xiaoshuang, while moving on with her new life, somehow feels a deep loneliness and deplores the loss of the intimacy and friendship that are gone forever.

Ma Xiaoshuang's misfortunes, suffering, and emotional upheaval are by no means isolated examples, but are echoed in the lives of almost all the female characters in this drama, especially those of her three former colleagues who have terrible difficulties of their own to endure. Sister Zhou has a disabled husband requiring round-the-clock care; on top of this, she has a son in college to support. Tian Lichun must deal with an alcoholic and irresponsible husband. And Zheng Xiushui's husband is impotent but abusive, leaving her bruised and wounded.

Even the capable businesswoman, Bai Yuping, becomes estranged from her professor husband and must try to find happiness in other ways. The collapse of domestic order and the breakdown of intimate relationships are common experiences of these women and frequently lead to emotional outbursts from the characters. Their prolonged suffering throughout the drama seems to vastly outweigh the positive conclusion in the final episodes.

Yet while these exaggerated emotions and melodramatic plot lines are central to the affective impact of *Crying Your Heart Out*, the lives of the main characters are not so far removed from viewers as to create a sense of distance between them. This is because alongside the melodramatic exaggeration there is also careful attention to minute realism and a focus on the typical everyday issues that are facing most viewers in today's changing society. Indeed, the social content of the characters' "crying" is all too familiar to these viewers, including: mourning the loss of the reassuring security of their past life; fear and anxiety caused by being laid-off and dealing with the pressures of everyday survival; anger and resentment arising from the growing social injustice and class divisions in society; and tension and confusion about the loss of clear moral values accompanying the decline of socialism and the rise of dog-eat-dog capitalism. One can easily imagine viewers tuning in to see the characters experiencing these familiar issues and expressing exactly the kinds of opinions they themselves would like to express about the social changes going on around them.

This point is clearly illustrated in episode six, which depicts the four female characters wandering through the bustling streets desperately looking for jobs. Through their eyes, we see increasing social inequality, extreme consumerism, and snobbery (when Xiaoshuang looks for work in a luxury boutique and is intimidated by the shop assistants); we also see moral corruption and abuse of power (when Sister Zhou is beaten and fired from her janitor's position for reporting a prostitute, and when the director of one government office takes a bribe from Tian Lichun but refuses to give her a job). And when finally these still unemployed women sit in a crowded restaurant, using their last cents to buy beer and release their frustration, they comment on how they used to be young and desirable, but are now abandoned by both their husbands and society, and they wonder out loud "how are we going to survive the change?" The scene ends with the half-drunk Sister Zhou making an ironic and daring toast: "We have just achieved two things: one is anti-corruption, the other is sweeping away immorality. These are supposed to be the government's responsibility, but it is we retrenched workers who did it for them!" The bitter emotions voiced by these laid-off female workers, be it sorrow, pain, resentment, or anger, arise out of a sense of powerlessness among the characters, and reveal frustration of a more lasting kind. They are direct social comments about unfairness and injustice in society, which are also closely bound up with the lived experiences of Chinese mass audiences, who themselves must deal with corrupt government officials, social degeneration, and an increasing gap between the haves and have-nots.

Thus, despite their intended propaganda function and ideological closure, TV dramas about laid-off women present a "tragic structure of feeling" (Ang 1985: 45), which emerges from the melodramatic situation and emotional displays by the characters, whose constant crying and weeping (*ku*) evoke an emotional experience and overall melancholy mood of extensive mourning and sadness induced by their present uncertainty, anxiety, hardship, and suffering. Such symptomatic crying, as we see in the responses of viewers, not only constitutes the core experience of the characters, but also functions as a major channel for viewers' emotional identification with the situation in the drama.

In this way, the use of melodramatic forms in Chinese TV dramas to mediate social issues produces emotional meanings far beyond their superficial ideological content. In these TV dramas, just as in some of their cinematic and literary precedents,

> the personalization of historical and social forces, the privileged site of the family as the microcosm of historical crisis, the portrayal of a beautiful, piteous woman as the victim of injustice, the clear-cut moral polarization of good and evil, the dramatically inflated scenes and sounds – all these work together to play on the senses and the hearts of the audience and to produce catharsis
>
> Wang 2004: 144

Kuqing xi and the ambivalent televisual discourse of change

Crying Your Heart Out and other TV dramas about laid-off women are not unique in their focus on weeping and the powerful expression of underlying affect. They share many thematic and stylistic characteristics with *Kuqing xi* (dramas of bitter emotion), a subgenre of melodrama which has seen a revival in popularity on Chinese television in the past two decades. Represented by works such as *Our Dad and Mom* (*Zanba zanma*, 1996), *Family Tree* (*Qinqing shu*, 2003), *My Beloved Brothers* (*Qinxiong redi*, 2007), and *My Ugly Mother* (*Wo de chou niang*, 2008), these dramas of bitter emotion often focus on the everyday struggles of the urban poor, unemployed, retirees, maids, and migrant workers from rural areas. Dwelling on the hardships and emotional turbulence of their everyday lives—financial difficulties, inadequate housing, large medical bills, aged parents, lost children, and abusive in-laws—these dramas of human misery and life's torments present a world of victims and losers buffeted by dramatic social changes. They are punctuated by an incessant series of unfortunate events, strained family relationships, and psychological problems and physical illnesses, and their characters are suffused with the feeling of being abandoned by their times. Some commentators have summarized this subgenre as "three brokennesses and one suffering" (broken families, broken feelings, broken marriages, and suffering at home) (Anonymous 2009).

The drama of bitter emotion has its cultural roots in a longstanding and important tradition in Chinese operatic art with its tragic sense of life: "Many

Chinese tragedies have a suffering and often unjustly accused citizen from the lower social classes as the central figure," and "a series of bad circumstances and tangles and knots in interpersonal relationships … characterize the tragic situation in Chinese drama" (Huang 2003: 63–64). The tragic hero can't avoid making bad choices due to his/her position in the web of relationships, and more often than not, the belated compensation or restoration of justice only takes place in the afterlife or a distant future when Heaven finally intervenes.

This preoccupation of Chinese dramatists with the suffering of ordinary people was rediscovered by modern intellectuals (writers, film directors, and artists) engaged in the May Fourth cultural enlightenment and the subsequent socialist revolution, but the fatalist sense of tragedy in pre-modern drama was generally replaced by revolutionary sentiments and calls for social change (Lee 2005). As Vera Schwarcz observes, "For almost a century, Chinese poets, historians, literary critics and even party officials have found ways to express the burden of grief in a public useful idiom" (Schwarcz 1996: 130). One typical example is the early family melodrama movies (*jiating lunliju*) of the 1920s and 1930s. With the suffering of the most vulnerable victims of society such as orphans and women as their central plot elements, films by Zheng Zhengqiu and Cai Chusheng used the plight of the poor and powerless to denounce injustice in society and politics, and the evils of the feudal system and patriarchal values. Later, the common people's "*ku*" (sorrow, suffering) was effectively used in techniques for the mass mobilization of emotion in the Communist Revolution, in particular through "public recitation of personal grief in speaking bitterness sessions" (Schwarcz 1996: 125).

While the above Chinese articulation of *ku*, as both sorrow and bitterness, may shed light on the social and political context of dramas of bitter emotion, the most direct influence on the recent revival of this genre on Chinese television was Taiwanese TV dramas and films, which were first introduced to mainland China in the late 1980s, and reached their peak in the first half of the 1990s, with some ninety Taiwanese TV dramas exported during that period (Yin 2002). These TV dramas and films, such as *The Stars Understand My Heart* (*Xingxing zhi woxin*), *Papa Can you Hear Me Sing* (*Dacuoche*), and *Love Me Again, Mom* (*Mama, zai ai wo yici*), inserted emotions and sentiments from a time of social transition and moral crisis into the family melodrama tradition of early film. They not only offered Mainland Chinese TV drama producers a practical model to work with—for example, the famous *Yearning* (*Kewang*, 1990) was directly based on such imported dramas (Zha 1995: 38)—but also coached popular media producers on how to "reconstruct the victimized voice/self/nation" in post-1989 Chinese society through *ku* (crying) (Wu and Wang 2008: 425).

Over the two decades since 1990, the Taiwanese mode of dramas of bitter emotion, often through various forms of co-production and collaboration between TV drama producers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, inspired a new subgenre on Chinese television with local and contemporary relevance. The 22-episode TV drama *Papa Can You Hear Me Sing* (*Dacuoche*, 2004), is

a typical case illustrating such appropriation and adoption. The mainland TV drama borrows the basic plot and main character development from a 1983 Taiwanese musical film with the same title, a tearjerker centered on the lives of a speech-impaired army veteran Sun Li and his adopted daughter Mei who aspires to become a successful popular singer. But it rewrites the plot into a localized story with realistic details depicting the social changes of the past decades and the everyday experiences of the poor urban working class. In the mainland version, Sun Li marries Lan, a sent down young girl who has returned to the city in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and Sun adopts the illegitimate girl that Lan conceived when she was in the countryside. Lan eventually leaves Sun for America and Sun struggles to bring up Mei despite the hardship of losing his job as a state waste disposal worker and becoming a street garbage collector. When he is then wounded in a car accident, the vulnerable family is crushed again by the huge medical bills. The pitiable character of garbage collector Sun Li, who is betrayed by his family and his time, embodies the silent and unspoken (due to the character's speech impairment) endurance of hardship and affliction, as well as the sorrow and bitterness of those who are socially disadvantaged and physically deprived in China's march toward a modern consumerist society.

As one TV drama producer, Hai Yan, has observed, the proliferation of dramas of bitter emotion in recent years "speaks to a collective unconscious and social mood that are not addressed by historical costume dramas (the mainstream genre of Chinese TV drama)" (Liu, W. 2005). Despite their highly melodramatic and occasionally unbelievable plots, viewers do find "melodramatic identification" (Ang 1996) and "emotional realism" (Ang 1985) in these dramas that they articulate through their tears. In Ien Ang's words there is a "close collaboration of the dramatic situation with social reality" (Ang 1985: 46), something that is especially meaningful considering the fact that TV audiences in China "primarily comprise viewers of lower educational levels, females, the upper middle aged and elderly, and the economically less affluent" (Kong 2008: 82). Paul Pickowicz's observation, when explaining the popularity of melodramatic cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, remains relevant here, "melodramatic representation was appealing to low-brow, nonintellectual consumers of urban popular culture in the troubled early Republic period because it provided clear answers to nagging questions." (Pickowicz 1993: 303)

However, from the censors' point of view, dramas of bitter emotion are diametrically opposed to the kinds of TV dramas "reflecting the bright side of society" that SARFT has clearly defined as suitable for broadcasting in primetime (Miao 2011: 98). Cultural officials have recently concluded that the social emotions unleashed by dramas of bitter emotion are too disturbing, possibly fanning the flames of social instability, and they have publicly stated that such works should be discouraged. In 2009, at a national meeting of TV drama scriptwriters, Li Jingsheng, the SARFT official who oversees television production, disparaged dramas of bitter emotion for their "three brokennesses and one suffering" formula, and clearly stated that this type of drama should

not be permitted to flourish (Anonymous, 2009). And as we will see in the next chapter, television stations have also come under enormous pressure to steer their reality talk shows on feelings away from discord and suffering and toward the more positive emotions of "harmony" and "happiness."

Conclusion

The emergence of TV dramas about laid-off women workers certainly had its roots in the state's re-employment project and economic reform discourse, something that is clear from the profusion of reports on laid-off workers that emerged in the official media from the mid-to-late 1990s onwards. TV dramas on this theme produced by the state-controlled TV stations also first appeared at that time—not surprisingly, since the official cultural bureaucracy has long viewed TV drama as one more popular form that must be mobilized to deliver the policy messages of the Party-State in an easy-to-swallow format. In fact, many of these dramas have been produced by TV production studios in association with central and local government propaganda departments. Clearly, therefore, their producers intended them to be main melody TV dramas promoting the Party-State's new re-employment project.

Yet more often than not, the broadcast versions of these dramas are actually more complex and ambivalent than one would expect from their production context, raising various controversial social issues and presenting a range of voices and emotions, some of which appear to be at variance with the positive official message. As our discussion of *Crying Your Heart Out* suggests, the melodramatic presentation of the social and personal experiences of laid-off workers clearly exaggerates and draws out the emotions of suffering, sorrow, and grief to an extreme degree, provoking the kind of bitterness and resentment that we see in the tradition of dramas of bitter emotion. Such dramas highlight the psychological and emotional plight of laid-off women and articulate a reality that is much darker and more ambivalent than the typical presentations in cheery and inspirational media reports. And precisely through this kind of "pedestrian form of suffering" (Ang 1985: 78), embodied in individual experiences and everyday life, an emotional antagonism and subtle social critique come into play.

The contrast between the intellectual articulation by critics and scholars of the positive social message in dramas of bitter emotion like *Crying Your Heart Out* and the much more emotionally powerful affective articulation of these same dramas by viewers reveals the complexity and the polysemic nature of TV drama in contemporary China. There are "subtle layers of controversial meanings" that lie beneath the apparently harmonious ideological surface, "layers of meanings that are arranged on different levels of explicitness" (Ma 1999: 113) to address the differing, sometimes contradictory, demands of their audiences. On the one hand, we see a neoliberal message of inspiration and upward mobility in a new market economy, and a living example of what a changed mindset can do to improve the lives of laid-off women. On the other

hand, we also see contentious voices and visual images from the victims' point of view, which tend to complicate the ideological messages and open up a critique of heightened social inequality and the new dominance of capital over all other values.

It is in this sense that Chinese TV dramas articulate the emotional complexities in a post-socialist society and dramatize the essential conflicts of China's historical transition to a new economic order.

Notes

1 Appleton *et al*., conducted a survey in 2000, covering 4000 households in 13 Chinese cities, and found that this retrenchment affected around 11% of urban workers, 53% of whom had remained unemployed since being laid-off (some as early as 1992). They also found that the risk of retrenchment was higher for women, the middle-aged and people with less education, and these groups were least likely to find re-employment. Therefore despite the rise of new service sector opportunities for younger workers, middle-aged women in particular still face greater risks from retrenchment. Appleton *et al*. 2002: 252–75.

2 Won (2004) found that, according to the Changchun statistical bureau, 80% of laid-off workers had not yet found jobs. Of those who did find jobs, 80% did so by themselves, rather than through the re-employment service centers. The re-employment service centers and the state account for less than 6% of new job acquisitions Thus, there seems to be no feasible solution to unemployment except encouraging workers to be self-reliant to survive in the market economy.

3 Yu Hongmei's research (Yu 1999) shows that the growth of female entrepreneurs became a favorite theme in the official media in the late 1990s. See also a collection of reportage *Facing Retrenchment* (*Zaoyu xiagang*, by Yu Xiu, Zhongguo gongshanglian chubanshe, 1998), which gives stories of 20 laid-off female workers all ending with the protagonist becoming a successful entrepreneur. In another re-employment guidebook, *What to do When You Are Laid off: One Hundred Questions and Answers* (*Xiagang zenmeban: Baiwen baida*, Zhongguo chengshi chubanshe, 1999), among the 50 people featured in its "re-employment models" section, 37 are female (Yu 1999). Yang Jie's research has also pointed out that gender plays a crucial role in the neoliberal technology of governing, including thought work (Yang 2007).

4 According to the *Blue Book of Chinese Society* (2003), the re-employment rate was only 15% in 2002.

5 For a more thorough study of popular satirical sayings, including their main themes and how they reflect popular sentiments, see Link and Zhou 2002.

6 For an explanation of "main melody," see note 2 of Chapter 1.

7 This finding is supported by the author's survey of the TV drama viewing experiences of 30 women in a provincial town, consisting mostly of unemployed, laid-off workers and housewives. While many of them (18) prefer other programs to TV dramas, those who do watch TV dramas do so for various reasons ranging from "boredom" to "feel like watching a story," and they seem to hold a general suspicion of TV drama's obvious messages. Typical comments include: "The happy ending or closure is unbelievable"; "the story is all made up (*tai jia*)"; "It (becoming successful after being laid off) doesn't happen that way in my life." Survey conducted by author in August 2011.

8 See the "Crying Your Heart Out" post bar (*tieba*) on Baidu, The data that I used consists of 1001 posts dating from January 2005 to August 2008. http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%D3%D0%C0%E1%BE%A1%C7%E9%C1%F7.

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3 *Magic Cube of Happiness*

Managing conflicts and feelings on Chinese primetime television

As we showed in the previous chapter, many Chinese TV dramas depict the enormous upheavals and undesirable social consequences of rapid economic reform. They vividly illustrate the serious and increasing gap between rich and poor, as those with power and wealth monopolize resources; and they often hint at the endemic corruption that has spread through Chinese political and social institutions. Clearly, socialist institutions such as the "iron rice bowl" have declined and the social welfare system remains inadequate to deal with laid-off workers and other casualties of economic reform. The decline in traditional forms of social belonging (work units, active membership of the CCP, and other social and political organizations such as neighborhood committees) has exacerbated the disintegration of the social and moral fabric. Yet due to the CCP's determination to maintain social and political control, citizens' grievances and discontent have often been suppressed, even in their fictional form in Chinese TV dramas.

As a result, beneath the glossy surface of this rapidly developing society, one constantly encounters a deep sense of anxiety and crisis among ordinary citizens. While statistics reveal that the majority of Chinese people are better off financially than before, they do not seem to be getting any happier—in fact they are heading in the opposite direction. Several surveys confirm this general emotional trend. A study based on data from the World Value Survey found that in 1990, 28% of Chinese people described themselves as very happy, but by 2000, this figure had dropped to 12%. When asked about their satisfaction with life, the response was similar: in 1990, the average satisfaction rate was 7.3 (out of 10), but by 2000 it had dropped to 6.5. This drop was seen in almost every income bracket and across rural and urban regions throughout China (Brockmann 2009: 388). This study is confirmed by another analysis of data collected by five survey organizations including one Chinese, between 1990 and 2011, which indicates that "Chinese people's feelings of well-being have declined in a period of such momentous improvement in their economic lives" (Easterlin 2012). In particular,

> in its transition, China has shifted from one of the most egalitarian countries in terms of distribution of life satisfaction to one of the least

> egalitarian. Life satisfaction has declined markedly in the lowest income and least educated segments of the population, while rising somewhat in the upper SES stratum
>
> Easterlin *et al.* 2012: 9778

As for the causes of these negative emotions, according to China's own national happiness database, based on a survey conducted between 2006 to 2009 of 86,000 respondents, the most common worries (and the biggest barriers to happiness) are getting adequate medical care, finding proper housing, educating children, job stress, and lack of support in old age. The group of social scientists who conducted this survey, led by Peking University professor Hu Dayuan, concluded that the most urgent issues needing resolution were reducing the gap between rich and poor, taming excessive housing prices, and introducing a properly functioning social insurance scheme (Zhang 2011).[1] Another online survey from People Net (December 24, 2009), however, indicates more awareness of political and social injustice and unfairness that make people unhappy, including: corruption (82.3%), increasing income gap (80.6%), cadre-mass local conflicts (63.2%), high housing prices (62.8%), a crisis of trust and moral standards (61.7%), democratic reforms do not meet expectations (52.3%), and pollution and ecological damage (51.6%) (Rosen 2013).

Government officials constantly encounter these deep social problems and discontent, whether it is the millions of petitioners flocking to government offices with un-redressed grievances, courts overflowing with major and petty legal disputes, and even large-scale social protests on the streets, numbering some 87,000 in 2005 and rising to over 180,000 by 2010 (Sun 2011).

This trend toward increasing popular dissatisfaction has caused CCP leaders to view maintaining the stability of society and the happiness of Chinese people as crucial to the CCP's continuing legitimacy. Since the mid-2000s, Chinese leaders have focused much of their energy on promoting a "harmonious society" and a "happy China." As Wen Jiabao, then Premier, put it in his report to the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007: "A people-first mode of development would increase happiness, and public policy founded on achieving that aim could become the foundation of China's harmonious society" (Hu 2011).

The CCP's imperative to promote a "harmonious society" has exerted influence at every level of officialdom, from local governments to law enforcement and cultural institutions, including the commercialized yet still state-controlled media. What role do popular media play in the articulation of happiness and harmony? To what extent can the ongoing media changes "expand the presence and voices from the societal sector in the media" (Pan 2010: 519), and how has the affective articulation emancipated by media marketization been co-opted into "orderly communication"?

As we saw in Chapter 2, when the popular media become involved in the process of affective articulation, the results are sometimes unpredictable. On the one hand, popular media, notably television drama, can provide an outlet

for people to release their pent-up emotions and air their grievances in public, especially in a society where there are few political avenues for the expression of dissent. And TV producers are keenly aware of the popularity and commercial potential of programs that engage with issues of deep emotional concern to ordinary viewers. On the other hand, producers must avoid focusing too heavily on negative emotions, as this might fan the flames of discontent and contradict the attempts by the Chinese government to promote its vision of happiness and harmony. This means that TV producers must keep affective articulation in check, while simultaneously satisfying the emotional demands of audiences, the commercial interests of television stations, and the policy requirements of government regulators.

In this chapter, we will focus on reality TV shows, which have become extremely popular in China in recent years, but have followed a very winding path to success between the rock of the market and the hard place of state "regulation." We will introduce two such shows from Shanghai Dragon TV, *Magic Cube of Happiness* (*Xingfu mofang*) and *The New Family Mediator* (*Xin laoniangjiu*), as case studies to illustrate how popular media have become an important affective site for mediating and articulating the various negative emotions accompanying rapid social change. Evolving from the earlier genre of "talk shows on feelings," which tended to dwell much more on the expression of negative emotions and interpersonal conflicts, the new genres of psychological counseling and mediation shows manage to satisfy the audience's need to address their interpersonal conflicts and vicariously release their emotions while also meeting the requirements of SARFT that television shows maintain a positive outlook on life and promote "harmony." They demonstrate an on-going negotiation and constantly adjusting interaction among market, society and the state in the domain of popular media.

From national affairs to domestic issues: the changing topics of TV talk shows

In China's heavily pre-scripted television culture, and in a media environment where television is viewed as a central tool for cultural engineering, it should be no surprise that more spontaneous genres such as talk shows did not appear on Chinese television until quite recently. Only in the late 1990s, due to a combination of the "emancipatory consequences of the market," the "influx of discursive resources" and the "creativity of media practitioners" (Pan 2010: 519) did such popular formats begin to take over the airwaves.

China's flagship station, CCTV, led the charge by introducing shows that were regarded as highly innovative at the time, such as *Investigative Focus* (*Jiaodian fangtan*, 1994), *Dialogue* (*Duihua*, 2000), and *Tell it Like it Is* (*Shihua shishuo*, 1996). The latter talk show immediately stood out from CCTV's previous stiff and heavily slanted news and current affairs programs by inviting people from different walks of life to engage in on-screen debate and discussion about social and real-world issues that concerned the mass

audience, from consumers' rights to rural migrant workers in cities to intergenerational relationships. For the first time, they hinted that television and other mass media might be able to provide the public with a platform or space to engage in or observe discussions about pressing current issues. The show's ratings were boosted by the personal charisma of the producer and host, Cui Yongyuan, whose sincerity, quick wit and sense of humor encouraged the guests to speak candidly.

Nevertheless, CCTV's dominant culture remained elitist and politically interventionist. Innovative talk shows such as *Tell it Like it Is* and *Dialogue* were severely limited by the prevailing winds of cultural hierarchy and political constraints. Their ability to provide an open platform for public discourse on a range of controversial issues was restricted (Zhong 2004). After Cui Yongyuan left *Tell it Like it Is* for health reasons in 2002, the new host He Jing described the struggle to tell the truth while constantly negotiating with official censors as like "dancing with chains around our legs" (Wang 2009). The show's autonomy and reputation declined and its ratings fell, and it was finally terminated by CCTV in 2009.

Yet while talk shows on national television that directly focused on public affairs and social issues failed to provide a true public forum for Chinese viewers, in the early 2000s, they instead began tuning in to new kinds of talk shows on the rapidly expanding provincial satellite TV stations, especially those focusing on the "feelings" of ordinary people and their domestic lives and private conflicts.

As mentioned in the Introduction, since the late 1990s, a decade-long process of opening up television to marketization and competition allowed provincial TV stations to become the fastest growing players in the media and entertainment industry. Hunan Satellite TV, a provincial satellite network, was the initial leader among provincial TV stations in introducing imported reality genres and creating hit entertainment shows, including a string of popular youth-oriented talent shows where audience participation became a major selling point.

Hunan Satellite's entertainment focus and "participatory" approach also transformed the talk television format through two influential chat shows, *Have a Good Talk* (*Youhua haoshuo*, 1999) and *Real Feelings* (*Zhenqing*, 2001). While the former created a new, albeit short-lived, model of lively open discussion on sensitive hot-button topics (see the Introduction), the latter was even more influential as the first example of a popular format that inspired many imitators in the coming decade. Launched on Hunan TV's Economics Channel (*Hunan jingji dianshitai*) in 1998, *Real Feelings* enlivened the sober talk show format right from its first episode, in which an ordinary married couple frankly discussed their marital problems with the TV host. Audiences were fascinated by this new focus on ordinary people and their relationships, and many volunteered to supply emotional narratives about their own marital and family problems for inclusion on the show. By 2001, the show had become the flagship program of Hunan Satellite TV and was syndicated as a

regular feature program on many other provincial TV stations and on CCTV International (CCTV4).

Real Feelings was arguably a TV appropriation of existing psychological counseling and educational programs on Chinese radio. Midnight hotline radio shows often featured an expert counselor who talked to call-in listeners or responded to their letters, providing health education, personal counseling, and relationship advice in a discreet and anonymous way. But by fixing their gaze on "authentic" people and their marital and family conflicts, reality TV shows turned this discreet radio format into a public spectacle. The candid confessions on *Real Feeling* were a precursor of the emergent genre of "talk shows on feelings" (*qinggan fangtan jiemu*), and numerous imitations and variations of Hunan Satellite's *Real Feelings* came to dominate the primetime broadcasts of many local TV stations in the next decade (Su 2011).

The basic format of most such shows involved the host and the participants sitting face to face and talking candidly about their relationship troubles, with occasional location footage or dramatized scenes to fill out the details and provide visual interest. The host was usually a woman with a youthful but calm manner, who would encourage the guests with sympathetic comments and verbal articulation of their sometimes inarticulate emotions. On some shows, guests would wear masks, hats, or sunglasses to conceal their identities—which may have encouraged candid speaking but also suggested that intimate details were being aired. Many shows also invited family members, friends, and even professional advisors to express their opinions or offer some solutions to the guests' dilemmas.

This narrow focus on family and emotions on provincial TV talk shows was at first a conscious move to steer clear of the kinds of controversial national issues and current affairs that were causing such approval headaches for shows such as *Tell it Like it Is* and *Have a Good Talk*. Producers of provincial TV shows decided that the apolitical, domestically focused entertainment approach was the best way to secure profits while avoiding political risks and censorship (Bai 2005). At the same time, whether intentionally or not, this new focus on the emotional lives of ordinary people resonated deeply with viewers living through rapid social changes and their accompanying emotional upheavals. The social transformations of the past few decades have clearly led to increasing domestic disputes among family members, difficulties in finding life partners, the destabilization of marriages, and the breakdown of extended and nuclear families. On top of these relationship problems, the frantic pursuit of rapid economic development and urbanization have also led to increasing competition for jobs and housing, and the resultant serious personal stress has created widespread psychological and mental problems for which little organized support or counseling is available. With the decline in traditional neighborhood networks and socialist work units, many Chinese people feel extremely isolated, desperate for some kind of channel or outlet to release their emotions, to get redress for their grievances, or to seek consolation for their sorrow. This social context helps to explain the enormous popularity of

television shows about ordinary people's feelings, especially those that claim to offer some kind of expert guidance or counseling.

By the mid-2000s, almost one hundred such talk shows on feelings had been developed by different provincial networks (Su 2011), and most of them were broadcast at primetime. In the fierce competition for "eyeballs" and advertisers, each TV station sought their own niche and frequently updated their format and content to maintain the interest of ever more demanding audiences. Some brought in a whole team of "advisors" or "counselors" from different fields (*guwen*) to discuss the guests' issues in a forum format (such as *Blog of Emotions* (*Qinggan buluoge*), Beijing TV); some stuck with one professionally trained psychologist to offer expert prescriptions (*Soul Garden* (*Xinling huayuan*), Dragon TV); others decided that location footage or dramatized scenes were the best way to provide visual interest (*Human World* (*Renjian*), Jiangsu Satellite TV); while still others trotted out controversial issues or media celebrities to satisfy viewers' curiosity (*Human Lives* (*Rensheng*), Guizhou Satellite TV). Over time, in this commodified new genre of intimacy, virtually any topic related to domestic conflict and family relationships became grist for the TV mill, be it extramarital affairs, tension with in-laws, disputes about parental responsibilities or child rearing, family property and financial disputes, ugly divorces, or illegitimate children. A race to the bottom occurred, with many shows increasingly focusing on the most scandalous domestic chaos and conflicts, and manufacturing spectacular scenes of emotional outbursts, hostility, and verbal abuse on screen. Emotional intensity and negative affect became "selling points" allowing such shows to climb in the ratings.

Yet while these shows provided entertaining visual spectacles by dwelling on people's emotional turmoil and suffering, they seldom probed into the real origins of these conflicts or provided resources for resolving them. More often than not, the token psychological counseling on these shows was a superficial gimmick to give a sheen of professional value to what was essentially media voyeurism: exploiting the audience's fascination for sensational stories and watching other people air their dirty laundry in public. One notorious example of this kind of media voyeurism was *Human World* from Jiangsu Satellite TV, a network which had branded itself as "the world of emotions" (*qinggan shijie*). *Human World* focused on the most sensational aspects of the guests' stories and the intensity of their emotions. Close-ups of the guests' weeping and shouting were captured on camera and repeatedly shown on previews and throughout each episode. A mixed format combining on-site confessional chat with investigative reporting and dramatic reconstructions emphasized the hidden details; and scandalous tabloid-style titles hit home the idea that ugly secrets would be revealed if viewers tuned in. Typical episodes included "She is not my real mother," "How a beautiful home tutor wrecked my family," and "Incestuous love between a brother and sister."

The search for media sensation even led to episodes where the plot and characters were completely fabricated. For example, In January 2010, the show featured the story of Sister Feng (Feng Jie), a migrant worker from Sichuan who had already become infamous online for her ridiculous self-promotion

and excessive demands in her search for a marriage partner. On the show, Sister Feng talked about her troubled romantic life with her "boyfriend" and "ex-boyfriend" but it was later discovered that these two men were actors and the whole episode was simply an attempt to capitalize on Sister Feng's online notoriety.

The combination of unchecked emotional displays and commodification of domestic conflicts in talk shows on feelings led to vocal protests from both viewers and censors. Many saw such shows as both a manifestation and a source of the disintegration of the social and moral fabric. As a result, such talk shows on feelings were frequently targeted for censorship by SARFT as negative models of entertainment programs. For example, in 2007, SARFT criticized Shenzhen Satellite TV and suspended its feature talk show, *Super Feelings*, for featuring another media celebrity, Sister Furong, whose only claim to fame was flaunting her sexual body and engaging in outrageous self-promotion on the internet. In fact, between 2004 and 2008, SARFT disciplined thirty-two shows, and suspended nine talk shows on feelings (Su 2011). Then in December 2008, SARFT issued an order criticizing the "vulgarization of programs on human feelings" (*qinggan jiemu disuhua*), including those focusing on "bitter" emotions, unusual relationships, and extramarital affairs, which the government blamed for their negative influence on viewers and on social stability. SARFT's notice required shows dealing with emotional life and family relationships to adopt a more positive attitude and to avoid sensational stories about extreme emotional topics (Liu 2009).[2]

Following this notice, most provincial TV stations restructured their programs and steered the emotional content toward "happiness" and "harmony". Hunan Satellite terminated its decade-long show, *Real Feelings*, and replaced it with "*8090*," a youth-oriented show with an upbeat spirit; and Jiangsu Satellite altered its slogan from "World of Emotions" to "Happy China" (*Xingfu Zhongguo*), and began planning a new youth-oriented show more in tune with this "happy" new image. This later developed into the highly successful *Are You the One?* discussed in the following chapter (Jing 2010). In Shanghai, Dragon TV shelved its five-year-old chat show, *Soul Garden*, in December 2008, and replaced it with a new show, *Magic Cube of Happiness*, which adopted a much more prominent psychological counseling approach in assisting its urban youth guests to deal with their emotional problems.

The next section demonstrates how one of these new shows, *Magic Cube of Happiness*, reframes domestic and emotional problems in psychotherapeutic terms, but at the same time maintains a paternalistic gate-keeping role by redefining the propriety of feeling and moralizing emotions.

Magic Cube of Happiness: a psychotherapeutic approach to happiness

Dragon TV was established in 1992 to provide "a more lively entertainment alternative" to residents of Shanghai and its suburbs compared to the staid

and traditional offerings of the Shanghai TV Station.[3] It quickly won over audiences and media recognition for its fresh approach and focus on local Shanghai culture and society. In the early 2000s, Dragon TV developed many well-received entertainment programs, especially two highly popular offerings in the imported talent show genre, *My Style My Show* (*Woxing woxiu*, 2004–9) and *Happy Boy's Voice* (*Kuaile nansheng*, 2006–7). Both gave Hunan's *Supergirl Voice* a run for its money, but they suffered similar fates to *Supergirl Voice*, eventually being terminated due to pressure from SARFT about the "unhealthy values" they promoted.

In 2008, under the watchful eyes of SARFT, Dragon TV launched several "infotainment" programs to "serve" its Shanghai audience and promote the ideas of harmony and happiness, including *Magic Cube of Happiness* and *The New Family Mediator*.

Despite its new title, *Magic Cube of Happiness* was really just a modified version of Dragon TV's talk show about feelings, *Soul Garden*, which ran from 2002 to late 2008. What distinguished *Soul Garden* from other such shows was its focus on the psychological roots of conflict. Zhang Yiyun, a Taiwan-born American-educated psychologist, was a regular fixture on the show, as were three "emotional counselors" (*qinggan guwen*) drawn from various professions including writers, teachers, and celebrities. *Soul Garden* thus claimed to be the first psychotherapeutic mental health show on Chinese television. At its peak, it reached 6.8% of the viewing audience, and besides being directly syndicated by other TV stations, its psychological approach inspired many imitators (Wang, 2008). But over time, under intense competitive pressure from other talk shows on feelings, the focus on psychological counseling was downplayed in favor of sensationalized stories and dramatizations, with unconstrained emotional talking and psychodramas taking center stage.

Soul Garden's replacement show, *Magic Cube of Happiness*, was a revival of the original idea that television could provide a psychological service (*xinli fuwu*) to urban youth and help them to resolve their relationship conflicts and "return to happiness." The set of the show is designed to reflect this "therapeutic" approach. In the center is a transparent glass cubicle that represents a psychoanalyst's private clinic (*xinli mishi*). The host and the guest are the only two who sit inside this enclosed space as if they are having a private psychological consultation or confessional session. The guest is thus treated as a patient with an individual psychological condition or "pathology" that needs to be treated.

A survey of the content of the fifteen programs broadcast in the randomly chosen month of April 2010 also confirms that the show's new purpose is to help its targeted audience of "young urbanites" with their "everyday problems and emotional difficulties." The majority of the guests are portrayed as desperate young men or women who have messed up their lives and come onto the show as a last resort to seek help. For example, there was a young woman who could not break free from obsessive memories of her past love and even

bought a property with a huge mortgage in the hope of rekindling her lover's interest (April 26 "Love overdraft" and April 27 "Love means helping the loved one"). There was also a young man, long separated from his mother, who wanted to invite her to his wedding but found himself in an unresolvable conflict with his father, who still resented the mother for leaving him so many years ago (April. 15 "Lost maternal love" and April 12 "Where are you Mom?"). And there was a son who complained how his parents interfered with his career choices (April 14 "My son ruined my happiness" and April 08 "Let me go, brother"); and a daughter-in-law who accused her mother-in-law of ruining her marriage (April 13 "Engagement broken" and April 6 "Mercenary marriage"). All these emotionally distraught guests pour out their problems to the host, Chen Rong, who then invites the psychological counselor (*xinli shudaoshi*) to help analyze their mental issues and give a potted diagnosis.

Yet this TV counseling differs in many ways from a real session with a psychoanalyst. Despite the psychological approach used in analyzing the conflicts, the show is primarily a forum for engaging in moralistic group persuasion and promoting a neo-liberal discourse of self-management and good citizenship. The veneer of psychoanalysis is just like the glass cube, whose existence is for surface show but without any proper function—instead of providing an isolated space for the host and the guest, the transparency of the walls and the microphones relaying their conversation mean that in fact everyone, including the viewers at home, can closely scrutinize what is going on inside. And during each 50-minute episode, besides the expert psychological counselor, family members, close friends, or colleagues of the main guest are all invited onto the stage to sit outside the cube. They may support or contradict the main guest's testimony. Behind the stage, there is also a 3×3 vertical stack of nine TV monitors, a bit like the quiz show *Hollywood Squares*, each of which houses a "netizen" (*wangyou*) on a live video feed ready to give his or her opinion during the session. This framing of the "patient" within several layers of social scrutiny indicates that social pressure rather than individual inner integration is the guiding force behind the "psychological counseling" being offered here.

One case from *Magic Cube of Happiness* will help to illustrate how these popular shows that previously exploited domestic problems and manufactured emotional excess have now adapted themselves to play a dual role of psychological counselor as well as moral gatekeeper to the public.

On April 29, 2010, the episode "Lost in a Business Venture" (*Chuangye mitu*) featured the strained family relationship of a thirty-year-old man named Zhao Chuan. Zhao sought help from *Magic Cube* because his father had refused to support a "rare opportunity" for him to set up his own business. Zhao needed two million yuan to invest in a wine bar, but to get a bank loan he had to provide security, so he was hoping to take out a mortgage on his parents' home in Shanghai. His father had rejected this plan.

When the father Zhao Jianming was invited to stage, he immediately rejected the son's story and furiously accused the son of ruining the family.

Apparently, Zhao Chuan was hoping to secretly arrange for the bank to do a valuation of their house to get his business loan while his father was away (the father lived and worked in Guangzhou most of the time). And in order to send away his mother who was still living in the house, Zhao fabricated a story that his father was having an affair, hoping that his mother would immediately fly down to Guangzhou to investigate this story! This hare-brained plan backfired when his mother filed for divorce from his father on the grounds of adultery, and the stress caused his already sick mother to be hospitalized. On the show, the father cursed his son for being evil-hearted and declared that he no longer wanted anything to do with him.

The father's emotional recounting of his side of the story adds a judgmental tone to this domestic conflict and the son and his desperate acts are suddenly cast under suspicion.

The host then introduced the mild-mannered and soft-spoken Psychological Counselor Lin. She suggested that the son's psychological profile was very emotionally immature for a thirty-year-old, and it was this "childish mentality" that caused him to make such irresponsible decisions. The host then asked three of the netizens to give their opinions. They all criticized the son harshly for provoking this family conflict, and they suggested he should be ashamed of acting in such a selfish and unfilial way toward his parents. One even used the highly derogatory term "parent nibbler" (*ken laozu*) to refer to Zhao.[4]

This kind of shaming mechanism, in other words, inviting public observers to take sides in a conflict and invoke feelings of guilt or shame in the main guest, is a fixture of many Chinese talk shows that deal with interpersonal disputes. Sometimes it occurs on air, and in other cases it may continue after the show concludes, through audience responses on the internet. However, in this episode, the moral judgments of the netizens seemed not to work on Zhao who fiercely asserted that others didn't know the true situation. Zhao then recounted how his father had worked in a different city for most of Zhao's life and never made any effort to build any real relationship with him.

Two more guests, Zhao's aunt and girlfriend, were invited on stage to provide their own perspectives. Confirming Zhao's story, the aunt also blamed the father for not looking after his sick wife and totally neglecting his responsibility for educating his son. Zhao's girlfriend then revealed why Zhao was so desperate for the bank loan. Despite graduating with an MBA from a reputable university, he had quit his job in a large company due to dissatisfaction with his boss, and then borrowed money to set up various businesses and invest in stocks and futures on the market. Following the 2008 financial crisis, his investments failed and he was now nearly 400,000 yuan in debt. One of his main creditors was a relative of his girlfriend who had threatened to break up their relationship if Zhao didn't pay him back soon.

This revelation became another trigger for the father to criticize Zhao for sticking his head in the clouds and not listening to the advice of his elders. Zhao continued to refute his father, describing how their strange family arrangement (him looking after his sick mother while his father lived

elsewhere) had ruined both his career opportunities and his previous relationship. He resentfully pointed out that his father had never helped him with his career, unlike their neighbors who assisted their children with their wealth or government connections.

Seeing this irreconcilable conflict escalating, Counselor Lin jumped in with another analysis, suggesting that Zhao's problems resulted from this dysfunctional family relationship. She proposed that the first thing they should do was "to repair the damaged father–son relationship, and make the other family member feel loved and cared for."

Faced with Zhao's continued intransigence and complaints, even the show's host, who normally maintains a neutral and cool stance, lost her cool: "How can you claim that you made sacrifices for the family?" She strongly criticized Zhao for his irresponsible and "unfilial behavior" and "parasitical way of living." Facing such moralistic criticism from all sides, Zhao became deeply emotional, weeping and crying out to his father: "It is you who made me this miserable! Do you realize how much damage you have inflicted on me?"

This emotional outpouring finally softened the father's anger slightly, and he agreed that he would pay off the son's existing debts on condition that the son immediately apply for a proper job and begin working steadily instead of relying on get-rich-quick schemes. Counselor Lin pointed out that Zhao should be truly grateful for his father's expression of family feeling (*qinqing*), and that the father should try to build a healthy relationship with his son from now on. She then encouraged the father to walk through the door into the cube and hug his son who was still sobbing inside. The episode ended with a close-up of the emotional faces of the father and son embracing each other.

There are several observations we can draw from the show's typical subject matter and from our close reading of the above episode. First, although this show resembles the former reality shows on feelings in its central focus on interpersonal conflicts and emotional release, such conflicts are now reframed as a kind of pathology, undesirable behavior that the show aims to "correct" through a therapeutic process. The show thus represents itself as a public counseling service in which viewers can vicariously participate.

Second, psychological terminology based on self-education has become the dominant discourse in managing negative affect in these television shows. Whether addressing Zhao's financial troubles or his family conflict, the professional psychological counselor "diagnoses" the son's irresponsibility as the result of his "childish mentality," and emphasizes the need to develop a healthy and self-disciplined character and family relationship as the foundation for dealing with his problems.

Third, while psychotherapeutic terminology is liberally sprinkled throughout these shows, the actual method of dealing with the interpersonal disputes is much more traditional, involving a high degree of group persuasion, shaming, and social pressure based on fixed moral assumptions. In the episode described above, we see this pressure coming not just from the Psychological Counselor but also from family members, the show's host, and the panel of invited

netizens, all strenuously urging the son to change his attitude. Their core assumption is that filial affection (*xiao*) is a normative moral obligation supported by both Confucian ethics and socialist ideas about the evils of selfish individualism. Zhao's behavior is strongly criticized for being unfilial, and his father's display of affection in agreeing to repay his son's debts is seen as correct because it allows the two sides to reconcile.

Whether this action will really result in the father and son finding individual happiness is not the point. Rather the show constantly emphasizes the importance of yielding individual interests for the sake of collective and social harmony. This kind of group pressure and traditional moral suasion is quite different from the standard psychoanalytic method, but it reflects the basic assumptions of the paternalistic popular media, that people need to be guided toward "correct" moral behavior, and that this is the way to resolve social conflict and bring about a harmonious society.

Magic Cube's focus on psychological discourse reflects a broader promotion of psychoanalysis in China. In fact, most of the guests featured on *Magic Cube* are selected from clients who have visited the Psychological Counseling Studio at East China Normal University, which claims to have over 400 licensed counselors available and offers a toll-free counseling hotline that deals with over 1000 calls per day. The Studio advertises its services by providing guests for various conflict resolution television shows like *Magic Cube* and getting its staff to write regular columns in the city's most popular newspapers, including *Xinmin Evening News* (Huada 2013). Thus the popular media are reflecting and encouraging the emergent psychological counseling movement in China, as if this is the most effective solution for the problems and conflicts facing Chinese people today (Yang 2013; Osnos 2011).

Yet beneath the surface rhetoric of psychology and moral compromise, we can see that cases of so-called domestic conflict and private emotion actually involve many underlying social problems, frequently side effects of frantic economic development. In Zhao's case, these include the extreme difficulty some university graduates face in finding decent employment in such a competitive market; the single-minded pursuit of material success and financial security (by Zhao's father) at the price of living together with his family and bringing up his child; the neglect of moral and ethical values in family and school education, except for outmoded socialist theories that even the teachers no longer believe in; and the general inequity in Chinese society where those with power and wealth can get ahead, and those without are left behind. However, these broader social issues are never directly raised or debated on these shows, and no mention is made of the need for political reforms to address them; instead, Zhao's problem is seen as a purely individual lack of responsibility—he is just a lazy "parent nibbler"—or as evidence of a dysfunctional family. Such problems can be "treated" through psychological counseling or overcome through compromise and reminders about the need for family feelings. In other words, issues that could easily be interpreted as political and social problems requiring difficult reforms by the Chinese leadership are instead re-articulated in these

shows as individual or family dysfunctions, susceptible to quick moral and psychological fixes.

Of course, aside from the issue of political reform, many interpersonal disputes also involve legal issues such as the distribution of property, divorce law, and breach of contract. Recognizing that such disputes cannot be resolved through psychological counseling alone but require expert knowledge of the law, Dragon TV launched another show in 2008, *The New Family Mediator*, specifically aimed at mediating legal disputes. This show also spawned numerous mediation programs on other TV channels, and it is interesting to examine how these shows share many of the characteristics and assumptions of psychological counseling shows, especially the idea that the popular media can channel negative emotions and interpersonal conflicts in a positive direction in the interests of a harmonious society.

The New Family Mediator: China's *Oprah Show*

By the early 2000s, CCP leaders had concluded that litigation in the courts and citizen petitions were imperfect methods for resolving many kinds of social disputes, especially those resulting from the "growing pains" of economic reforms, such as land claims, labor relations disputes, and domestic or family quarrels (Peerenboom and He 2008: 13; Minzner 2011: 947). Therefore, besides initiating a nationwide educational and propaganda campaign to promote a harmonious society, the Party also made a concerted effort to revive mediation practices (Hand 2011). This promotion of mediation was recently given stronger institutional support with the passing of the *PRC People's Mediation Law* in 2010, which sets out the requirements for establishing mediation committees and the procedures for engaging in mediation activities and drafting mediation agreements, and requires local governments to provide adequate funding for the work of mediation committees (Xinhua 2010). The purpose of the new law was clearly stated by Wu Aiying, the Chinese Minister of Justice, when presenting it to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress: "While China is experiencing profound social and economic changes, various kinds of social conflicts are also emerging. … Mediation should be the first line of defence to maintain social stability and promote harmony" (Liang 2010).

Chinese TV producers were not slow to capitalize on this revival of official interest in mediation. From 2008 onwards, several stations embraced the concept of the TV mediation show, seeing this new genre as an excellent way to repackage their talk shows on feelings and fulfill their social responsibility role. In some cases, TV stations even co-produced these shows in collaboration with local courts or procuracies, which added legal authority and an official imprimatur to the decisions made by the mediators on the show.

To show how these TV mediation shows articulate the interests of various social agents, ranging from TV producers to court and Party officials and TV audiences, and how this results in a sometimes uneasy combination of law,

morality, entertainment and politics, we will now analyze *The New Family Mediator*, the first and still most representative of these shows, in more detail.

The New Family Mediator is a reality show, and its "family mediators" (*lao niangjiu*)[5] were selected from real "people's mediators" (*Renmin tiaojieyuan*) working in Shanghai's neighborhood committees. The show also burnished its official credentials by directly collaborating with the Shanghai government's Bureau of Justice (*sifa ju*); and the set was arranged like a mediation room in a court, with disputants on each side and the mediator seated in the center. Real disputes from neighborhood committees all over Shanghai were selected to be resolved on the show.

The typical format of a 40-minute program is as follows. The disputing parties are invited by the female host into the mediation room (TV studio) to sit facing each other, often partly disguising their identities with hats, masks, and sunglasses. Each party recounts their side of the dispute to the host and the mediator. After listening carefully to each side, the mediator steps in and negotiates a settlement between the parties using a mix of legal arguments, moral persuasion, and sheer force of personality.

The most common topics on the show are family disputes, especially those between husbands and wives (usually involving suspected extramarital affairs, financial issues, or child-rearing disputes), and between parents and their grown-up children. My survey of three months of *The New Family Mediator* episodes from July 1 to September 30, 2012, included a total of 45 different cases. Of these, 37 cases dealt with marriage disputes and 18 dealt with disputes between parents and their grown-up children (some of these overlap with the first category, as parents often interfere with their children's marriage decisions). Many of these family disputes also revolve around the unfairness of property distribution among family members, as is clear from the case below. In the sample, 9 out of 45 cases directly involved property disputes, and several others were arguably caused by large families having to live together in the same cramped apartment due to their inability to afford adequate housing. Other less frequent topics included gambling debts or investment scams (4), elder abuse (1), and drug addiction (1).

As for the socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants on *The New Family Mediator*, it is clear from the context of the disputes and the parties' speech and behavior that they are virtually all people from lower socio-economic levels: urban workers, laid-off employees, poor seniors, or migrant workers living temporarily in Shanghai.[6]

The New Family Mediator captured the imaginations and interest of Shanghai audiences, and it soon jumped to the top of the ratings among Shanghai TV shows. Its success was largely due to the skill of one of its mediators, Bai Wanqing. A former Party official from the neighborhood committee of Jing'an District in charge of propaganda/organizational work and seniors' issues, Bai started off as just one of several people's mediators who took turns appearing on the show. She stood out with her quick but penetrating judgments, her no-nonsense attitude, and her authoritative yet

amiable personality. The show increasingly featured her as the main mediator and she soon became an unlikely TV star. To demonstrate Bai Wanqing's approach to disputes and the broader discourse of TV mediation represented by *The New Family Mediator*, I will analyze a domestic dispute case from the show involving the pressing current issue of residential property ownership.

Shanghai has long been notorious for its high cost of living and poor housing conditions, and it is common for several generations of a family to share a single cramped apartment. This already serious situation has been exacerbated by major policy changes and social restructuring over the past decades. A particularly thorny issue has been the return of sent-down young people and their families from rural areas since the late 1970s, which created a whole set of legal and social problems relating to registration re-settlement and property ownership. More recently, housing reform and the demolition of residential houses, together with the arrival of a massive floating population, have led to massive development of the metropolis. The result has been a rapid spike in real estate prices, and a tendency for local people to become obsessed with the issue of finding a decent place to live.

Housing disputes are frequently interwoven with issues relating to parental support, the household registration system (*hukou*), disputes with in-laws, inheritance and estates, and other longstanding grievances. To mediate property disputes, one not only has to be aware of traditional Chinese values and moral beliefs about family relationships, but also to be familiar with the historical and policy changes that have led to the current housing problem in the first place, as well as the relevant laws and regulations that cover the area of the dispute.

On its November 7, 2010 episode, *The New Family Mediator* featured a dispute between two brothers who shared a two-bedroom apartment left to them by their deceased parents.[7] In this family with five grown-up children, the third son, who was divorced with custody of his daughter, lived with the parents in Shanghai, and had contributed a substantial sum when the apartment was first purchased by the parents in 2000. The eldest son, a sent-down youth in the Cultural Revolution, had moved to a town in Zhejiang province with his second wife, but in 2001 he lost his job when his employer, a state-owned company, closed down. His family soon broke up—his wife left him and took their daughter with her. Realizing that his elder brother was on the verge of a mental breakdown, the fourth son brought him back to Shanghai and arranged for him to stay with the parents and the third son.

After the parents died in quick succession, legal ownership of the two-bedroom apartment was divided equally among the five children, but seeing the two brothers' difficult situation, the other children decided not to sell, allowing the two brothers to continue to stay there. However, the living arrangements and domestic dynamics in this shared space changed when the new girlfriend of the third son moved in with her teenage daughter. Soon the couple used the excuse of renovating the apartment for their upcoming wedding to throw out the belongings of the eldest son. When the eldest son persisted in

coming back to sleep there, it led to physical altercations and even police intervention. In fact, one of the rooms that the eldest son used was so badly damaged by his brother that it became uninhabitable.

The mediator Bai Wanqing, after hearing the stories told by the two sides, wasted no time in bluntly telling the third son and his girlfriend that they were wrong to try to force the eldest son to move out: "You don't have the right to do this, because you don't have ownership of the property (*suoyou quan*)." She then clearly stated the legal situation:

> What your parents gave you was the right to use the property (*shiyong quan*), but the name on the real estate certificate is that of your parents. And now [since the parents have died], even your right to use the place is just a generous gift from your other siblings.

In this way, Bai immediately showed the disputing parties how a court would look at the situation if it was a lawsuit.

The offending couple were obviously shocked by her conclusion but apparently still not convinced enough to agree to a reasonable settlement. Seeing this, the show's host, Yang Lei, opened up the viewer call-in line and allowed three viewers to express their "public opinions." They all sympathized with the eldest son and criticized the third son for forgetting the "value of family" and "brotherly love." By this time, the aggressive couple looked defeated and much more willing to compromise in order to settle the dispute.

Bai then proposed two solutions: one was to sell the property and divide the proceeds among the five siblings, which was the formal legal option. The other was to maintain the previous arrangement whereby the two would share the apartment, with the third son's family staying in the larger room and the eldest son in the smaller room. The third son, realizing his disadvantageous legal position, preferred the latter solution, but the eldest son insisted on selling the apartment. Surprisingly, Bai then made it clear that she supported them keeping the apartment rather than selling it. She appealed to the principle of "family feeling" (*qinqing*): "Don't sacrifice family feelings for your individual interest." She reminded the eldest son that if the apartment were sold, the third son, as a low-income worker, could not afford to buy or even rent another place in Shanghai, due to the high living costs there, and the third son and his family would have to migrate somewhere else. She then repeated the moral exhortations of the call-in viewers, praising the other siblings for their generosity in dealing with their parents' inheritance, and reminding the eldest son once again that "*qinqing* is more important than individual interest." Eventually the eldest son accepted this compromise, or "middle way," arrangement, and the episode concluded with the two brothers reluctantly shaking hands.

Clearly, in TV mediation as exemplified by Bai Wanqing, legal or individual rights are not privileged at all. Instead, the mediators must try to satisfy several demands simultaneously. Bai summarizes the principles she follows in

mediating as "three bottom lines": the first is the moral line; the second is the (government) policy line; and the third is the legal line (Bai 2010b). In particular mediators must ensure that their work helps to maintain social stability and build a "harmonious society." To provide a legally based adjudication is not necessarily the primary goal; rather they must attempt to achieve the more difficult task of repairing damaged social relationships and, in some cases, "robbing the rich to feed the poor," thereby soothing the turbulent social emotions of frustration, anger, and resentment among the mass of ordinary citizens. It is in this sense that the TV mediator is praised by the propaganda department of Shanghai Municipality for its multiple "positive functions", including acting as a "psychological consultant, moral educator, legal advisor, and a channel for the release of popular emotions" (Bai 2010a).

Thus, like the psychological counseling shows we discussed earlier, the mediation discourse of *The New Family Mediator* combines several different models of social governance and conflict-resolution: we see the influence of the neighborhood committees and similar institutions that typified the social governance system in socialist China; also traces of the family mediators in traditional Chinese society, based on the Confucian family and clan system of reciprocal relationships; and the most recent overlay of professional legal advice and court adjudication techniques influenced by imported liberal conceptions of individual legal rights and "rule of law."

The success of *The New Family Mediator* and Bai Wanqing's surprising emergence as a grass-roots TV celebrity inspired many other provincial and municipal TV stations to jump on the mediation bandwagon. Similar shows sprouted all over the place, including *The Family Mediator of Qiantang* in Hangzhou (*Qiantang Laoniangjiu*), *The Sincere Female Assistant* in Jilin (*Zhenqing nü bangban*), *The Third Mediation Room* in Beijing (*Disan tiaojie shi*), and *Feelings at Eight O'Clock* in Changsha (*Qinggan badianzhong*). In fact, by early 2011 there were already thirty-eight TV mediation shows being broadcast regularly by thirty-four local TV stations and four provincial satellite networks. And these mediation shows generally seem to do very well in the ratings (Feng 2011).[8]

While there are some format variations and gimmicks that distinguish these mediation shows from each other, they also share many basic features and assumptions. First, most are predominantly oriented toward domestic and neighborhood disputes in their local communities. By focusing on highly specific local issues and neighborhood concerns, they consciously seek to boost their ratings among local audiences. This feature also allows the TV stations to seek the cooperation of various local government bureaus to achieve their "common goal" of "building a harmonious society."

Second, in terms of their mediation techniques, the more recent shows have increasingly emphasized their "modern scientific" approach to mediation, with legal and psychological experts called in to assist in resolving the disputes, in contrast to the earlier emphasis on the mediator's life experience and earthy folk wisdom. Some shows also incorporate psychological games and analysis

to help the participants understand what is really driving their interpersonal conflicts, which adds both modern appeal and an aura of professional credibility to the process.[9]

Third, in order to attract viewers, these mediation shows have clearly borrowed techniques from reality talk shows on feelings to dramatize their presentation of the cases. Perhaps most obvious is the tendency of the show's editors to play up the conflicts between the parties in order to keep viewers glued to their sets. At the start of each episode, and at several points during the show, the editors repeat clips of one or both disputing parties losing their tempers, shouting at their family members, threatening to walk out, bursting into tears, or even kneeling on the ground begging the mediators for help. In this way, we see the "harmonious" ideological message disrupted by the commercial motives of the producers, and the constant repetition of such melodramatic scenes implies that conflict rather than harmony is the main draw of the shows for viewers. Like the psychological counseling shows discussed earlier, mediation shows can thus be seen as thinly disguised transformations of their banned "world of emotion" predecessors.

Fourth, despite their focus on conflict, all these mediation shows contain very strong doses of moral teaching, sometimes directed at the disputing parties and sometimes at the broad mass of viewers. In most cases, morality is expected to trump or at least modify simple legal rights, and participants who selfishly insist on their rights will usually receive a very public dressing-down by one or more observers. Clearly these shows are trying to prove their worth as morally edifying public "edutainment" programs, as opposed to socially divisive, tabloid-style reality shows.

The other interesting aspect of the moral teaching in these shows is its strongly traditional, even Confucian, character. Individualistic insistence on rights and self-interest is discouraged, but in its place we do not see a revival of Communist values; instead there is constant affirmation of "family feeling," "brotherly love," and "filial behavior." We discussed the first two of these "Confucian" values when analyzing the case from *The New Family Mediator*, but the idea of filial behavior also frequently appears in disputes between parents and their grown-up children. The psychological counseling shows also frequently emphasize such traditional family values, as we noted in the case of Zhao Chuan from *Magic Cube of Happiness*.

Finally, law does play an important, if subordinate, role on these mediation shows. Most episodes include discussions of the legal rights of the parties, often with lawyers or legal experts providing opinions on the parties' chances of success in a court of law. Viewers could learn a great deal about current Chinese legal principles relating to contracts, property rights, family law, and wills and estates from watching such mediation shows regularly. Yet generally the law is used either as a stick to encourage both sides to compromise, or as an inferior option when viewed from the perspective of morality and social harmony.

Nevertheless, despite the claims of their producers and sponsors that they are helping to bring about a "harmonious society," it is not clear that TV

mediation shows will provide a better long-term solution for the disputants. The problem is that many such disputes are caused by the unfair allocation of resources in society, and the continuing harmful consequences of unjust past and present government policies. That is why we see so many conflicts between family members, like the two brothers in our case, who are forced to live together in over-cramped conditions because of unaffordable property prices (from which the government and its mainly state-owned developers have been the main beneficiaries), and also because one of the brothers was laid off after the government's "restructuring" of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, which led to the loss of his subsidized housing and the breakdown of his own marriage.

What is the "solution" offered by *The New Family Mediator* in this kind of situation? Simply to tell the elder brother not to insist on his "legal right" to sell the apartment, and to put "family feelings" before "individual interests" for the sake of some abstract ideal of a "harmonious society." Though on the show the brothers shook hands and agreed to accept this compromise, one wonders how long their new-found "harmony" and "family feeling" lasted after they returned to their cramped, stress-filled apartment. In other words, for the disputants, TV mediation can at best only paper over some of the cracks in society with a thin veneer of harmonious rhetoric, and occasionally a minor adjustment of resources to slightly lessen the burdens of the poorest members of society.

Conclusion

The emergence of reality talk shows on feelings in China was at first commercially motivated. With numerous constraints on discussing issues of public concern and social problems, the newly commercialized and self-supporting popular media sought to attract viewers by turning their focus onto ordinary people, especially their interpersonal relationships, emotional problems, and domestic conflicts. From the late-1990s, these provided the raw materials for countless new entertainment talk shows. But in a society like China, where there is little outlet for citizens to vent their grievances through a formal public sphere or political/legal institutions, these new shows inevitably morphed into a forum for the expression of negative emotions and cynicism by a populace disillusioned with constant social and economic instability. And with their ratings on the line, television stations were happy to fan the flames of emotion—sometimes even fabricating conflicts—to hype their shows, boost their revenues, and see off their competitors. One could say that the TV producers were engaged in a kind of affective articulation, in other words encouraging ordinary people to "articulate" their feelings, but without any clear moral purpose.

Yet the visual excesses and overwhelming negativity of these shows led to them being targeted by SARFT, and television stations were forced to instantly turn into cheerleaders for the state's harmonious society and happy

China campaigns. They transformed themselves from instigators of emotional abandon to responsible gatekeepers, managing social and domestic conflicts and instilling positive emotions. At the same time, their producers were keen to maintain their ratings by focusing on real-world problems and addressing viewers' deepest emotional needs and anxieties.

The need to satisfy these different interests has led television producers to a negotiated compromise, exemplified by the proliferation of psychological counseling and mediation shows on Chinese television in recent years. On the one hand, these shows still deal with the kinds of fraught emotional conflicts and interpersonal disputes that were a staple of earlier talk shows about feelings; on the other hand, they are careful to frame or articulate these negative social emotions and conflicts as "mental issues" or "moral errors" of individuals who need to be "treated" or persuaded to do the right thing. They carefully avoid identifying the broader social and political causes of these negative emotions and interpersonal conflicts, as this might open them up to further criticism and restriction by government regulators. Instead, they focus squarely on trying to improve individual and family wellbeing through promoting self-understanding, moral awareness, and traditional values such as filiality and brotherly love. This is a different kind of affective articulation, a channeling of negative emotions and interpersonal conflicts into a healing discourse that attempts to explain and defuse them. In the process, other potential avenues of emotional release, such as social protest and political action, are de-emphasized and intentionally overlooked. In this context, the emergent TV psycho-counseling and mediation programs are not only new manifestations of the longstanding role of TV/media in socialist societies as "supervisors of misconduct and wrongdoing" (Liebman 2011: 169), but also excellent examples of how popular media functions as a form of cultural governance in a post-socialist society.

Having said this, it would be too simplistic to conclude that this shift in television programming is a blunt example of the state exerting its control over the media, an affront to the ideal of media freedom. We need to view these contradictory "images and narratives" against the backdrop of broader social and ideological tensions in contemporary Chinese society. While the constant promotion of harmony and happiness by the media and government may cause people to feel they are being "happified," or forced to be happy (*bei xingfu*), the pursuit of happiness is certainly not just an official concern. For the broader population experiencing these drastic social and economic changes, the conflicts and anxieties are very real, and their desire for happiness is equally real. As we pointed out in the first section of this chapter, surveys have shown that Chinese people's overall sense of wellbeing has not improved along with their relative material prosperity. There is an increasing trend for people to seek alternative paths to happiness, whether religious practices or yoga, psychotherapy or ecological activism, or escaping into a virtual world of online fantasy. Thus while it is true that TV stations were pressured into modifying their entertainment shows by SARFT, the continuing popularity of their psychological counseling and dispute resolution shows suggests that they

are to a certain extent meeting a deeper emotional need of ordinary Chinese viewers.

We therefore see not so much a top-down exercise of government control and suppression of media freedom, but rather a delicate, occasionally shifting, balancing of interests and a complex process of negotiation and compromise among different agents—producers, officials, viewers—each with their own needs and interests. Within this process of compromise, there may even be limited room for TV stations and their viewers to create a public space for expressing their opinions on broader social issues, a phenomenon that we will discuss in the following chapter.

Notes

1 According to *China Economics Weekly* (*Zhongguo jingji zhoukan*) where the results of this survey were published, the research team of "CCTV 2010 Survey of Economic Life" ("CCTV 2010 jingji shenghuo dadiaocha") received 86,000 responses out of 100,000 survey forms distributed all over China during a four year period (2006–9). The research team found that 44.7% of Chinese claim they are happy or very happy, contrasting with only 11.1% who are not happy. It also claimed that the survey covered populations from different areas (104 cities and 300 counties in 31 provinces, with 77.7% from urban areas and 22.3% from rural areas), with different educational backgrounds, ages and income groups. For example, 85% of the respondents were people with annual income under 50,000 yuan, thus the survey was representative of "the average Chinese." See Zhang 2011. Though we need to use this data cautiously in comparison with other surveys, it can indicate how popular opinion is reflected through "official" channels of Chinese researchers and the mainstream media.

2 Some talk shows on feelings were terminated after the notice was issued, including *Human Lives* from Guizhou TV and *Codes of Feelings* (*Qinggan mima*) from Shijiazhuang TV, the first for featuring unhealthy feelings and the second for fabricating stories to attract attention. Anonymous 2009.

3 In 2001, Shanghai TV and Dragon TV merged into the Shanghai Media Group (SMG), which meant that the two stations were no longer competitors.

4 The term "parent nibbler" describes grown-up children who refuse to leave home and get a proper job, instead depending on their parents for financial support. It has become a frequent term of abuse on online forums.

5 The term *laoniangjiu* (which I translate as family mediator, but literally means "old uncle") is a folk dialect word from the Shanghai region which traditionally referred to senior and respected family members who played the role of mediators when family disputes and neighborhood conflicts arose. With the rapid urbanization and disintegration of traditional family structures and neighborhood relationships, one might imagine that this term would have become obsolete. However, the concept of *laoniangjiu* has been revived over the last decade, mainly due to the influence of shows like *The New Family Mediator* and the government's re-emphasis on mediation as a dispute resolution technique.

6 Bai Wanqing also notes that virtually all the participants on *The New Family Mediator* are poor. See Bai 2010b.

7 Episodes were viewed by the author online using the archives of *The New Family Mediator* available on the video syndication website Youku: www.youku.com/.

8 Many of them, such as *The New Family Mediator*, *Gold Medal Mediation* (Jiangxi Satellite TV) and *Xiao Guo Runs Errands* (*Xiao Guo paotui*, on Shanxi TV Science

and Education Channel) are broadcast daily, given primetime slots right before or after the national CCTV Evening News (which is shown on most channels), and then repeated twice each day. According to one estimate, these three shows were watched by 21.15%, 15.10%, and 12.63% of the regular viewing audience, respectively, in 2011. See Feng 2011.

9 For example, both *Gold Medal Mediation* and *The Third Mediation Room* (Beijing TV) have psychologists on their regular expert panels.

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4 *Are You the One?*

The competing public voices of China's post-1980s generation

Ma Nuo did not expect to become notorious, even though she was bold enough to take part in *Are You the One?* (*Feicheng wurao*), a TV dating show launched by Jiangsu Satellite Television (JSTV) in early 2010. During the January 17, 2010 episode, the highly attractive Ma was identified by Zhao Chen, a 23-year-old freelance fashion magazine writer, as his favorite girl. When Zhao asked, "Are you willing to go out riding bicycles with me?" Ma, obviously unimpressed by this shy and slightly eccentric guy, giggled as she blurted out her cutting reply: "I would rather sit crying in a BMW!" Ma's offhand comment and shockingly materialistic attitude touched a raw nerve with younger male viewers, and she immediately became the most controversial figure on the show.

In March 2010, when Liu Yunchao, a typical "second generation rich kid" (*fu erdai*), presented himself to the female contestants, the enormous sum of six million yuan was flashed on a big screen as an estimate of his personal fortune. Liu set his sights on the infamous Ma Nuo, casually mentioning that he had three luxury racing cars, and he was currently customizing a BMW. He invited Ma to come and "cry in my BMW"! His shameless flaunting of his wealth caused another firestorm of debate among netizens, and reopened the wound caused by Ma's caustic BMW remark.

The Ma Nuo controversy came to a head on April 3, when a tough-looking male contestant from Shanghai, Luo Lei, took the stage. His main attack came soon after the screening of his second self-introductory video clip, and was aimed directly at Ma Nuo:

> "I am here for those netizens who go online everyday just to write a couple of lines of criticism despite the fact that they are exhausted after a full day's work. Have you ever thought of them? Now I have some words for you, Ma Nuo. You shouldn't stay on this show any longer because nobody can satisfy your picky demands. You should leave so there is more space for people who are sincere about looking for their other half. … The program that really suits you is a beauty pageant where all the new millionaires will be present. You won't need to worry about crying in a BMW; you could even have a runny nose in a Porsche!"

> "I am not that kind of person," Ma Nuo, blurted out in a trembling voice, then turned away from the podium and stumbled off the stage.

This most dramatic episode of the show went viral and was especially popular among the young netizens Luo claimed to represent. On Baidu's *Are You the One?* net bar in the following days, comments were posted at a rate of 500 per minute, reaching over 40,000 posts each day. A single thread "Do you support Luo Lei or sympathize with Ma Nuo?" attracted 26,111 posts (Baidu 2010). There was a range of opinions: some claimed that Ma deserved what she got for being so contemptuous and materialistic, while others felt she was at least honest and that her materialistic attitude only reflected the dominant values of society. Some blamed Luo Lei for being self-righteous and misogynist, while others praised him as a hero avenging all males for their humiliations at the hands of these demanding women. Some claimed it was all just a joke, a cynical way for Luo to stage a show to promote his own career, while still others suspected it was a scripted drama staged by the TV producers to boost the show's ratings.

Thanks to episodes that featured Ma Nuo and other sharp-tongued women, *Are You the One?* soon became the most controversial reality TV show in China, following its launch in January 2010. With its unusual format of twenty-four fashionably dressed, attractive young women standing behind a string of podiums trying to decide, based on the presentation and responses of a single male contestant, whether they wanted to become his "girlfriend," as well as the intrusive and ego-deflating questions thrown at the male contestants, and most of all, the heated debates on various social topics that the show stimulated, both onstage and online, it remained for some time at the top of national TV ratings and inspired a string of copycat shows by other provincial satellite TV channels.[1] Enthusiastic contestants from all over China and even a few foreigners tried their luck at finding a romantic partner on the show. In four months, the number of applications to compete on the show exceeded 170,000, and JSTV had to set up four offices in different cities to process all the enthusiastic candidates (Feichengwurao 2010).

But after JSTV successfully fought off its competitors and began to sell space to major advertisers, exploiting the market value of its enormous audience, the bright flame of the dating show just as quickly appeared to burn itself out. In mid-June 2010 it was one of the main targets of a new notice from the State Administration for Film, Radio and Television (SARFT, June 9, 2010), which criticized the show for promoting immoral people and unhealthy ideas. Its very existence was threatened. CCTV also attacked the program and similar dating shows on its *News Network* (*Xinwen lianbo*, June 12) and on the current affairs program *Investigative Focus* (*Jiaodian fangtan*, June 11) with Ma Nuo's escapade repeatedly shown on screen as a negative example. Only a quick and strategic response from JSTV coupled with the show's enormous popularity ultimately saved the day, and the show—in modified form—remains one of China's most popular television spectacles.

Why is *Are You the One?* so popular, or from the point of view of SARFT so potentially "harmful"? How does China's post-1980s generation of young adults use this show to articulate their sometimes conflicting aspirations and anxieties about the life they want to live in the face of confusing political, economic, and cultural transformations? And how should we evaluate the significance of the TV show and its associated internet sites and fan clubs in engaging viewers to think about civic values and exercise citizenship in their everyday lives?

In this chapter, I examine the public forum that has emerged around *Are You the One?* placing it within the larger context of China's new media culture and its changing formats and functions in a society where social values are in transition and constantly under challenge. Through an analysis of the issues and debates uttered on the stage and in heated online audience responses among internet fan communities, I will provide empirical evidence for a new form of public space opened up by such entertainment and popular media shows, and will evaluate the appropriateness of Western-originating critical concepts such as "cultural public sphere" (McGuigan 2010) and "lifestyle politics" (Bennett 2003, 2004) for analyzing this emergent cultural phenomenon.[2]

The localization of an international dating show for China's post-1980s generation

Dating shows have been a feature of Chinese television since the late 1990s launch of Hunan Satellite TV's *Date with a Rose* (*Meigui zhi yue*, 1998); and global TV audiences will recognize the twenty-four women and one man formula of *Are You the One?* as an appropriation of the international dating show *Take Me Out*, developed by Fremantle Media based in London. But what really distinguishes *Are You the One?* from its Chinese and foreign models is the way it encourages all the participants to express their candid ideas on what qualities they are looking for in an ideal life partner and their aspirations for a good life more generally. In the quick and often sharp exchanges between the participants and the hosts, we find that they are taking the show much more seriously than might be expected from such a light entertainment genre.

To understand this level of seriousness, we have to place matchmaking shows in the social context of the emergence of so-called "leftover (unmarried) women and men" (*shengnan*/*shengnü*) in China. Intense career pressure, increased social mobility, and loosened social bonds have caused China's urban generation to experience to a heightened degree the problem found in many international urban environments. Young people are too busy making a living to find a partner, and contemporary urban life patterns have generated few convenient channels for meeting suitable people. Further, given the fact that China's younger generation is a product of the one-child policy, their marriages have become matters of great import and urgency to their families and to society more broadly. According to Tian Fanjiang, the head of a

matchmaking website that has developed a partner relationship with *Are You the One?* "There are 180 million single people in China … They and their parents are very worried about the marriage problem" (MacLeod 2010).

Thus, part of the immense appeal of this "matchmaking service show" lies in its professed goal of helping young contestants meet their life partner. And the show's enormous viewership ensures that even those male contestants who are rejected by all the females on the show will generally be deluged with online offers of dates from female viewers who watched and then contacted them using the dedicated email address posted at the end of each episode.

But according to its producers, the show has an additional agenda that adds to its serious appeal: to re-engage young urban viewers, who constitute an important demographic as consumers of popular culture but increasingly devote their time to new media instead of television, through opening up a public space for them. Wang Gang, the producer of *Are You the One?* noted that when the show was first conceived, it was intended

> not to be a pure dating or entertainment program, but to concern itself with various hot button topics, including housing issues, children, in-law relationships, income, careers, and DINKs (double income no kids), all the social issues that emerge during the dating process.
>
> Mei 2010

Wang also noted that when his team carried out initial research for the proposed show, they found that "there was no vehicle offered in the mainstream media for the post-1980s generation to freely express its ideas about love, family and marriage" (Mei 2010).

Representing some 200 million Chinese born between 1980 and 1989, and another 140 million who were born after 1990, together constituting nearly 30% of the entire population, the post-1980s and post-1990s generations are the new face of post-socialist China, the beneficiaries of Deng Xiaoping's vision of economic reform and opening to the world. Cultivated in a market economy, they grew up in a period when politics were no longer primary and resources were less scarce than before, and they are the first generations to openly embrace materialism and the unabashed pursuit of wealth, as well as the most active consumers of domestic and global goods. At the same time, with the opening up of China and increasing globalization, along with the impact of the one-child policy, an individualistic attitude has developed among these younger people, not so much revealed through political expression but rather through their lifestyle choices, attitudes towards work, and personal expression. As the first generation to grow up during China's re-emergence into the global economic and political order, they tend towards nationalism and patriotism; yet through modern technology and increasing contact with the outside world as immigrants, foreign students, and media consumers, they have a more cosmopolitan, open appearance and have received a lot more material benefits from globalization than previous generations. They differ

from their parents, most of whom were born in the 1950s and early 1960s and experienced the bitter persecutions of the Cultural Revolution. They also differ from people in their late thirties and forties who still remember the privations of their childhood and the brief period of enlightenment and idealism before 1989. Because of this generation gap, they find they have little to inherit spiritually from their parents and grandparents (Fallows 2011). They must search for new values and moral meanings through "competing and conflicting influences" in an increasingly pluralized society (Rosen 2010: 161).

It could then be argued that *Are You the One?* is framed as a post-1980s generation coming-of-age ritual. In other words, by opening up a space for these young people to express themselves before a broad national public, the show acts not only as a practical way for contestants to find a partner and proclaim their adulthood, but also as a symbolic stage for them to articulate their personal values and beliefs and to debate these values with their own generation and others.

JSTV's attempt to take *Are You the One?* beyond superficial entertainment and engage with deeper "hot button" social issues is reflected in its choice of co-hosts. In contrast to Paddy McGuinness of the British show *Take Me Out*, a comedian whose joking around encourages lighthearted banter among the contestants, the two initial co-hosts of the Chinese program, Meng Fei and Le Jia, were specifically chosen for their weighty professional backgrounds. Bald, warm-hearted "brother Meng" established his reputation as an anchor and reporter for *Just in Nanjing* (*Nanjing Lingjuli*), a local news and current affairs program on Jiangsu TV. He proved himself to be a knowledgeable commentator and a serious journalist of moral integrity. In *Are You the One?* he encourages the contestants to discuss social issues linked to their self-presentations, while his frequently inserted personal opinions add social relevance to seemingly trivial topics. At the same time, his self-deprecating humor and mature, balanced tone help the contestants relax and defuse some of the tense arguments that break out among them.

Meng is backed up by his equally bald co-host Le Jia, a psychology consultant who is supposed to give character analysis and advice to contestants about how to handle their emotional problems. During his initial appearances, Le seemed sharp and ruthless, never afraid to give the more outspoken contestants a good dressing-down for their ridiculous prejudices. But over time, Le proved to be a sensitive judge of character, able to release his private emotions and share his own personal experiences with contestants. These two hosts, who clearly have real affection and respect for each other, create a complementary environment of compassionate, paternalistic concern and psychological/moral guidance for the contestants and, by extension, for the viewers. At the same time, they are quick to spot opportunities to shift the focus to broader social controversies that often surface during the show.

One final feature that helped *Are You the One?* become a potential site for public debate, as demonstrated by the Ma Nuo controversy, is the enormous communicative network that developed around the show, mainly via social

media and internet fan sites. In its frantic search for urban youth, JSTV made sure that it was well connected with new social media. To engage its targeted post-1980s audience, at the outset *Are You the One?* set up an online registration function and formed alliances with several online matchmaking websites including Shiji Jiayuan and Baihe Net to solicit contestants and assist in promotional efforts. Its producers also exploited the huge potential online viewership by making every episode of the program available in archives on the official website of JSTV or on You Ku, China's biggest digital video storage site. This made it very easy for viewers to share the shows with their virtual friends through instant messaging (IM) and social network services (SNS). And through Twitter feeds and personal blogs, viewers' comments about the show were immediately distributed to hundreds, even thousands, of potential readers.

This kind of interactive viewing of television shows (including soap operas) is particularly common among students and young professionals, who by 2009 made up the two largest groups of the 124 million users of social network services in China, constituting 50.3% and 31.1% of the total, respectively (CNNIC 2009). The interactive features provided by the internet have resulted in an enormous proliferation of fan websites, discussion lists, and personal blogs for various shows, and have created new forms of social interaction about and around media texts in a way (instant and multi-directed) not seen in conventional print and electronic media.

Several unofficial virtual chat rooms were set up by fans of *Are You the One?* on popular search engines such as Baidu and Tengxun, but the show's producers also actively cultivated online debates, social media, and mobile communications to keep viewers involved and engaged between episodes. The show reached out to online audiences by setting up its own official website listing all the personal information of the contestants, providing contact information and video clips of them, and creating a discussion forum for visitors to express their opinions about issues raised on the show. And the show's hosts regularly participated in the forum.

Popular topics for comments on these various official and unofficial online sites include positive and negative opinions about the participants, analysis of the reasons for male contestant failure or success, and speculation about ways to be invited on the show. But it is clear that for many netizens, the virtual community surrounding the program functions as an invaluable classroom for learning about how to present themselves successfully in public and as a site for discussion of social issues that arise from the on-air exchanges among the show's participants.

The "materialism" debate and survival anxieties of the post-1980s generation

During the first few months of the show, the topic that caused the most controversy among viewers was the extreme materialistic outlook of many

participants. The show seemed to be parading a string of "material girls" (*baijin nu*)—women who openly expressed their contempt for losers and their desire to find a wealthy man. Besides the Ma Nuo incident mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there was Zhu Zhenfang, a migrant office worker in Wenzhou, who made it clear that men who wanted to date her must have an income of at least 200,000 yuan a month (far higher than the average provincial-city monthly salary of about 2,000 yuan). She also frequently spouted outrageous comments when rejecting male contestants, such as "I didn't smell a luxurious mansion on him!" There was also Yu Xia, who called herself a "three-good female" (*sanhao nusheng*)—good figure, good style, and good character—and she claimed to be looking for a "man with the four haves" (*siyou nanren*)—good looks, quality, money, and assets.

The naked materialism proclaimed by these girls in seeking their ideal partner was also reflected in the way that male contestants were presented. The show's producers would help each hopeful male create a series of self-introduction videos, which were shown to the female contestants and viewers in several stages. Particular emphasis was given to their careers and financial situation, with their current job and monthly income highlighted on the screen, along with details about whether they owned a car or home. The central attention given to financial success implied that masculinity was associated with career achievements, especially in business, and that a man's ability to achieve material success was one of the most important factors in winning the heart of the "ideal woman."

Doubtless this staging of materialist values and the outrageous comments from some of the participants were partly hyperbolic gimmicks, designed to create controversy, attract viewers, and pump up the ratings for this new show, as many viewers pointed out online. But if everyone knew that it was "just a show," why did the comments from Ma Nuo and others strike such a raw nerve among young viewers and generate such heated online debates among netizens? A good example of the popular uproar elicited by the show involves Zhu Zhenfang, who was quickly punished by netizens determined to locate her personal information and to harass her by sending hostile and insulting messages to her place of work. As a result, Zhu had to quit the show to avoid losing her job.

To understand the overwhelming emotional reaction and the intensive debate around materialism in *Are You the One?* it is useful to take a broader look at the dreams and current predicaments of the post-1980s generation.

As mentioned above, China's post-1980s and post-1990s generations are millennium youth who have grown up constantly exposed to contradictory values, and their difficult search for beliefs, values, and identity has been further complicated by the changing social environment around them. In the past three decades, China has witnessed "the largest and most rapid development of a middle class in human history" (Rosen 2013), and urban youth have become the main constituting force and potential members of this growing social class. As their parents' only hope for a successful family future, post-1980s

and post-1990s children have been brought up to prove themselves through individual success, especially in material terms, and they are better equipped to do so through their modern education. Moreover, living in this increasingly competitive, market-based society, they face great peer pressure to avoid being left behind in the rat race.

However, while the post-1980s generation represents an unprecedented force in the individual pursuit of wealth and success in China, recent social developments have made it harder and harder for them to attain their middle-class dreams. In such a highly populated society with limited resources and serious corruption problems, young people without connections or money struggle just to survive. Typical issues include the high cost of education and health care, difficulty finding secure jobs, and booming house prices in the major cities where most opportunities are found. This undesirable life environment is made harsher by increasingly unequal access to resources and opportunities due to manipulation by power and money interests. The lack of white-collar jobs and high living costs are particularly severe in the major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The number of college graduates multiplied eightfold from 830,000 in 1998 to 6.8 million in 2012, but the number of well-paid jobs hasn't kept pace. In fact, the largest growth in China is still in industrial blue-collar sectors like manufacturing, export, and construction (Kisselmann 2013). Thus in the last decade, increasing numbers of college graduates have found themselves struggling in underpaid temporary jobs and living in cramped accommodation at the far edges of cities, becoming a socially disadvantaged group.

Huang Hung, a Chinese media commentator, encapsulated the dreams and bitter frustrations of the post-1980s generation in an opinion piece:

> Then there is the newly discovered "I am an underdog after all" sentiment of Chinese who were born in the 1980s. This is our first single-child generation to enter the work force. They have grown up with dreams of being the next tycoon or Internet guru. But for the past 10 years, the majority of them have been stuck in cubicles pushing paper. They are all broken dreams, clipped wings and wounded egos.
>
> Hung 2010

Such anxiety over survival and status have even introduced a new set of terms to the cultural lexicon with a bitter, self-debasing tone, and a weary sense of injustice and unfairness, such as "ant tribe" (*yizu*) and "house slave" (*fangnu*).[3]

These issues facing the post-1980s generation are vividly illustrated by two TV dramas that have gained extreme popularity and become hot topics of discussion among younger viewers in recent years. The first was *Struggle* (*Fendou*, 2007), which depicts a group of recently graduated classmates who must find their place and establish their careers in the competitive Chinese market economy. As this drama demonstrates, unlike their parents' or grandparents' generation, the "struggle" of the post-1980s generation is a highly

individualistic enterprise aimed at improving individual "quality" (*suzhi*), seeking self-optimization, and gaining material rewards. Intriguingly, the maturing process of the young male protagonist, who also happens to win the heart of the most beautiful woman, is depicted also as a "struggle" to choose between his two fathers. One (the biological father) is a wealthy multinational capitalist, a returned Chinese–American who invests in China's booming real estate development. The other (his stepfather) is an idealistic Party member who is an uncorrupted local official in charge of city planning and development. This ironic plot line glaringly encapsulates the mixed emotions felt by China's younger generation during the current transformation, which awkwardly attempts to balance socialist and neoliberal imperatives.

The second TV drama, *Narrow Dwelling* (*Woju*, 2009), depicts the disillusionment and despair of the young urban middle class through the experiences of two sisters who adopt contrasting strategies as they settle in a big city. The older sister works extra hours and saves every penny to gradually create a better life for herself through her own painstaking efforts, a typical "house slave." But the younger sister decides to take a short cut by becoming the mistress of a rich and powerful official who gives her an apartment and numerous other expensive gifts. The younger sister's abandonment of her boyfriend for an older, richer, more powerful (and of course corrupt) man evoked a heated online debate among viewers. The discussion reflected the constant fear of many young men: without a certain level of wealth and possessions, they will never be able to attract a suitable wife. As one viewer of *Narrow Dwelling* put it: "Society will not force you to succeed, but it will tell you clearly what it is like to be a failure" (Bai 2013).[4] This pressure to "succeed" is a real threat to the sense of masculinity and adulthood of many young Chinese men. It is a society in which financial inequality and even sexual frustration seem directly linked to poor family backgrounds, undesirable birthplaces, and age; a place where the disadvantaged simply cannot compete with corrupt officials, rich entrepreneurs and their "official kids," and "rich kids" (*guan erdai; fu erdai*).

Seen in this light, we can better understand how Chinese popular TV shows like *Are You the One?* reflect the contradictory discourse among Chinese youth. Indeed the current generation of aspiring middle-class youth is experiencing a sense of inner conflict that connects two powerful interlocking emotions—a desire for the kind of affluent life they see or imagine others to be leading, and a fear of losing everything in the extremely competitive social environment that China has become. More often than not the frustration of young Chinese males is directed at the objects of their desire—materialistic young women who ignore them and instead use their looks and charm to attract richer men and to take a short cut to wealth and fame.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that the comments by Ma Nuo and other female contestants and the relentless focus of *Are You the One?* on the income and material assets of male contestants would lead to an extreme affective response by outraged netizens and ultimately to Luo Lei's public

attack on Ma Nuo. Perhaps accidentally, the show turned into a public sphere: an outlet for a large group of young viewers to publicly voice their frustrations about the contradictions and unfairness of the current social order.

Competing voices: the lifestyle politics of the post-1980s generation

The initial episodes of *Are You the One?* entailed an exaggerated focus on shameless materialism and tended to fan the flames of young viewers' emotions. This led to heated debates online and in the media, which in turn drew the skeptical attention of official censors. In June 2010, SARFT issued a "Notice on Further Regulation of TV Programs about Marriage, Love and Friendship" to several TV stations, including JSTV, criticizing the unhealthy tendencies of dating shows and setting out detailed restrictions on their content:

> Such programs are currently dominated by models, actors, and rich young people. They should broaden the range of their contestants. Controversial public figures who are morally suspect and have alternative values and unorthodox views about marriage should not be invited to participate. These programs cannot be broadcast live, and [producers] must ensure they comply with this regulation and delete any problematic content and incorrect points of view.
>
> SARFT 2010

Are You the One? was now facing a crisis. The show was temporarily halted and JSTV had to find a quick solution in order to avoid a cancellation disaster—a fate that befell many reality shows that had pushed the envelope too far in the last ten years, as noted in the previous chapter.[5]

JSTV's response to SARFT was compliant yet strategic. Changes were made to the contestant line up, with some of the sharper tongued women removed or edited out of recorded shows. The content of the men's self-introductions was adjusted: most noticeably, the videos no longer displayed the personal income of male contestants. And the show invited the participation of a much greater variety of men and women representing a broader range of career paths. They even staged two special programs on July 18 and August 1, 2010, in which all contestants, male and female, were migrant workers. This was to showcase the program's "media responsibility" (*meiti zeren*), since migrant workers often find it particularly difficult to meet life partners. The most inventive modification of the show's format was to recruit a female professor from the Jiangsu Provincial Party School to sit alongside Le Jia and function as an additional psychological advisor and commentator. Her approachable manner and common-sense perspective helped to balance the occasional sharpness and emotional extravagance of Le Jia, and her Party School background made her an ideal establishment figure, someone who could "supervise" content and demonstrate the "sincerity" of the TV station.

With all these format and content adjustments and promises to do better, *Are You the One?* obtained permission to continue broadcasting and has maintained its top spot in the ratings. Indeed, despite toning down some of its controversial content, *Are You the One?* has managed to further develop its basic function as an "intimate public forum," and its "lifestyle discourse" has continued to engage legions of young viewers and evoked myriads of responses online and elsewhere. The show has become a curious hybrid of popular entertainment, affective articulation of debates about core civic values, and incisive social commentary.

One distinctive example of the show's public forum role is a recurring debate about the relationship between contemporary lifestyles and environmental awareness. Most contestants on *Are You the One?* display little overt concern for the environment. But there have been several conspicuous exceptions involving male contestants who enthusiastically embraced a "green" and sustainable lifestyle. The reaction of many female contestants to these "exceptional" men demonstrates a dominant assumption of the post-1980s generation in China: environmental issues are not central concerns in their lives. Contestant reactions also show that there is a great deal of ignorance about such issues among younger Chinese. The fact that the show consistently gives these "environmental boys" plenty of time to explain their alternative viewpoint indicates that the program's producers and hosts are eager to promote a more mature and socially aware outlook on the issue.

The first environmental enthusiast to appear was a British contestant with the Chinese name Wang Doufu (May 3, 2010). Though good-looking and personable with relatively fluent Chinese language skills, "Wang Doufu" was rejected by many female contestants when he declared his monthly income to be only a few hundred yuan (he was obviously a foreign student on a small stipend). Finally, all the remaining lights went off when he said that his hobby was recycling abandoned objects that he found on the street. The host, Meng Fei, was charmed by the young British man and gave him a chance to explain why he used recycled objects. "Wang" said these objects could be given a new lease on life and would not be wasted. It was not good for the environment to mindlessly throw things away. When Meng Fei asked the contestant what his parents did for a living, "Wang" replied that his mother was an artist and his father was an investment banker. "In other words, your family is not short of money?" Meng added. By making sure that these points were clarified, Meng was emphasizing that the environmental issue was one which people should take more seriously and that this was a positive decision made by a thoughtful young man about recycling and avoiding pollution. It was not a sign of poverty, contrary to what most of the female contestants seemed to assume.

This emphasis on sustainability was strongly reinforced in a subsequent episode (October 3, 2010) when an intriguing male contestant appeared on stage. Lu Hongyi was Chinese, but had spent some of his childhood in the US and had graduated from Harvard Law School. He had worked in an American law firm for a few years, but then became highly committed to the

environmental movement and gave up his secure job to return to China to work for an NGO dedicated to improving environmental awareness in China. He was a very active person and enjoyed riding a bike, as it was not only healthy but also fit with his "low-carbon" lifestyle. This was the reason he did not own a car. He also mentioned several other ways that he tried to reduce his "carbon footprint," including the rather radical suggestion that he did not want to father any children because the world population is already too large. Instead he wanted to adopt one or more abandoned children and give them a loving family.

One imagines that many women would be bowled over by this brilliant, articulate, decent-looking young man with his lofty ideals. Once again Meng Fei gave him plenty of time to state his views and highly praised his idealism and his call for more people to dedicate themselves to solving China's serious environmental problems. But most of the questions from female contestants focused on material issues. For example, one asked how he would support his family in what she assumed was his low-paying volunteer job. Another contestant asked if he would be willing to reconsider his decision not to father children.

While Lu Hongyi did better than "Wang Doufu," reaching the final stages and selecting one woman as his date, it is surprising how many of the female contestants rejected him after finding out about his environmental lifestyle, despite his apparently excellent personal attributes. However, following this episode a major debate broke out on the internet and many viewers of the show were obviously impressed by Lu's willingness to give up a high paying job to work for an NGO and his commitment to improving China's natural environment. For example, a Chinese search on Google of the phrase "Feicheng wurao, Lu Hongyi" generated 32,700 items related to this episode, many of which are discussions by fans praising Lu's admirable character and environmental awareness.

During the July 2, 2011 episode, the environmental issue once more took center stage when Wang Sheng appeared on the show. He was an environmental inspector whose job was to test waterways for industrial and other types of pollution. But his "green" attitudes were not just restricted to his job. He declared that he wanted to devote his whole life to environmental sustainability, and while he may have been looking for a life partner on the show, in fact he spent much of his video segments and self-introduction (encouraged by Meng Fei and the other two hosts, of course) suggesting methods that people can use to reduce pollution and emissions, such as recycling old batteries and picking up litter. In his first video, he explained that he would regularly pick up trash dropped by other people and put it in litter bins, and the video showed him doing this and using a plastic bag to pick up dog poop left by someone else's dog. One female contestant was obviously disgusted. She said she could not stand her boyfriend picking up dog poop because people would look down on them. She turned off her light. Meng Fei cuttingly asked the woman: "If you saw someone who is not your boyfriend disposing of dog

poop, would you look up to them?" The woman said she would, but not if it was her boyfriend. Meng Fei then concluded the discussion by saying that she was entitled to have such a muddled opinion, but that he was also entitled to look down on her for having such an opinion. Though only one female contestant expressed her opinion so directly, all the others soon turned off their lights, and Wang went off without a date. The general assumption among the show's contestants seemed to be that environmental awareness and commitment is a very good thing in theory, but if it requires a real change of attitude and lifestyle, then it is not something they want to bother with.

One could argue that in encouraging the show's contestants to promote environmental awareness, *Are You the One?* is simply following current Chinese government policy. And it is certainly true that particularly since its run-in with the official censors at SARFT, the program must continually show that it is playing a positive role in promoting "healthy," socially responsible values, and its hosts must make it crystal clear where they stand. Yet such a criticism would be unfair because some discussions of this issue (including the Wang Doufu episode) were broadcast before the censors became involved in June 2010. Second, in terms of the format, two sides of the debate are always presented and the hosts do give the female contestants who are not impressed with environmental activists the opportunity to explain why they opt to reject them. In some cases their doubts may be legitimate. For example, it is relevant to ask how an environmental activist might support his family if he is not getting any income from a volunteer position. This is one reason why the discussion of such social issues on *Are You the One?* can be so vivid and engaging: each issue has at least two sides and we see real people (with whom viewers can identify) taking both sides of the issue and justifying their decisions. The other important difference that sets the program apart from government propaganda is the debates about the show's content that continue on various online forums. These are less closely monitored and therefore much less likely to be influenced by the official viewpoints embraced by the show's hosts.

Another important feature that helps *Are You the One?* generate open and productive public discourse is its intentional recruitment of non-Chinese contestants. These have included people from Korea, America, Great Britain, Vietnam, Russia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Even more common is the participation of Chinese contestants who have spent years working or studying abroad, the so-called "overseas returnees" (*haigui*). In fact, in more recent programs, *Are You the One?* went so far as to produce special programs on location in eight different countries for Chinese contestants who live in Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Europe. These contestants often have ideas and values that viewers consider unusual or alternative, and in some cases superior, to what they see as mainstream Chinese values. Their comments provide many fruitful opportunities for discussion among the show's contestants and hosts and among online fan groups. They force Chinese viewers to confront their own entrenched worldviews and value systems, and to consider life from a fresh perspective.

This brings to mind Lu Hongyi, the Harvard Law School graduate who returned to China to join an environmental NGO. Many of the online comments about Lu compared his "socially responsible" outlook to the views of another male contestant on the show, Zhang Fan, who graduated from one of China's top medical schools, but who was mainly concerned with getting ahead in his job and seemed to have little awareness of broader social issues. Netizens debated whether this was due to the superior moral education provided by American universities, or was a problem associated with the materialistic worldview of Chinese society as a whole.[6]

Yet it was not until another overseas returnee, An Tian, appeared on the show on March 26, 2011, that this particular online debate really exploded. At first An appeared to be a buffoon, making funny faces and joking as he walked on the stage. Some female contestants were critical of his lack of "seriousness" and "respect." But then they found out he had an undergraduate degree from Harvard, an MA from Oxford, and was finishing a Ph.D. at Berkeley, and that he had returned to China to contribute to society by researching agricultural economics. Immediately those who had kept their lights on (21 of 24 women) became highly interested, though still suspicious of his "eccentricity."

But the true drama did not play out until the final moments of the show. Two willing female contestants remained in play and An was given an opportunity to ask them a final question before making his choice. He asked: "If it happened that you won US$10 million in a lottery, how would you choose to spend the money?" Suddenly it was clear that despite his joking around, An was very serious about testing the values of the woman who might become his life partner. The first contestant said that it would not change her life at all; she would just continue to buy things based on necessity. The second contestant gave a slightly more imaginative answer, saying that she would use the money to make her mother happy and her mother would not have to work anymore. But An Tian was not satisfied with these responses. He explained to Meng Fei that he would have suggested setting up some kind of foundation and giving the money to a worthy cause like orphans or education, rather than just spending it on themselves and their families. "Maybe if it was just $1 million, you could spend it on yourself, to buy a house, car, etc., but $10 million is such a lot of money! … We have to think about serving the people." He decided not to choose either of the women, and left the stage alone. Backstage, he explained to the camera that he was looking for a woman with a vision similar to his own, in other words, someone who wanted to give back to society.

This incident triggered an unprecedented surge of responses by fans and other commentators, with over 700,000 posts on the topic over the next few weeks. The online debate was then picked up by the official media, with various newspapers reporting on the incident and adding their own editorial commentary. The main thrust of the debate revolved around the question of whether foreign values were superior to Chinese values because they supposedly led to more socially responsible people who really care about giving back to society

("serving the people" or *wei renmin fuwu*, as An Tian put it, echoing the Communist ideal), as opposed to contemporary Chinese values that stress financial benefit (or "serving the people's currency," *wei renminbi fuwu*, as one wag put it). Some educators also reflected on what had been lost from China's current education system, despite the fact that people still pay lip service to lofty socialist slogans.[7]

The An Tian incident is perhaps the clearest example of how *Are You the One?* facilitates public debate on serious social issues through its dating show format, yet it is the deep social emotion that it evokes and restless questioning by young people online regarding the moral uncertainties and social problems in a transitional society that turned this entertainment show into a true public arena.

Conclusion

The debates surrounding *Are You the One?* clearly display the enthusiasm of the post-1980s generation for vocalizing a diverse range of opinions. In turn, these competing voices contribute to a public discourse on lifestyle choices as important aspects of self-identity and social responsibility. In this process, passively associated networks of people online and using social media become active public citizens raising and debating some of the most pressing social and emotional issues that deeply concern restless Chinese youth today.

What, then, can we learn about Chinese media and society from such entertainment shows? The popularity of *Are You the One?* and the online debates it evokes point to an understudied yet crucial phenomenon in Chinese media. With the growth in media commercialization and a corresponding shift in emphasis from news to entertainment, "the responsibility of the media for informing, educating and providing moral guidance to Chinese citizens is now increasingly being fulfilled by entertainment programs produced at the local and provincial levels" (Sun 2012). In the case of *Are You the One?* it facilitates an affective articulation among China's youth and rising middle class, allowing them to debate consumerism, individual success, quality of life issues, and nationalism. Because of the far-reaching influence and broad popular appeal of such shows, we should give greater weight to the public space created by them in our efforts to understand public discourse and social emotion in contemporary China.

It may seem strange to claim that a dating show like *Are You the One?* has a major influence on public discussions of serious social issues like materialism, environmental issues, and the Chinese education system. But this results from a confluence of several factors, including, (1) the willingness of the show's producers and co-hosts to encourage detailed discussion of serious social issues that emerge during the dating process and the show's conscious selection of some particularly outspoken contestants and hot button topics; (2) the willingness of both male and female contestants to talk about such issues and express their frank opinions in public, something that older people may not

be so keen to do; (3) the extremely rapid development of the internet and other social media over the past few years (especially among the target audience for the show) and the impressive popularity of authorised and unofficial online netizen fan clubs and bulletin boards that allow the discussion of issues to continue after each episode is broadcast. This practice is also facilitated by the availability of all episodes online where they can be viewed and exchanged among friends.

Perhaps the most crucial factor behind the show's impact is the real thirst among the restless and self-contradictory young people in China today for public debate and discussion of issues that deeply concern their lives, accompanied by the "vanishingly small outlets for them to seek redress on the issues they care about" (Rosen 2013). This lack of available public forums is not only due to restrictions on civil society organizations and state control of official media, but also due to young people's skepticism about the value of conventional media and political involvement. And while the internet does allow people more freedom to debate social issues without interference, such debates have tended to be dispersed over many unrelated sites and have had little impact beyond a small group of netizens. *Are You the One?* has provided a focal point for many of these debates by linking them with dating and romance, a topic that has a strong emotional appeal to almost all young people (and to their parents and grandparents!) and thereby creates a central forum involving huge numbers of contestants (and viewers) in which discussions of social issues can become broadly meaningful and influential. In fact, some issues that were raised on *Are You the One?* generated so much interest and emotional discussion among viewers that they began to shape national public discourse in the official media, as witnessed in the An Tian incident.

It is in this sense that *Are You the One?* has articulated a cultural public sphere for debating competing values in contemporary Chinese society through affective engagement. Certainly, this cultural public sphere is limited and is yet to develop its full potential, since the show would immediately be censored if it strayed over the line that separates legitimate discussion of social issues from challenges to the political status quo. Furthermore, it is not the case that all interactions among contestants and netizens constitute serious public debates. Many are extremely trivial. But despite these constraints and the show's obvious focus on ratings and commerce, it does play a crucial role in mediating public discourse. It has clearly encouraged younger people to think about some of the conflicting values that are on display in China today. The show has demonstrated that there are diverse voices challenging mainstream materialistic assumptions, and it has given these voices an opportunity to participate in public discussions with both likeminded and different-minded peers. It is impossible to say what impact this will have on the future development of Chinese society, but at the very least, it can provide young people with a sense of potential variety when it comes to lifestyles and a diversity of perspectives that go far beyond the limited experiences of most viewers.

The "accidental public sphere" of *Are You the One?* also challenges simplistic assumptions about the allegedly passive, disengaged, and self-centered ways of the post-1980s generation. This case study should cause us to reflect on the frameworks that we use to discuss civic engagement and citizenship among younger generations more broadly. For increasing numbers of Chinese citizens, like citizens in the West, "politics in conventional (collective, government-centered, electoral) forms has become less salient" (Bennett 2004: 103). Thus we need to look beyond the conventional forms of civic action and political participation that center around party, state or other political institutions and organizations and pay more attention to the kinds of "lifestyle politics" that make their presence known through popular culture and virtual communities, or as McGuigan puts it, "the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life" (McGuigan 2010: 15). These individual expressions of lifestyle-related political issues are a crucial aspect of the sort of civil society and democratic life that is emerging in the process of China's modernization and globalization. It is likely that expressions of this sort will become "increasingly forceful features of state-society relations" (Zhu and Robinson 2010) in twenty-first century China.

Notes

1 According to the Fans Network, ratings for *Are You the One?* reached their highest point of 4.23% on May 17, 2010, surpassing *Citadel of Happiness*, the most popular Chinese entertainment show of the past decade; and its fees for a 15 second advertising slot during the show almost quadrupled, from 40,000 to 140,000 yuan. See Yu 2011.

2 For the cultural public sphere, see my discussion in the Introduction. In this chapter, one important manifestation of the cultural public sphere is in the forms and expressions of "lifestyle politics," which, as explained by W. Lance Bennett, indicates a tendency whereby "individuals increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them" (Bennett 2004: 103). It is used by social scientists to describe "a shift from traditional civic life and political participation to a new age of 'lifestyle politics' driven by values articulated at the level of individual behaviour and popular action in consumer choices, online exchanges, demonstrations and other informal forums" (Bennett 2004: 103). See also Anthony Giddens 1991.

3 "Ant tribe" is a neologism used to describe groups of low-income university graduates who settle for a poverty-level existence at the edge of the cities of China. The name, according to Lian Si, a social scientist from Peking University who coined the term, is meant to draw a comparison between the lives of these college graduates and ants: "They share every similarity with ants. They live in colonies in cramped areas. They're intelligent and hardworking, yet anonymous and underpaid" (Lian 2009). The 2010 *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Talent* estimates that there are 1 million people who fit the definition of ant tribe members living in slum-like conditions. "House slave," or home mortgage slave, refers to those people who pay a huge amount on their mortgage loans which negatively affects their social lives. As a consequence of rapid urbanization and soaring real estate prices, many middle-class Chinese in large cities find themselves in this undesirable living condition. To pay off the mortgage, they refrain from changing jobs or spending

money on entertainment or travel, and they worry greatly about falling ill. This term went viral after the broadcast of the TV drama *Narrow Dwelling* in 2010, and the social issues associated with excessive house prices led to wide public outcry.

4 Ruoyun Bai's research (Bai 2013) offers a nuanced discussion of the middle class's (including urban youths') vehement reaction to this drama and their ambivalent attitude toward corruption, class divisions, and inequality.

5 Previous reality shows that were cancelled due to government regulation include *Perfect Holiday* (*Wanmei jiaqi*, 2000), *My Hero* (*Jiayou hao nanhai*, 2007), and *Soul Garden* (*Xinling huayuan*, 2009). Other shows, including *Supergirl Voice*, were forced to tone down their content and format in order to continue broadcasting. See the detailed discussion in Chapter 3.

6 One example is a posting which was copied by many bloggers entitled "Character analysis of Zhang Fan and Lu Hongyi from *Are You the One?*" (Duiyu Feichengwurao nan jiabin Zhang Fan he Lu Hongyi de xingge jiexi). See one reproduced version on a blogger's webpage at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4bcc84ea0100m7jr.html. What is most interesting here is that this blog also copies and pastes the different responses to the original post.

7 See, for example, a post on the *Feicheng wurao* net bar on Baidu (http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=1035735370) entitled "The wisdom and honesty of An Tian: a resounding slap in the face of the Chinese education system" (An Tian de zhihui yu chengshi gei le Zhongguo jiaoyu tixi yiji xiangliang de erguang), which attracted 36 responses in just one day, with a great variety of opinions expressed about the Chinese and American education systems.

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5 *Undercover*

Internet media fandom and the sociality of cultural consumption

> We first came together because of *Undercover*, and we got to know each other through this common interest. *Undercover* brought us together here, and even though it has made us sad, it has also strengthened our happiness …
>
> I began browsing the "Making Fun of *Undercover*" bulletin board the very first day it started. It became compulsory reading for me, and eventually I joined the discussion myself. Here, I found joy and friendship that helped me forget my unhappiness and the pain of my illness. My fellow "net bar" posters have sacrificed a lot of their time to pour out their emotions here … Numerous children of the '80s and '90s have enthusiastically participated after completing their homework, and judging from their responses, it's clear they have deep and sincere affection for our whole bulletin board family. And net friends who are already working have managed to squeeze out time in the midst of their work and family duties to post contributions and add to our joy … I am deeply moved by all of this enthusiasm.
>
> A few days ago, when I was preparing some statistics on our "Making Fun" bulletin board, I found there were almost 700 initial posts already, and that doesn't include the countless appended comic poems, sequels to initial posts, and follow-up threads. There were so many that it was inconvenient to browse through them all … I decided to rearrange and edit the original threads by compiling the best posts into an anthology called "Have a Good Time: The Best of Making Fun of *Undercover*'s Characters." I present it here for all of you to enjoy – it's the least I could do for you, my dear friends and fellow members of this net bar.
>
> [Posted by] Da'aiwubian, Nov. 29, 2009, 9:01am

Written in a lofty style reminiscent of Mao Zedong's famous speech "Serving the People" (*Wei renmin fuwu*), this post by a netizen and fan of the Chinese TV series *Undercover* (*Qianfu*, 2008) is dedicated to a slightly less sublime subject: it introduces a new thread editing the best posts under the "Making fun of characters in *Undercover*" (*Tiaokan Qianfu renwu*) online fan bulletin board. This choice of "sublime" language and rhetoric for a "trivial" hobby like an online fan club might appear inappropriate to many outsiders—indeed the whole nostalgic revolutionary expressions of "comradeship" seem incongruous

in this context—but it captures the particular mores and sensibility of numerous media fans in general, and this group, the so called "submarines" (*qianting*), or fans of the TV serial *Undercover*, in particular.[1]

In fact, for Chinese readers familiar with pre-modern literati writings such as Wang Xizhi's (303–61) *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection* (*Lanting ji xu*), which describes an informal poetry gathering in the spring countryside, this form of affective engagement also has distant echoes of "the joys of the ancients." Yet with its strange mixture of traditional literati-style self-consciousness, group cultivation and "socialist" self-sacrifice for the collective good, this virtual community is characteristic of the kinds of networks and popular cultural practices that have emerged with the arrival of the internet and new media in China.

As noted in the Introduction, the internet has not only changed how media content is delivered but has also profoundly influenced the ways in which this content is consumed. The interactive features provided by the internet have resulted in an enormous proliferation of fan websites, discussion lists, and personal blogs, including burgeoning microblogs (*weibo*) which are more flexible and mobile, and consequently have created new forms of social interaction about and around media texts in an instant and multi-directed way not seen in conventional print and electronic media.

Internet media fandom is thus an emerging phenomenon within the context of media production and consumption in contemporary China. By internet media fandom, I refer to people or groups of people who are extremely familiar, even obsessed, with certain media texts and who engage consistently and passionately in various internet activities relating to those texts, such as blogging, posting on BBS boards at fan club sites, and contacting friends and acquaintances via instant messaging and SMS to share their experiences and opinions. In this way, they form virtual communities and create platforms where intellectual interaction and emotional nurture can occur. This media fandom, I would argue, not only demonstrates a new form of creative energy and interpretive practice among the younger generation of Chinese in the digital age, but also indicates a new kind of social bonding and communication through cultural consumption, in other words, a "participatory culture" (Jenkins 1992) and "collective intelligence" (Levy 1997) in post-socialist China. In this light, the online forums where internet media fandom takes place become invaluable ethnographic sites for the study of popular culture and public discourse as well as emerging forms of cultural public sphere in contemporary China.

Recent scholars have investigated internet communities and online activism (Yang 2009; Zheng and Wu 2005); e-government and internet control (Li 2009; Kalathil and Boas 2003); and the overlap and intersection between public and private space on the internet (Yu 2009; Hu 2008). These works point to the potential of cyberspace for stimulating and consolidating emerging civil societies, while at the same time noting the layers of contention and struggle in cyberspace among different social forces and agents. All of them

stress the importance of the internet as a newly emerging social space of communication and a site for civic discourse and even collective action. Yet although these studies provide convincing accounts of the internet's increasing importance in Chinese citizens' political lives and social engagement, much less attention has been paid to the internet as a site for cultural production and consumption, and to the broader cultural implications of the kinds of social interactions taking place in virtual communities of Chinese "fans."

In this chapter, I will examine the role of the internet in new forms of cultural consumption and social communication through an ethnographic study of internet media fandom of the 2008 TV spy drama *Undercover*.[2] My research primarily uses two internet sources. The first comes from a content/discourse analysis of the discussions and reviews of *Undercover* posted on Douban.net (*douban wang*), a web-based media and art community highly regarded for the quality, and often controversial content, of its film, TV drama, and book reviews. The second comes from an observational study of online communal interaction over a period of time, focusing on the *Undercover* Fan Club (*wangba*) on Baidu's post bar, one of the largest search engines and social network service providers in China.[3]

Before entering into the analysis of the web-based fandom surrounding *Undercover*, I will first provide a brief historical background on spy TV drama (*diezhan ju*) in China and introduce the production context of *Undercover*.

The revival of spy theme TV drama in the 2000s

The spy genre has a long history in modern China. It originated in the late 1940s, when China was split into opposing Nationalist and Communist camps.[4] The genre then matured during the 1950s, with two main story types: one is the undercover story in which underground CCP agents hide in the heart of the enemy's territory; the other is what could be called an "anti-spy" story, in which Chinese police and state security agents successfully uncover traitorous moles planted either by the Taiwanese Nationalists or the American "imperialists." In establishing the special set of generic conventions of the spy genre, imported Soviet Union spy movies and spy fiction served as a major ideological source and narrative model (Dai 2010).

Interestingly, the first TV series in post-socialist China was also a spy drama: *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* (*Diying shiba nian*, 1981), a nine-episode drama depicting an undercover Communist who infiltrates the Nationalist government from 1931 to 1949. Yet despite the apparent resurgence of the spy genre in publications, TV series, and film productions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the genre's popularity faded in the 1990s due to the end of the Cold War and growing political rapprochement between East and West.

The most recent revival of interest in the spy genre on Chinese TV began in the early 2000s with the broadcast of *Silent Vow* (*Shiyan wusheng*, 2002), a twenty-episode TV drama, which continued the familiar anti-spy narrative tradition depicting state security agents unearthing Nationalist moles who

were trying to undermine the PRC's new submarine project during the 1960s. While the plot was typical of earlier examples of the genre, the progression of time and social conditions since then meant that its depiction of the 1960s evoked nostalgic sentiments among viewers for those "passionate years." Moreover, the drama displayed some ambivalent messages and feelings, especially in depicting conflicts between the characters' loyalty toward the state/country and their personal fate and identity, hinting that they were not the single-mindedly determined revolutionary heroes that appeared in previous anti-spy dramas.

In the decade since 2002, numerous other highly popular spy dramas have been produced, such as *Undercover*, *Before the Dawn* (*Liming zhi qian*, 2010), and *Plotting* (*Ansuan*, 2006). In the revival of the spy genre during the 2000s, it is the undercover/mole story that has come to dominate spy TV serials, films, and fictional works, and this shift appears to be related to contemporary public sentiment and social emotions, such as the uncertainty of identity and moral anxiety in today's increasingly confusing world of new technology, ideological conflicts, and transnational flows. I will expand on this point below, after a brief description of the basic plot of *Undercover*.

The story revolves around Yu Zecheng, a Communist spy who "lurks" in the Tianjin office of the Military Bureau of Statistics and Investigation, the notorious Nationalist secret service in the 1940s (better known by its Chinese abbreviation *Juntong*). It describes Yu's attempts to assist the Communist cause and remain undetected, while at the same time following his romantic liaisons with three successive women. At the beginning of the drama, Yu is a loyal core *Juntong* member, one of its first trainees, and with his assassination of "traitors" in the final stages of the Sino-Japanese war he wins the personal trust of its chief, General Dai Li. However, after the ensuing civil war ruins his dream of living a peaceful life with his beloved girlfriend, Zuo Lan, who is a strong believer in Communism, Yu faces a major tension between his political and personal loyalties. Eventually the idealistic Yu is repelled by the massive corruption of Nationalist officials and secretly joins the CCP, who order him to stay in the *Juntong* and work for Communism from the inside. To assist in his underground work and look after his daily needs, a former peasant guerrilla veteran, Cuiping, is sent to live with Yu as his "wife." After initial misunderstandings and awkwardness between the educated and thoughtful Yu and the illiterate and straightforward Cuiping, the two develop true feelings toward each other. And when Yu's first love, Zuo Lan, dies while protecting Yu and Cuiping from exposure, they really do get married. During this time, Yu has successfully provided much useful information for the Communists that assists them to win the civil war. While Yu's hard work, apparent "loyalty", and low-key attitude win him the personal favor of his director in the *Juntong*, the jealousy and suspicion of his colleagues and the transfer of a cunning and loyal agent, Li Ya, into his office pose an increasingly dangerous threat to Yu. In the fierce struggle between Yu and Li, several undercover Communists, including Cuiping, are exposed, and Cuiping has to flee to Communist-controlled

territory, but Yu manages to survive Li's machinations without exposure. In 1949, Yu reluctantly follows his director to Taiwan, where Director Wu has already prepared a safe haven for himself by setting up a business and accumulating money from extortion and bribes. The series ends with Yu marrying his new "wife" Wanqiu, who was once his student in Tianjin, and he remains committed to the undercover patriotic role he has devoted himself to, but he secretly misses Cuiping, who has now given birth to a baby girl and is forced to hide in an isolated mountain village in order to protect Yu's identity.

Soon after it was first broadcast on Tianjin TV Station in November 2008, *Undercover* received enthusiastic responses from a broad range of viewers, which prompted many other provincial TV stations to re-broadcast it. The result was unusually high viewing rates in the second run of the TV series in April 2009. While on the one hand the series was named one of the most influential TV dramas of the year (2009) by the TV Drama Committee of SARFT; won many official awards, including the official 11th Five Ones Project Award (2007–09); and was praised by official media, academics, and mainstream critics for advocating socialist ideas and values and resurrecting the selfless Communist hero-type; on the other hand it also won a popular reputation among ordinary fans, who have produced provocative alternative readings and controversial responses that differ in many ways from the fulsome praise recorded in the official media. These fans express their opinions and interact with each other mainly through the internet, mobile phones, and other social network services. In fact, according to some researchers, it was largely due to the enthusiastic response by internet fans that the series stood out from the crowd and caught the attention of so many provincial TV stations, leading to the second round of its broadcast. Its popularity is therefore closely tied up with the reputation that it gained from the internet (Zhu, L. 2009).

An analysis of the reception of *Undercover*, especially among younger fans, and of the online interpretative practices surrounding this drama is crucial for understanding why spy drama has become one of the most popular TV genres in recent years. In particular, it will reveal how new media such as the internet are playing a major role in creating social networks and a cultural public sphere through consumers' interactive and creative consumption of popular culture products.

The habitus of China's post-1980s generation and knowledge-based middle class

To contextualize the following discussion on how the production of meaning of *Undercover* by fan viewers represents an alternative and occasionally subversive deconstruction of the official discourse on spy dramas, a brief digression on media fans' cultural consumption practices and the "socio-emotional environment" (Baym 1998: 116) that has shaped their interpretations is in order.

As mentioned earlier, Douban net is distinctive compared to other social network services due to its active art and media communities and the quality of its user-generated content, in particular its reviews of media products, including music, books, films, and TV serials. Douban is not the most popular web portal: though it had 30 million registered users in 2010 plus a growing number of anonymous non-registered users, this is far fewer than broad-based hubs like Tianya and Baidu (Ye 2011). But it has become one of the most influential portals attracting intellectuals, geeks, and urban hipsters to exchange comments and ideas in forum-like groups, and this has more than once landed Douban in the midst of controversy and caused it to become a target of government censorship.

In Douban's ratings of the most popular domestic TV dramas, based on votes by visitors to the site (data collected on January 15, 2012), *Undercover* topped all others with a 9.0 rating from 38,287 votes, beating other popular dramas such as *Soldiers Sortie* (*Shibing tuji*, 2007), *Soldiers and Their Commander* (*Wo de tuanzhang wo de tuan*, 2009), *Narrow Dwelling* (*Woju*, 2009), and *Struggle* (*Fendou*, 2007). This rating differs slightly from the ranked list of biggest fan clubs for domestic TV dramas on Baidu, but is quite representative of the overall popularity of these dramas. According to the accumulated number of posts recorded on Baidu by May 13, 2011, the ranking was as follows: *Soldier Sortie* (with 7,265,812 posts); *Soldiers and Their Commander* (1,354,427 posts); *Narrow Dwelling* (864,394 posts), *Struggle* (407,522 posts), and *Undercover* (367,079 posts).[5] The ratings and rankings don't necessarily reflect the actual TV viewing ratings for these serials, but there is little doubt that they correspond with and affect the popularity of the dramas to a certain degree, especially among urban youth who are more used to consuming media products via the internet as well as exchanging their opinions through virtual spaces rather than through traditional forms of communication.[6] Indeed, with the increasing growth in web-based media production and consumption, internet media fans have played an important role in popularizing certain TV dramas or films. One such example is *Soldier Sortie*, a black horse in the TV industry during the decade of the 2000s, whose success largely resulted from word of mouth "promotion" by internet fans. The "internet buzz" surrounding the drama subsequently influenced the decision of several TV stations to re-broadcast the drama and its sequel.

Douban's users are mainly urban youth (mostly from Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan, and Chengdu) and they are predominantly male (79% are men), according to data from the "2011 Social Network Analysis Report," released by Ignite Social Media (Chappell 2011). The predominant age group is 25 to 34 years old (71.5%), followed by 18–24 years old (19.5%). In terms of their educational level, 55% of users have graduate degrees, another 20% have bachelor degrees or "some college education," and 16% have high school diplomas. The income of the users contrasts with their high educational levels: 80.5% fall into the bottom income group of 0–24,999 yuan per year, whereas only 8% of its

users earn decent incomes between 75,000 and 99,999 yuan per year. Demographic data thus indicate relatively higher education levels, but lower income and younger age ranges, among Douban users in particular and Chinese SNS users in general, when compared with international/global SNS users, as exemplified by sites like LinkedIn or Facebook (Chappell 2011). Another study on the use of the internet among people from Shanghai also finds that those in the 18 to 25 age group are the most active at using the internet to express their opinions (Zhang, Z. 2010: 28).

The unusual enthusiasm among the most educated and internet savvy population for spy dramas and military dramas reveals the survival anxiety prevalent among China's younger generations, who have grown into adulthood in an increasingly competitive and harsh capitalist environment with prevailing social corruption and inequality (see Chapter 4). Military dramas like *Soldier Sortie* and *Soldiers and Their Commander* often depict a poorly resourced group of regular guys striving to become the best by going through extreme, even inhumane, military training and overcoming all kinds of ordeals, from social discrimination to psychological barriers. They offer inspiration for the emerging knowledge-based middle-class viewers who aspire "to live well" by "not abandoning (the struggle), and not giving up" (the words of Xu Sanduo, the main character in *Soldier Sortie*).[7] The highly disciplined and collective/collaborative culture of military camp also appeals emotionally to these urban youth who find themselves standing alone in an increasingly individualistic and ruthless capitalist society.

It is within this charged socio-emotional environment that media fans' affective engagement with *Undercover* has taken place. Consequently, media fans' interpretative practices with respect to *Undercover* should be read in the light of their current "structure of feeling": on the one hand, they feel a sense of "struggle aspiration," but on the other hand they are dealing with a strong case of "survival anxiety." In other words, as noted in the previous chapter, there is a major inner conflict between two powerful interlocking emotions—a desire for the kind of affluent life that they can see others leading, and a fear of losing everything in this extremely competitive and ruthless social environment.

Text poaching and collective meaning-making among fans

The high evaluation of *Undercover* among media fans as illustrated by the Douban ratings can be explained by many contributing factors. To start with, the plot is extremely well woven and tight, and the series is well paced with suspense created in every episode, a rare quality among Chinese TV dramas. Another factor is the mysterious history of *Juntong* spies and Communist underground workers whose stories have always been topics of curiosity and speculation. Further factors also include the excellent performances, especially the reserved but powerful acting of Sun Honglei (who plays the hero. Yu Zecheng) and Feng Enhe, a veteran stage actor, who plays Director Wu of the *Juntong*. Yao Chen, whom fans have dubbed the "Chinese Julia Roberts,"

also gives Cuiping's character a touch of indigenous and naïve charm that has won her the affection and laughter of numerous fans. But a more in-depth reading of the content of the reviews and follow-up comments provides further insights on why younger viewers find *Undercover* worth watching and talking about.

According to my own count made in May 2011, on Baidu's *Undercover* net bar, around half of the two hundred or so threads that have attracted more than ten thousand hits are speculations about the drama's characters and romantic plot. They appear not just as "thoughts after viewing *Undercover*," but also in other forms, such as comments on the ending and especially character analysis. Popular threads such as "Which woman does old Yu love the most?" (25,966 hits); "Deep analysis of Yu's three romantic relationships" (23,972 hits); "My opinion on whether Yu loves Cuiping" (24,957); "Analyzing the tragedy between Yu and Cuiping" (23,827); and "Pictures of the couple Yu and Cuiping" (11,467) highlight the fact that the romantic relationships between Yu and the leading female characters remain the major concern of fans, especially Yu's earthy, "mundane" love relationship with Cuiping, which contrasts with his more romanticized dream-like love for Zuo Lan. While the fans pour out their lighthearted comments about this comic yet convincing depiction of "love not at first sight," their deepest sympathy and resonance is evoked by the unhappy endings of all three romantic relationships. Yu's painful loss of his beloved Zuo Lan when she is killed for protecting him, his unbearable separation from Cuiping, and finally his reluctantly arranged marriage with Wanqiu all provoke the fans to raise issues regarding the manipulative hand of politics on the lives of individuals, the sacrifice of individuals in the name of great public causes, and the ethics of revolution.

This conflict between loyalty (to one's public duties as opposed to private feelings) and love (for one's country/people or one's family/lover) is especially evident in Yu and Cuiping's relationship. Their romance gradually develops in a realistic but also humorous way, from misunderstandings to mutual care and trust: Yu teaches the illiterate Cuiping to wear sleeping clothes and to read and write, and the hot-tempered but loyal Cuiping tries in her own way to "feed" and protect Yu, including expressing her deep jealousy toward their bourgeois neighbor, Wanqiu, who is a former student/admirer of Yu. As a result of this development of trust, the viewers build a deep emotional attachment toward these two characters. Thus it is no surprise that many fans became annoyed and saddened when, at the end, Yu and Cuiping are "ordered" to stay apart. Cuiping must raise their child alone in an isolated mountain village, and Yu is forced to "marry" another woman in order to continue his next secret mission in Taiwan. The last episode, where the newlywed Yu sheds tears in front of his old wedding photo, became the most provocative scene for fans to discuss the value of the happiness of individuals as opposed to their duty toward their country and other "higher" ideals. In response to the outcry about the cruel and tragic ending, two TV stations (Shanghai's Dragon Satellite TV and Beijing TV, which recorded an extremely high 14%

viewing rate for this episode) even changed the original dialogue before the episode was broadcast to leave some hope for a reunion of the two main characters.[8] Many fans also posted their own alternative "feel-good" endings to the drama. For example, one fan posted on the BBS of Sina.net a comment titled: "I can't help spitting out my own ending for *Undercover*," and this comment received over 1,100,000 hits in one day and over two hundred responses. In this fan's "therapeutic version" (*liaoshang ban*), Yu returns to Mainland China years later, and after many years of persistent search he finally reunites with Cuiping (Anonymous 2009a).

It is clear from these and other online responses that fans' emotional attachment to the characters led to deep suspicion of lofty ideas such as "sacrificing one's little self for the Greater Self," ideas that are constantly promoted in the red classics to which *Undercover* superficially belongs. Many fans raised awkward questions such as: what would have happened to Yu if he had stayed in Mainland China? They then listed some of the sufferings and wrongful deaths of famous secret agents of the CCP during the Cultural Revolution to prove that Yu would not have been an exception. A post on Douban entitled "Utopianism on the other side, or Yu was lucky to leave for Taiwan" represents such an interpretation:

> The genius of this screenwriter/director (Jiang Wei) is that he found the balance between main melody and historical nihilism. … It is difficult to imagine what would have happened to Yu Zecheng – an undercover Communist who never formally joined the Party but had been a long-time Nationalist – during the anti-Rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution. And what would those who sacrificed themselves for their leftist Utopia, such as Zuo Lan, have felt when this political "Utopia" became a reality? It's better for Yu to stay in Taiwan so Communism can always stay as a Utopia for him. Another example of historical nihilism in this drama is the parallel between the past and the present. The inspiration for the internal fighting in the Tianjin office of the Juntong must have come directly from today's officialdom. And Cuiping's condemnation of the Juntong's massacre of demonstrating students really makes the viewer feel sad.
>
> Li 2010

Other fans also ironically noted the recent official attempts at "reunion" on both sides of the Taiwan Straits to prove the futility and worthlessness of taking one's political beliefs too seriously and the unpredictability of historical change over time.

This kind of speculation about characters' fates or reworking of the drama's ending is a typical act of identification by fans, or in Grossberg's words, an "affective investment" (Grossberg 1992: 83). In other words, *Undercover* and its online fan clubs offer places where a fan can locate some sense of his/her own identity and comment on reality through the mouths of

the characters. In this light, it is particularly intriguing for understanding the alternative meaning-construction of this drama to see that many fans sympathize and identify with Li Ya, Director Wu, and Xie Ruolin, all of whom would have been typical villains or "antagonists" in traditional Communist spy dramas. Among the most circulated posts are "Collections of the Best Dialogue" (*jingdian yulu*) from *Undercover*, and it is quotations from Director Wu, the corrupt Nationalist spy chief, and Xie Ruolin, the cynical opportunist neighbor of Yu who trades top military secrets for money and is proud of his "flexibility," that provide most of the examples. A typical list of the "best dialogue" includes the following descriptions of Nationalist officials and agents:

> "If you cut off their money supply, they will cut off your blood supply."
>
> "Their mouths spout noble ideas, but their hearts only care about business."
>
> "They have taken so much money, they'd better run away before they get into trouble!"
>
> "If it weren't for these 'special perks', who the hell would become an official?"
>
> "You see these two gold bars: can you tell me which one is clean and which one is dirty?"
>
> "Any government that ignores 'human relationships' will be short lived."

Such comments are quoted, linked, and re-transmitted again and again in different messages and contexts, becoming a "lexicon of users' practice" (De Certeau 1984: 31), and ordinary fans enthusiastically embrace them as true comments about contemporary China, its corrupt officials and degenerate public morality. The following comments from a fan bring to light a fundamental connection made by fans between the drama and their lived reality when they "quote" these pieces of dialogue:

> The screen writer is really awesome. On the surface it is about the history [of Nationalists], but it has a penetrating power of criticizing the reality [today]. There is no difference between history and the present: it is just a matter of changing the Party's name. But SARFT [which regulates Chinese television production] could only swallow its bitterness quietly.
>
> The dialogues in *Undercover* are really worth reflecting on. … The biggest teaching it gives is deconstruction: … those so-called political beliefs are nothing but excuses for the authorities to justify their power and self interest. Both Yu Zecheng and Li Ya are but their hired guns.
>
> Lou 2009

Indeed, the intriguing impression one receives when reading the reviews and comments about *Undercover* from Douban and other spy drama-related websites is that, rather than pondering on the plot and its intellectual brain

game, the discussions typically evolve to encompass much broader and more current topics, such as love, faith, idealism, and especially survival tactics in professional and/or political careers (*zhichang*/*guanchang*). This impression is supported by the work of other researchers. Based on a content analysis survey of 114 internet blogs from Sina.com, China's largest commercial portal which hosts the most influential bloggers, during the period of April 8 to 24, 2009, Zhu Lili found that the mainstream/orthodox interpretation of *Undercover* as a story about a Communist superhero only constituted 6.14% of the comments. Other interpretations of *Undercover* on blogs claim that it is about "love" (12.28%), "bureaucratic politics" (5.26%), "hidden rules" (3.51%), "office politics" (3.51%), and "corruption" (1.8%), or other miscellaneous themes (11.4%).[9]

The following excerpt of a review by the famous cultural critic Wang Gan, posted on Wang's blog on sina.com, which became one of the most popular comments on the series that has been linked and circulated by thousands of websites and bloggers, illuminates these kinds of alternative interpretations:

> *Undercover* is a spy drama, but it is a spy drama that infiltrates into many other issues: thus men see in it echoes of official survival, women see office politics, and lovers see the battle of the sexes … Leaving aside the superficial ideological elements, it is a fictional work about officialdom … In other words, Yu is not only an excellent undercover hero, he is also an expert in power struggles. The drama not only makes you realize how difficult it is to be undercover, but even more how dangerous it is to be an official and the terrible impact of hidden rules. The character of Xie Ruolin is very realistic: his trading information for money exactly reflects the situation of those buying and selling official positions in today's China.
>
> Secondly, in *Undercover*, both Yu and his rival Li Ya are loyal and hardworking, and they do their best while competing to win the favour of their boss Director Wu. This is what is required in the workplace. Professionals and white collars appreciate the drama not only because they see the wisdom and courage of these characters, but also because they see in it the hidden rules of their own workplaces.
>
> Wang, G. 2009

Wang's reading struck a chord with many other "alternative" readings that identified the drama as "a rare tutorial for the workplace." As another blogger put it: "The experience of Yu is absolutely relevant for us: it teaches us how to survive in a sinister workplace environment which is much more dangerous than Yu's. We are all small potatoes working undercover in a turbulent time" (Lu 2009). Indeed, fans such as Lu Qi found *Undercover* so "penetratingly insightful" and "useful" that he compiled a 20-point menu for "hidden rules in the workplace" based on the drama (ibid.). Likewise, in posts such as "The Philosophy within the Dialogues of *Undercover*," the "villains" Director Wu

and Xie Ruolin, with their clear eyes and cunning skills in bureaucratic politics, have become new mentors for surviving in today's cutthroat Chinese society.

However, not all fans approve of this utilitarian and cynical reading of *Undercover*, and in fact one of the most popular online topics, after romantic love, is the faith and idealism of characters in the drama. One review from the netizen Blue Moon with the title "Is it because of its pragmatic usefulness that *Undercover* has become a hit?" expresses doubts about the "hidden rules" readings. Blue Moon argues: "If Yu tried purely to win power and status without having faith in his cause, he would soon get seriously depressed, just like the character that Tony Leung plays in *Infernal Affairs*" He then makes the plea: "Don't debase this drama to a menu of survival tactics and hidden rules; this is the worst misunderstanding of the drama" (Blue Moon 2009). Another review titled "The Sisyphean Struggle of Li Ya" (Chai 2009) also tries to explain the great popularity of the character Li Ya from the perspective of his sincere belief in the Nationalist cause, which persists even when he sees the inevitability of the Nationalists' defeat, in sharp contrast with his cynical colleagues who fight only for power and money or secretly for their own escape from danger.

Indeed, the director/screenwriter Jiang Wei also claims that faith or belief (*xinyang*) was the dominant theme when he conceived this drama, but at the same time he found that he couldn't use the simplistic ideological framework of the previous spy genre to conceive his characters: "What moral criteria can you use to judge them?" he asks, pointing to their complexity (Meng 2009). This attempt to underline the importance of faith that goes beyond simple political beliefs has certainly resonated well among younger viewers. In a thoughtful review entitled "Belief in the Limits of Pure Emotion, or Anti-belief Disguised as Belief," Zuo Mingqing suggests that people need belief, but this belief is not necessarily a political belief: it can be based on universal desires of humanity, kindness, and hope, or on the simple wish to live a stable life with one's beloved, as Yu Zecheng finally (if temporarily) realizes through his quotidian everyday life with Cuiping. By contrast, "whenever belief and politics are joined together, heroes will only die of broken hearts. … Often this so-called belief makes people kill. … It is only when belief is separated from manipulation by power that it can exert real force and value" (Zuo 2009).

Thus we see that in interpreting their favorite characters and the values that these characters represent, *Undercover* fans insert their own social criticism, moral reflection, and political ideas into the drama. Noticeably there is a complex negotiation of meanings and expropriation of concepts and ideas in this process. On the one hand, these fans seems to express a surprising cynicism or historical nihilism where survival is the only objective; on the other hand, the passionate debates themselves show a persistent search for meaning, faith, and idealism, complicated by nationalist sentiment where heroes are admired for their true sacrifice for the nation.

Through sharing their esthetic and viewing experiences, the fans of *Undercover* have found a way to publicly discuss the much-suppressed topics of social

injustice, corruption, public morality, and ultimately the meaning or meaninglessness of revolution. Media texts such as *Undercover* have become resources for the production of meaning. Unlike dramas on contemporary subjects, such as *Narrow Dwelling* and *Black Hole* (*Heidong*, 2001), where the social agony, frustration, and anger was directly voiced through the characters and their contemporary situations, the textual poaching practiced by the *Undercover* fans in interpreting this media text takes a more subtle and circuitous route, but in the end it is equally powerful and confrontational. In Chinese fans' "meaningful encounters with texts" (Jenkins 2006: 140), as demonstrated above, they are not simply accepting the surface meaning along orthodox lines, but rather "broadening the field of meanings that circulate around the primary text" (ibid.) and even appropriating and hijacking its content to insert alternative ideas into its mainstream frame. It is in this articulating process of turning fan talk into a public forum that TV drama has become one of the most productive sites of discourse in contemporary China.

"Submarines" and the creation of social pleasure in the *Undercover* net bar

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will use the online *Undercover* net bar on Baidu to explore the different kinds of communicative practices of web-based fans and the social connections they have created. The purpose is to understand more clearly what binds together fans of a popular media text/genre, and more broadly, how virtual communication operates in China to create new communities in the digital age.

On the "*Undercover* net bar" (*Qianfu ba*) on Baidu,[10] users can either browse through all the threads listed on the main page in chronological order since the threads started, or focus on specific area topics listed in the right margin: such as digital magazines, videos, or pictures related to *Undercover*, related links which lead to information about members of the cast and crew, or the "best threads" (*jingpin*), which are usually selected by the webmaster. To participate in the activities and make oneself visible is also simply a matter of clicking on "post a message." Anyone can start a thread and follow it by posting a message, which might range from a single word like "*ding*" ("great, bravo") to a sophisticated digital video. With such a simple platform, it is not surprising that thousands of messages/posts are generated every day, and some of them receive tens of thousands of hits. The sheer amount of traffic and the creative interaction between users make these internet fan clubs an extremely active social space.

The first thread on the "*Undercover* net bar" appeared on December 4, 2008, and it experienced a sudden surge of traffic in Spring 2009, during the second run of the series. The amount of web traffic since then reflects the intensity of the fans' interactions: in less than thirty months, some 23,715 initial threads were posted, among which over two hundred threads had received ten thousand or more hits. There are also about two dozen initial

threads that have inspired over one thousand replies each, making them into, stunning "skyscrapers" (*gai lou*) over one thousand "stories" high, to use Chinese net jargon. The *Undercover* bar, like other clubs hosted by Baidu, is relatively strict in terms of content control, especially when compared with sites like Douban net, but its enormous popularity means that the kind of content and interactions that do appear there are actually more representative in terms of reflecting the internet life of the majority of netizens in contemporary China.

Careful observation of the threads reveals much variety in both the creativity and interactivity of web-based fandom. Among the 23,715 threads, the most popular eleven threads (with over one hundred thousand hits) as listed below reveal some of the major themes and characteristics of the fans' interactions:

1. Making fun of/joking about the characters from *Undercover* (1,242,399)
2. Best of making fun of the characters from *Undercover* (519,909)
3. Selected pictures making fun of the characters from *Undercover* (462,345)
4. Cartoon scenes from *Undercover*: Li Ya in white interrogating Sheng Xiang (335,775)
5. Director Wu: His acting is awesome (327,845)
6. Something to say about the ending of *Undercover* (179,410)
7. *Undercover* by Longyi (160,644)
8. *Secret Service Weekly* covers: The first 200 issues (147,055)
9. Laughs about *Undercover* characters (120,390)
10. Who is Ermeifeng? (118,781)
11. Selected works of Longyi: *Undercover* (102,685).

It is interesting to note that the top three most visited threads all involve humorous treatments, or *tiaokan*, of the characters from *Undercover* in different forms and genres. They mainly constitute lighthearted, comic short situations or reworked pieces of dialogue based on the stories or characters from the series.

These messages probably appear "trivial" or "vulgar" to outsiders, especially those seeking more "meaningful" or "profound" activities and comments on the deeper meanings of the media text. However, for ordinary fans such invented jokes and ridiculous remarks enhance the shared sense of pleasure and fun for those who are so familiar with and fond of each character in the drama. The popularity of this genre is very clear from the fact that items 1 and 2 on the list of threads above are actually based on the same content, but the latter is simply an edited version of the former accompanied by comments from selected followers. This demonstrates how the fans not only draw pleasure from the original creative making of comments but also from the subsequent interactivity that allows them to feel involved and engaged with each other. Through this playful and harmless "joking around," the fans express their

affection and appreciation toward the characters as well as toward their fellow fans, and they try to make the characters live on in their imaginations.

This kind of playful appropriation or reworking of media texts for comic effect is a common practice in digital communication among the younger generation in China, through mobile texting, twitter-type messaging, or online spoofing (Liu, X. 2012; Meng 2011; Yu 2009; Yang 2009). Though some of these fan comments may contain hints of social commentary and social satire, most seem designed mainly to show off the author's wit and cleverness to their online community of likeminded followers.

While most fans come to the Baidu post bar to share information and speculate about the characters and story of *Undercover*, there are some who are inspired by the series to produce highly original artistic works that they post on the bar to share with their fellow fans. *Secret Service Weekly Covers* is such a case. It is an ambitious project by a twenty-one-year-old fan, whose net name is Shangsuancaicaizi, consisting of some two hundred self-designed covers for an imaginary magazine titled *Secret Service Weekly* (*Baomi zhoukan*). Each cover is a "collage" of pictures and headlines for imaginary articles in the "issue." While most of the cover pictures are based on stills from *Undercover*, many are re-processed with touches of style and artistry. There are also behind-the-scenes and promotional pictures, apparently collected from other fashion and media magazines or websites. Later covers also include drawings, cartoons, and original woodcut artworks by other fans, whom Shangsuancaicaizi acknowledges as special art editors (*teyue tubian*). Just like real-life magazine covers, these imaginary covers also include eye-catching headlines, such as "Stories of Secret Agents," "Display of [Spying] Skills," "Fashions of Secret Agents," "Lectures on Officialdom," and even "Ideas for Wives [of Spies]." When drafting the specific topics for each issue, Shangsuancaicaizi displays great familiarity with both the content of fan discussions of *Undercover* and current trends in popular culture in general, and an admirable talent in bringing them together effortlessly with a humorous and playful tone.

Like Shangsuancaicaizi, who single-handedly produced these imaginary fan magazine covers, and thereby transformed her emotional attachment to the drama into a creative act, many other fans have used *Undercover* as a fertile soil in which to cultivate their imaginations and creativity. And they proudly show off their works on the *Undercover* net bar. More often than not, their fellow fans generously acknowledge their efforts and support their work by responding with their own contributions or simply adding compliments and words of appreciation. Number 4 on the list, "Cartoon scenes from *Undercover*," demonstrates how this supportive interactivity is actually crucial for, and in some cases constitutes the essence of, web-based fandom and sociality. This discussion thread first started with a fan named "Xiong Xiaoyuan," who posted a spoof cartoon based on characters from the series, of Yu Zecheng's nemesis Li Ya interrogating Sheng Xiang by using opera to torment him. In her own comment on this post, Xiong claims that after reading other fans' posts to the bar, she feels that Li Ya is a great comic figure, and for this reason

she decided to create her cartoon. This first cartoon by Xiong immediately received ten encouraging posts from fellow fans, including one that suggested she draw a whole series of cartoons. Xiong then posted her second piece just half an hour later. Since then, Xiong's thread has been consistently selected as one of the "best works" and hundreds of responses have poured in after each successive cartoon that Xiong has posted. Some have contributed ideas, others compliments, and still others have linked this thread to other fan bars such as the "Zu Feng Bar" (a fan club named after the actor Zu Feng who plays Li Ya). All this enthusiasm encouraged Xiong to produce a whole series of 114 cartoons depicting numerous different characters and situations from the series. This thread has become one of the most popular and interactive ones with a total of 336,000 hits and 2373 separate posts in just one-and-a-half years.

In her final cartoon, dated January 25, 2011, a couple of days before Chinese New Year, Xiong sent her fellow fans a New Year's message in her typical style: a cartoon depicting a "big reunion" of the major *Undercover* characters eating dumplings, each with a humorous blurb reflecting their typical tone and expression. In the same message, Xiong expressed her gratitude toward her virtual family, with deep affection: "The series has continued for so long and received so much support from my good friends. I am so touched … I love everyone here who has accompanied me along my journey."

The cases of Xiong Xiaoyuan and Shangsuancaicaizi both demonstrate an active fan culture-producing community where "reciprocal exchange of information" takes place (Jenkins 2006: 136) and "collective intelligence expands a community's productive capacity" (ibid.: 139). This knowledge community is, while voluntary and temporary, nevertheless defined "through intellectual enterprise and emotional investment" (ibid.: 137). The reason these posters are willing to devote so much time and effort to the net bar (often during lunch hours or evenings after work or school) is that they feel a need to express in public their deep appreciation for what *Undercover* has given them. At the same time, they are doubtless spurred on by the constant encouragement of other net users. After spending a whole night posting a complete collection of her 200 magazine covers on the net bar, Shangsuancaicaizi states that editing this collection took her over a month, and during the process she felt overwhelmingly happy and purposeful. She also mentions that the love and encouragement of her net fans have helped her overcome nagging self-doubt and motivated her to "live well and do meaningful things." Her fans responded in kind, with one fan calling her "the most photogenic, the most popular, the kindest and most hard-working, and the most persistent of all!" Apparently, in such an affective community, to make other fans happy and entertain them provides the greatest meaning for these "submarines," and a deep sense of connection and appreciation built on their shared passion for *Undercover* is displayed constantly. It is through this collective sentiment and affective interactivity that the pleasure of a

popular media text is enhanced and crystallizes into a deeper sense of social connection.

Conclusion: web-based fandom and social bonding in China

The "virtual ethnographic" study of internet media fandom in this chapter provides concrete evidence of the new interactive and communicative social space where certain popular media texts such as TV dramas and films have become "articulating links," bringing together people from various walks of life with no geographical boundaries and acting as a catalyst for them to share their creative energy and debates on meanings and values within and beyond the media text. Seen in this light, the recent revival of interest in the spy genre, not just on TV screens but also in film and fiction,[11] is not simply a revival of popular nostalgia for cultural products from the Cold War. It is true that most recent Chinese spy films and TV dramas are set during the Sino-Japanese war or the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, and the producers have obviously taken advantage of this classic patriotic or revolutionary narrative to gain approval for broadcasting. They have also exploited the popularity of the established niche market for Hollywood-style suspense and detective stories, and translated it into the Chinese context by using the spy genre. These are pragmatic decisions based largely on commercial and political factors. Yet for the viewers, these dramas do much more than evoke nostalgic socialist sentiments such as heroism and idealism; rather, the moral ambiguities and existential dilemmas depicted in the dramas allow viewers to become actively involved in re-creating their own meanings through a "radical contextualization": voicing their emotional reactions of frustration, indignation, anxiety, and disillusionment about their everyday lives in a state-controlled capitalist society, but also their shared solidarity and playfulness in the face of life's difficulties. It is in this emotional and cultural matrix between past and present, fantasy and reality, serious and playful, heroic and quotidian that spy TV drama has tapped into a much deeper social and affective need, and gained such enormous popularity.

In the next chapter, we will return to the world of cinema to show that such online communities are equally active in (re)interpreting the latest blockbuster movies for the viewers' own purposes, in particular as a form of political expression. We will also draw together the threads from these two chapters, explaining the significance of the explosive growth and vocal presence of online communities in terms of the creation of a cultural public sphere in contemporary Chinese society.

Notes

1 The Chinese word for submarine (*qianting*) shares one character with *Qianfu*, the Chinese title of this TV drama.

2 The reasons I choose *Undercover* will become clearer to readers later in the chapter. I here briefly summarize them as follows: first, *Undercover* is regarded as a representative and, to date, the most highly regarded work of spy drama, an extremely popular genre on Chinese television in recent years. Second, the substantial online materials on *Undercover* fandom make it feasible to study its interactive audience responses. Third, the ambiguities in the content and characters of this drama leave a particularly fertile interpretative space for fans to supply their own meanings, through which we can see their deeper concerns about contemporary Chinese society.

3 My role in this ethnographic study is basically that of a non-involved observer. I have been an occasional reader of both Baidu tieba and Douban net for nearly five years, but I only began systematically investigating the two specific fan communities on *Undercover* during the research and writing of this chapter from February to July 2011. The choice of these two different types of fan groups or ethnographic sites is designed to reflect the great variety of virtual spaces in China and the distinctiveness of their respective cultures, an issue to which I wish to call scholars' attention.

4 Dai Jinhua (2010) points out that spy films made in the late 1940s by the Nationalist government, such as *Tianzi di yi hao* (*Number One in the World*) not only foreshadowed the subsequent cold war ideology between Communism and Nationalism, but also set up a narrative mode for later spy movies, including those from the socialist camp.

5 In using the accumulated number of posts to reflect the popularity and topic-generating quality of certain TV dramas, one must bear in mind the first broadcast date of each drama, which I have included above. Obviously the most recently broadcast drama will take some time to catch up with those that have been around for several years and that have very likely released a DVD and been re-broadcast on TV and the internet.

6 There is a certain discrepancy between actual TV viewing rates and ratings/rankings on the internet (for which, see Anonymous 2008). Part of the reason for this is the different audiences for TV and internet broadcasts. Many surveys have shown that the majority of Chinese TV viewers are homemakers and retirees, similar to daytime soap audiences in the West. Thus, while spy dramas and soldier dramas do not necessarily have the highest television ratings (Anonymous 2008)—because they do not necessarily appeal to the main TV audience groups—such genres are extremely popular among the most educated and internet savvy population who are extremely active in web-based communities, and who tend to view the dramas online anyway.

7 "Knowledge-based middle class" (*Zhishi zhongchan jieji* or *Xueli zhongchan jieceng*) is a term frequently used in recent scholarship to refer to the emerging urban middle classes who accumulate their various forms of capital based on their education or knowledge; they are also known as "urban white collars" or "professionals," in contrast to those who get rich either through business (which in its early stages often involves smuggling and other illegal business practices) or through their personal connections with powerful interests (the typical princelings). This new class has emerged with China's globalization, especially with the advancement of the internet and new technology, and developed some distinctive cultural interests and tastes. See Zhou 2005 and Liu, S. 2010.

8 Unlike in other countries, where TV drama screenplays are often re-written as the series progresses to adapt to changing ratings and audience reactions, Chinese TV drama screenplays are usually completed well before production begins and seldom change—unless the censors require it. This is a result of the Chinese official approval system. For the changes made by these two stations, see Anonymous 2009b.

9 Zhu Lili draws a distinction between the core "orthodox interpretation" (*zhengtong xing*) and the "alternative interpretation" (*fei zhengtong xing*) of the drama. The

orthodox interpretation adopts the official historical view, and promotes a revolutionary heroism. It regards the main characters in *Undercover* as revolutionary heroes who loyally uphold their belief in Communism and sacrifice themselves for the great cause of creating a new China. The alternative interpretation, by contrast, represents a much more intellectual discourse on the pros and cons of revolution. It transcends the official ideology and views the historical tragedy of individuals from a more humanistic perspective (rather than a political position). It especially sympathizes with small human figures sacrificed in the name of "history". See Zhu, L. 2009.

10 Baidu Inc. is China's largest commercial web portal, offering a Chinese search engine for websites, audio files, and images, and hosting numerous keyword-based discussion forums and film/TV series fan clubs in the form of net bars, or post bars (*tie ba*). Baidu's net bars are connected to Baidu's search service, which, like Google, can link up to an enormous and ever-increasing network. It is here that millions of fans of TV dramas and films find their self-styled "families" (communities) in the thousands of net bars named after the titles of films or TV series.

11 There is clearly mutual fertilization among different artistic mediums in the promotion of the spy genre. For example, both *Undercover* and *Plotting* were adapted from works of fiction, by Long Yi and Mai Jia, respectively. These fictional works, while they had already won a high reputation among spy fiction cognoscenti, became much more popular after the TV dramas were broadcast, and the authors are now in high demand for further TV dramas and films. Mai Jia subsequently wrote the screenplay for the blockbuster film *The Wind* (*Fengsheng*, 2009), and Long Yi was the screenwriter for a new spy TV drama *Borrowing a Gun* (*Jieqiang*, 2011), with Jiang Wei as its director. Spy films also became popular on the big screen, even giving martial arts costume dramas a run for their money, with recent hits including *Qiuxi* (2010) and *East Wind Rain* (*Dong feng yu*, 2010). In both films, the director and leading actor was Liu Yunlong, who made his name through his performance in the spy TV drama *Plotting*.

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6 *Let the Bullet Fly*

Film discussions and the cultural public sphere

> The genius of Jiang Wen lies in the way that, in the film, Maoists see Mao, pro-US viewers see (George) Washington, reformers see reform, revolutionaries revolution, populists see populism, small potatoes see their savior, the film bureau sees "no new China without the (Communist) Party": so everyone thinks that the film speaks for them![1]

Jiang Fangzhou's enthusiastic yet tongue-in-cheek comment is referring to director Jiang Wen's *Let the Bullet Fly*, an action comedy somewhat reminiscent of the style of Hollywood Westerns but sparkling with suggestive dialogue and allegorical images that Chinese audiences find most entertaining and provocative, "earning a kind of across-the-board critical and public acclaim" (Kraicer 2011). Since its release on December 16, 2010, it has set an all-time domestic box office record with total receipts of 664.7 million yuan at dazzling speed, including breaking the all-time Saturday box office record previously held by the imported American movie *Avatar* by earning 62 million yuan on December 18 alone. In theaters, Chinese audiences uncharacteristically expressed their enthusiasm by shouting and screaming, as described by one fascinated viewer:

> Watching the film live is an awesome experience: the whole theatre seems to be boiling. Every time a good piece of dialogue is spoken, there are shouts of *niubi* ("awesome") from the audience, as if we are at a rock and roll concert, and people can't help jumping up from their seats. Everyone is on a high with *Bullet*. One seldom experiences ecstasy with Chinese films, but this one gives us not one but many ecstatic moments!
>
> Bobangni 2010

Let the Bullet Fly not only had unprecedented success at the box office but also provoked intense spontaneous online debate amongst audiences. In the weeks following its public release, viewers made use of blogs and bulletin boards to share their excitement or offer their interpretations of the film in overwhelming numbers of reviews, discussions, and debates. In just a few days, *Let the Bullet Fly* became one of the hottest topics on all the major Chinese internet portals, such as Sina (*Xinlang*), Tencent (*Tengxun*), and

Baidu; and each created special online columns for the film, containing information about promotional tours by the film's cast, box office statistics, news coverage, video clips, and selected comments from microblogs that were updated daily.[2] Internet-based fan clubs were also quickly established and the numbers of participants were stunning: for example, thematic posts to Baidu's *Let the Bullet Fly* net bar quickly climbed to tens of thousands in just a few weeks, and many of these posts received over a thousand visits and hundreds of responses. In the more sophisticated film-oriented online communities, such as Douban and Mtime.com (*Shiguang wang*), the film was rated by enthusiastic viewers at 8.8 and 8.5 out of 10, respectively. In-depth original reviews and comments were posted, often followed and quickly reproduced by other BBS or personal blogs. And on major BBS forums, such as Tianya's Random Talk (*Tianya zatan*) and the Strengthen the Nation Forum (*Qiangguo luntan*) on People.com.cn, the meanings of the film and the intentions of the director became topics of intense public speculation and debate. The emotionally charged public discussions soon became "an interpretative carnival of political allegories" (Guo 2011) with numerous mixed voices, opinions, and political undertones competing to make themselves heard. Like a Rorschach ink test, the film elicited multiple narratives from audiences and groups of different political persuasions, and revealed the agitated state of a society undergoing a deep psychological crisis and full of suppressed aspirations for change.

Some phrases from the film even entered the lexicon as "classic" ways to express popular grievances. The most commonly uttered statements included:

> "The taxes have already been collected for the next 90 years";
>
> "If you don't want either money or women, why do you want to be a governor?";
>
> "Pick up your gun and follow me";
>
> "Money is not important for me, and neither is power. What is important is to get rid of you!"

By repeating these phrases like mantras, both online and in their daily communications with others, ordinary Chinese viewers seemed to experience a sense of emotional release, knowing that they were not merely appreciating clever movie dialogue but at the same time making an indirect critique of the current Chinese political system. Even the title, *Let the Bullet Fly*, has become a popular cultural watchword creatively used by Chinese audiences to reveal their social experiences and popular concerns, as the following widely circulated *Bullet*-inspired text message makes clear (this is just one of many variations that circulated in 2011):

> Following on the heels of the great popularity of "Let the Bullet Fly," the National Development and Reform Commission recently put a rush

> order on the film "Let the Oil Prices Fly." As yet, there is no fixed timetable for the release of "Let the Stock Prices Fly", which is being financed by the China Securities Regulatory Commission. Of course, the government has announced that it can easily compete by releasing its huge historical epic "Let the House Prices Fly." But the leaders in all walks of life still cannot give us a definite release date for the one we've all been waiting for, "Let Our Incomes Fly."
>
> Guo 2011

For a media researcher, this virtually unanimous online critical acclaim from the broad mass of viewers is striking. The netizen/audiences' response to and discussions of *Let the Bullet Fly* provide further evidence of the increasingly vocal tendencies of Chinese popular culture consumers as they aspire to cultural power, pursue cultural democracy, and practice forms of political expression in the cultural sphere.

Following on from the previous chapter, which demonstrated how media fandom surrounding a popular TV drama created a sense of community and "collective meaning making," this chapter will extend the discussion of the social meanings and public uses of popular media—in this case film—to a more political dimension. Through discourse analysis of the interpretative practices of online communities that evolved around the film, *Let the Bullet Fly*, I will provide further evidence for the formation of a cultural public sphere in China and examine the political implications of the consumption and dissemination of popular culture. In particular, I will focus on drawing out the civic value and critical potential of the various forms and content of affective communications among fans.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a brief introduction to the film itself and its central characters will provide a context for the sometimes far-fetched interpretations of its numerous online fan communities.

Jiang Wen's *Let the Bullet Fly*: a synopsis

Set in southern China in the 1920s, a notoriously chaotic time in Chinese history when warlords fought over the shattered land after the 1911 Republican Revolution, *Let the Bullet Fly* is a "revolutionary Western" (Kraicer 2011) featuring an idealistic bandit facing off with a local strongman for control of a provincial outpost called Goose Town.

Pocky Zhang (played by Jiang Wen), a former revolutionary turned bandit, and his gang attack a strange two-carriage train being pulled along the rails by a team of white horses. Inside are the con man Ma Bangde (played by Ge You), his devious mistress, and his trusted aide Tang. Ma has brazenly purchased the governorship of Goose Town and is currently en route to take up his position. After hijacking the train, Pocky forces the terrified little weasel Ma, who now pretends to be the dead aide Tang, to reveal Ma's cunning plan. Pocky decides to take over Ma's identity and become governor himself—and then to set

about extracting money from the local fat cats to distribute among the poor townspeople. He takes Ma/Tang along with him as his "counselor."

Upon arriving in Goose Town, Pocky and company discover that it is already firmly under the thumb of a slick opium-runner named Master Huang (played by Chow Yun Fat), who has very close ties to the local government officials. With his power, connections, wealth, and especially his practice of exploiting the poor and dividing their money among the rich, Huang is the main obstacle to Pocky's plan. "I shall pull Huang up by the roots!" vows Pocky.

Pocky's seven-man gang and Huang's various lackeys confront each other in a deadly series of mind games, assassinations, and shooting wars. At the same time, Ma/Tang uses his cynical understanding of local politics to please both sides and do whatever it takes to survive. The rivalry between Pocky and Huang culminates in a full-pitched battle. Ma/Tang desperately tries to flee but is killed by a landmine. The townsfolk are so scared of Huang that they refuse to join the battle until Pocky manages to trick them into thinking Huang is already dead. As the delighted masses attack and loot Huang's fortified castle, the real Huang is killed by his subordinate who has realized that the game is up. After their victory, Pocky's surviving gang members load up their spoils and take the train to Shanghai accompanied by a beautiful prostitute. But Pocky decides to stay behind: a lone figure riding off into the sunset.

This brief plot synopsis cannot really explain the amazing appeal of Jiang's film to Chinese audiences. Its success stems from a combination of the dramatic action-packed plot, a hurtling narrative pace, powerful and imaginative images and symbols, and, most importantly, the "wittily inflected sharp dialogue with acidly contemporary sound bites" (Kraicer 2011), all of which resonate deeply with the unarticulated experiences and powerful emotions lurking in the hearts of the film's viewers. What makes the film even more effective in the current Chinese political environment is its postmodern style full of ambiguities, which allows this archetypical revolutionary rebel tale to generate "a corresponding allegory for almost every kind of ideologically engaged viewer" (Kraicer 2011). In other words, Jiang Wen creates a "writerly" text which opens up unlimited possibilities for tacit understandings from the audience.

In his fascinating study of the "embodied" images and allegorical meanings of Jiang Wen's first two films, *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Devils on the Doorstep*, art historian Jerome Silbergeld makes an insightful observation on the significance of Jiang Wen's visual language:

> In his dissident dance around the censor, the Chinese filmmaker's route is necessarily indirect. As an artist, his tactics are little different from those of his Mongol-period or Manchu-era predecessors: overtly visual but cunningly allegorical, and a thoughtful use of embodiment is one of his most important means of evasion.
>
> Silbergeld 2008: 21

Convinced that in China "allegory and the analogical mode reign supreme in rhetorical expression as the circumspect means of negotiating with censorship," therefore "a careful bit of body watching can be a useful tool in trying to understand the unstated or understated," (ibid.), Silbergeld carries out a painstaking scene-by-scene analysis of Jiang's two films, focusing on the characters' "body talk." In Silbergeld's view, body image substitutes for verbal communication, including the metaphorical substitution of individual bodies for something larger than themselves: ideas and institutions. With his art critic's scrutiny of details and historian's knowledge of Chinese culture, society, and history, Silbergeld deciphers for his Western audiences many of the allegorical meanings of various kinds of embodiments and shows how "the careful observation of form can take one beyond the obvious in textual narrative, to a level in which the significance of the narrative, made subtle for the sake of both artistry and political subversion, is itself embodied." (Silbergeld 2008: 13).

Silbergeld's discussion of embodiment and allegory are equally relevant for understanding the cinematic language of *Let the Bullet Fly*, in which, as some critics believe,

> Jiang takes a genre that originally mythologized the expansion of the American frontier and the establishment of free-range individualism and nimbly tweaks it to fit both the chaotic Chinese warlord era prior to Communist control, and, by implication, the current post-Communist (but definitely not post-Party) return to a wild, laissez-faire regime of unregulated aggressive capital and tenuous central control.
>
> Kraicer 2011

Indeed, the following discussion about the film's "allegorical meanings" is partly derived from the engaging and ambivalent visual language and the hinted political discourse of the film. However, since my main concern is interpretations of the film by its Chinese audiences and the emergence of a new form of public discourse through popular reactions to the film, instead of attempting to offer another "expert reading" of Jiang's rich cinematic text, I will shift the critical focus to the Chinese viewers themselves: how have they deciphered the visual and aural "embodiments" in *Let the Bullet Fly*?

Reading between the lines: interpreting *Let the Bullet Fly* in public online forums

The extensive online material related to the film that I use to analyze its public discourse can be roughly divided into two strands. One is online film reviews posted on Douban and other film fan communities, and the other is discussions of the film on various bulletin boards (BBS), especially the forums within the Tianya Community (*tianya shequ*). Since it was established in 1999,

Tianya has grown to become one of the biggest online communities in China. It is best known for its BBS public forums (*luntan*). Its popularity partly stems from the active involvement of some well-known public intellectuals posting controversial opinions about pressing social issues, especially in its early stages. But much of its growth has been due to the convenient hub that it provides for all manner of discussion forums (Yang 2009: 168). Random Talk (*Tianya zatan*) is the central hub for current affairs debates, and it attracts several million visitors every day. In the case of *Let the Bullet Fly*, over two hundred separate discussion threads emerged in just the first few weeks of the film's release; and many of these threads generated hundreds or even thousands of responses, thus creating numerous small forums inspired by the film.

Compared with the thoughtfully argued and consistent commentaries in film reviews, it is more methodologically challenging to make use of the messy and wildly uneven discussions on BBS forums like Tianya for reception studies. However, for this topic, the public discussion of popular media in the BBS environment is crucial for understanding the conditions, operation, and nature of the cultural public sphere. This is because these BBS sites allow us to follow an initial post and all its subsequent responses, which reveals the ongoing process and interactive nature of these online communities as they react to a specific cultural event. Second, based on the numbers of participants, it is clear that Chinese netizens in general, and Tianya's communities in particular, much prefer to read the news and look for hot topics on BBS rather than through other media forms. Thus discussions on BBS tell us more about the public and communicative nature of netizens' cultural activities than personal blogs or individual reviews. Third, the threads and follow-up discussions posted on BBS represent a broad mix of people expressing their different reactions. The sheer variety of participants means that these audience responses exemplify online discussion in its unsolicited, unmediated raw state. They provide a valuable resource for measuring the spontaneous reactions of ordinary audiences to the film. Finally, by looking at a discussion thread within its context on the BBS site, in particular in the context of other hot social topics being discussed online at the same time, it is possible to discern how a particular discussion of a film is framed and interacts with other public discussions of social and political import to these audiences. We find that a film discussion is never isolated but rather is closely tied to other contentious topics within the broader public discourse swirling about the blogosphere, including the kinds of pressing current issues that Yang Guobin has identified in his nuanced study of online citizen activism (Yang 2009).

Space does not permit comprehensive analysis of this huge amount of material, but I have selected one specific discussion thread from Tianya's BBS for more detailed consideration. This thread is entitled "Illustrated Explanation of Allegories in *Let the Bullet Fly*." (Rang zidanfei yinyu tuwen jiexi).

The original post on January 2, 2011, was by someone with the net moniker Fenghuanghuo No. 2. It consists of a total of 43 installments and over 100 illustrations from the film (including ten installments at the end, which the

author claims to be by "a dedicated follower"). In less than five days (January 2–6), this most comprehensive and thorough "explanation" of the film received over half a million hits (564,000), with nearly two thousand responses to the discussion. This 24-page piece thus provides an excellent resource for us to draw out some of the typical themes and preoccupations of BBS discussion threads.

The popularity of this thread is partly due to its attractive format using stills from the film as the basis for sardonic comments about current Chinese society. Apparently this format has been used for some time by online film communities to dissect the stylistic features of movies. In their serious scene-by-scene analyses, there is an almost professional level of scrutiny exercised—not so different from the expert analysis of Jiang Wen's films by Silbergeld mentioned above. For those who have seen the film but find they are not grasping the meaning, these kinds of threads may serve as useful viewing guides. For other participants, this approach seems to be their way of paying homage to a great director's work by giving minute attention to every single detail in their films. It is basically an esthetic approach: an intense, if sometimes highly speculative, decoding of the structure, images, and symbols of film works.[3]

Fenghuanghuo's "Explanation" makes use of this established format for a much more provocative purpose: applying his/her wit to draw out the political and social "messages" hidden within *Let the Bullet Fly*'s images and dialogue. Most of the author's explanations for each still shot are quite brief, but they are frequently bold and shocking, and they get right to the point. For example, the first installment focuses on the opening shot, which features the starkly beautiful but incongruous image of a train carriage pulled along by a team of white horses. Fenghuanghuo declares: "The film uses a train pulled by horses to symbolize the [political] system. This system (called Marxist–Leninism) is fundamentally outdated, but it has a falsely advanced appearance."

Here the author plays on the double meaning of the words "horse train" (*ma la lieche*) in Chinese, as *ma lie* is a common abbreviation for Marxist–Leninism (*ma lie zhuyi*). In this way, we go from an unusual image in the film through a clever homonym to come up with a blunt allegorical political critique.

Soon after this first installment, Fenghuanghuo loaded several more examples drawing direct parallels between scenes in the film and contemporary politics and society. Here are a few more translations with my explanations in square brackets:

> Installment 2: The ones who control the train [i.e. the Marxist–Leninist system] are corrupt officials like Ma Bangde [the character who, as mentioned above, purchased his position], and he hires gunmen – *chengguan* [officers of the City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Agency][4] – to protect him.
>
> Installment 4: Ma Bangde is [an indirect way of referring to] Ma De's gang [which would be written as *Ma De bang* in Chinese]. Ma De refers

> to the Party Secretary of Suihua in Heilongjiang Province, who caused one of the biggest political scandals in PRC history when he sold official positions for profit. [Ma De was prosecuted in 2005 for taking bribes of more than 6 million yuan in return for promoting his underlings to higher positions: see Xinhua, 2005].
>
> Installment 5: "The hundred year drum of injustice" in the film hints at the current mechanisms for maintaining social stability (*Weiwen zhidu*). This drum sits in front of the government office, but it hasn't been used for over one hundred years, so roots and leaves are growing up all around it, and it is sprouting into a tree. When Sixth Brother … is about to bang the drum to complain of the injustice suffered by the common people, the corrupt official Ma Bangde stops him, saying: " … Who would dare to complain of injustice? If you try clearing away the leaves and banging this drum after over a hundred years of silence, that in itself will lead to enormous injustice!" If you think about it, this hundred year drum of injustice is little different from the current Letters and Visits System (*Xinfang zhidu*) for maintaining social stability, which tries to extinguish a fire by covering it up with a lid. There may be a drum, but it is covered up and never used: what an imaginative metaphor!

And in installment 14 the author makes an even more provocative statement:

> In the eighth year of the Republic, the bandit who wears a mask with 9 points leads 6 brothers to attack 4th Master Huang … I dare not spell this out [i.e. explain what this really means], because it will only be "harmonized." [By coincidence, the various numbers in this scene give the date 89.6.4, in other words June 4, 1989, the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre. The author says that if he makes this any clearer, it will be removed to help maintain the harmonious society, i.e., censored].

For this Chinese netizen, all the imaginative yet idiosyncratic images, expressions and events in the film can be linked to details from contemporary Chinese reality, and she/he feels no need to explain further how she/he made the connections. In fact the links are often quite random and arbitrary, based on vague and far-fetched visual, auditory or verbal/numerary associations. Yet while the interpretations lack a logical thread and fail to consider the issue of the film's artistic unity, they reveal a clear and consistent intention to use the film as a springboard for controversial social and political comments, including many sensitive and even taboo topics.[5]

This method of political/social "hijacking" or "poaching" somehow fulfills the needs of many online participants, and there are plenty of "spectators" who are keen to jump on the bandwagon to vent their suppressed emotions and engage in political commentary. Although many of them simply throw out a few brief comments, such as "This is really true!" "Great!" and "Insightful," others

relay long review articles from other websites to offer more insights or raise new topics for participants to chew on. Still others add weight to the original author's interpretations by providing further examples and more extended explanation and discussion of the same issues.

For example, in explaining the strange and gruesome scene where Master Six is tricked by Master Huang's hit man, Hu Wan, and is forced to cut open his chest to prove his innocence, Fenghuanghuo's original comment is: "Cheated by the powerful and their running dogs, the powerless and those with a conscience have no option but to commit suicide or burn themselves to death." Responding to this vague allusion to "burning themselves to death," which does not happen in the movie, a follower notes that he/she has "figured out" what the author left unsaid: since the political system and economy of Goose Town is actually controlled by Huang, "(who) collects money from the poor and then divides it among the rich and powerful, isn't this scene actually about forced eviction, where the ZF [a pinyin abbreviation for *zhengfu*, "government"] and the property developers divide the money among themselves?" (Xiaomai, January 2, 2011).[6] Obviously both the original author and follower are connecting this scene to a hot topic in recent Chinese public discourse: forced evictions due to rapid property development, and in particular a real-life protest against forced eviction that sparked national public outrage in late 2009. A woman called Tang Fuzhen from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, refused to leave her property when the developers arrived, and instead burned herself to death on the roof, an incident that was caught on video and posted on the internet, then widely reported in the Chinese media.

But another two followers felt that this interpretation did not explain why Master Six cut open his chest, and how this absurd action could prove his innocence. They reminded netizens of another real-life event from 2009 which made headlines in the media and blogosphere, including on Tianya: the so-called Open Chest Lung-Testing Incident. After falling seriously ill, a migrant worker Zhang Haichao was convinced that his illness was caused by hazardous working conditions. Frustrated by the refusal of his employer to pay workers' compensation due to so-called lack of evidence, Zhang voluntarily underwent open-chest surgery to physically reveal the dust in his lungs and thereby prove that he had contracted pneumoconiosis, also known as "black lung disease." Another follower then comments: "The reality of legal injustice in China is much more absurd than the fictional film plot!" (Chaoshengbo zhadan, January 4, 2011).

Apparently this intense speculation about the symbolic meaning of the film by viewers has its source in the affective associations that well up from their lived experience and the immediate political/social environment in which their discussion takes place. And not surprisingly, Tianya's news bulletins and other online discussions of China's social and political issues are frequently cross-referenced as evidence for their interpretations. While many of these interpretations are speculative, and some are clearly far-fetched, they do reveal an important emotional function of such public forums and their peculiar discourse. As two members comment:

> Maybe these explanations are over the top, and I don't think Jiang necessarily had this intention when he made the film, but because this society is so chaotic and so much dirty business goes on under the surface, it's no wonder the viewer made such associations.
>
> Chongqingbangbang, January 2, 2011

"One film can evoke so many associations, I don't think these comments are merely pretentious or overstretched. It is anger (*nu*) [which causes them]. Everyone knows what our society is like" (Yuanluchenxiang, January 4, 2011).

Thus it was not surprising that politically-charged readings of *Let the Bullet Fly* led to a more specific political debate on the theme of revolution, which soon emerged as a dominant topic in reviews posted on personal blogs, online film communities, and public forums. Some online commentators saw the film extending the Republican period writer Lu Xun's criticism of the unenlightened masses and the incompleteness of any revolution; others considered the film to be a veiled representation of Mao's land reforms in the revolutionary period and his indigenous mobilization of peasants; still others contended that the extreme corruption and distributive inequality portrayed in the film reflected the situation in contemporary society, which would soon lead to the eruption of another socialist revolution. These various comments reveal the presence of what has been called a "political unconscious" in the modern Chinese mind, a complex psychology and form of discourse with which Chinese audiences used to be deeply familiar and to which they still readily respond. I will examine this theme of revolution in more detail with reference to a particularly thoughtful commentary posted on the highly regarded film review site, Douban.

In this extensive review, entitled "Farewell to Revolution, or Continuous Revolution?" the author, Zhang Xiaoyang, who regularly posts his film criticisms on Mtime and Douban, argues that *Let the Bullet Fly* is a summary and analysis of China's revolutionary history over the last hundred years, embodied in the characters and the ideals that they express through the film's dialogue: "Jiang Wen has compressed all the revolutions of the 20th century into a single story. This story appears to be quite absurd, but it contains a great deal of rich material for its audience" (Zhang 2010). The author argues that the 1911 Republican Revolution was led by the bourgeoisie in reaction against the weak and corrupt imperial system, and both Pocky Zhang and Master Huang devoted their youth to this movement, but the Revolution did not have much real impact, especially on rural society, as Lu Xun observed in his famous short stories that point out the indifference and ignorance toward revolution of ordinary Chinese people. The different paths taken by Huang and Pocky represent the ideological split between Nationalists and Communists: Pocky's practice of distributing silver to the poor clearly refers to Mao's land reforms and his mobilization of peasants to escape political subjugation. However, Mao's theory of continuous revolution was not well understood by

his followers and was quickly abandoned after his death, just as Pocky Zhang was left alone after the successful destruction of Huang's fortified base. And just as the ordinary people looted the riches of the deposed Huang, and the victorious bandits (except for Pocky) headed to Shanghai/Pudong to enjoy their victory, so we see in the past few decades in China the people (encouraged by China's leaders) have bid farewell to revolution and rushed to embrace the market economy. The author clearly believes that Jiang's film is an attempt to revive the legacy of Mao's revolution and reemphasize its relevance for China: "As long as poverty and class division still exist, revolution will never end."

The essay is well researched with many footnotes, and the author also quotes several Western thinkers, from Karl Marx to Hannah Arendt, to debate deeper issues such as the ethics of revolution. Zhang's article attracted many followers and the revolution issue was vehemently debated on many other websites. For example, on Utopia (*Wuyou zhixiang*: www.wyzx.com), China's most active online Maoist community, over sixty reviews of *Let the Bullet Fly* were posted in less than two months, and most hailed the film as a eulogy to Mao and his revolutionary thought, and by extension a criticism of the current regime's market reforms and turn to capitalism, which they see as a betrayal of Mao's pure ideals (Feng 2010). Similar views were also expressed on other BBS such as the Strengthen the Nation forum on People.com.cn,[7] and other forums on the Tianya community site.

While this reading of the film reflects the nostalgic sentiments of a certain segment of the public for a bygone egalitarian society that never was, it can also be seen as part of a broader political debate among Chinese intellectuals about how to resolve China's current predicament, especially the problem of growing social inequality and injustice. This is illustrated by another review on Douban, where an author with the net moniker Kalening de weixiao raises the pointed question: Why has "revolutionary narrative" now returned after going out of fashion for a couple of decades? The author draws parallels between the fictional world in the film and the contemporary reality of thirty years of reform and argues that despite the great achievements of economic development in China, deeper reforms have met with resistance from interest groups, and at the same time, the reforms that have occurred have resulted in a less fair distributive system, thus leading to huge social tensions. These internal contradictions have become worse and worse over time. In this desperate situation, "revolution again becomes one of the options on the table for solving the deep problems of society, and this is the context behind the reappearance of revolutionary themes in artistic works" (Kaliening de weixiao, 2010).

But not everyone agrees that the Maoist style of violent revolution can solve China's problems. For example, the opposite opinion appears in a review by Cao Feiyun posted on Blog China, entitled "The Trap of Political Science Fantasy in The Bullet."[8] Cao's posting is one of the better-argued and most widely cited reviews available online—in fact, the main points of the interpretation by Fenghuanghuo described in the previous section are actually borrowed from Cao. In his review, Cao makes an appealing argument that the

film is a thinly veiled representation of contemporary social reality, and he shows how the three main characters personalize different social groups. However, Cao argues that that the film's revolutionary solution to China's problem is nothing but a "fiction," a wishful empty promise of the director, because in today's China there is no such social foundation or particular social group that can lead a successful reform/revolution.

In a similar vein to the predominantly political discourse on Tianya, these reviews and commentaries create a public discourse of political debate on the theme of revolution. The cinematic text, in this case *Let the Bullet Fly*, is just a "trigger" that inspires the viewers to release their suppressed emotions and express their political opinions. In the name of interpreting the "true" meaning of the plot or the characters, what the audience netizens are actually doing is engaging in spontaneous public discussion about China's past revolution and its consequences, particularly Mao's revolutionary legacy and its relevance for today's China. In such public discussions, we see a shift away from the esthetic commentary/critique or autonomous discourse on the art of film to an expression of public concerns, and equally important, sharing those concerns with a responsive community.

To be noted, not everyone on the blogosphere agrees with this over-reading of political meanings in the film. In the responses to Fenghuanghuo on Tianya, we see many netizens declaring that his/her political interpretation is too stretched (see, for example, Majiarensheng, January 3, 2011). There are also more serious criticisms that this way of interpreting the film is politically and hermeneutically problematic, and that it reveals echoes of the kinds of extreme political readings common during the Maoist period, especially Yao Wenyuan's criticism of historical drama on the eve of the Cultural Revolution (Askahaha, January 2, 2011). The author warns that this kind of political reading not only distorts the director's intention, but may also lead to political persecution and banning of the film: "It was not easy for Jiang Wen to finally get permission to make a movie like this: so why do you have to go and get it banned?" (Toumingguoban, January 2, 2011).

Film artist as cunning hero: *Let the Bullet Fly* and the "imaginative" resistance to media censorship

Another theme that marks the political discourse of film discussions around *Let the Bullet Fly* is the significance the film has in the context of China's ubiquitous media control, in particular film approval and censorship. Netizens publicly wondered how such a politically vocal film managed to get approved in the first place, and what kinds of strategies did Jiang employ to get the upper hand over the censors.[9]

One post on Douban by someone with the moniker Xiliu on December 18, 2010, offered an interesting answer by suggesting that Jiang's movie was a coded attack on the official institutions regulating film. Entitled "Jiang Wen's kingdom will never end: some hidden clues, allegories, ambitions and compliments in *Let*

the Bullet Fly," initiated the whole phenomenon of online political allegorical readings of the film (Guo 2011). The post was recommended by over fifteen thousand people and nearly two thousand responses were posted on the site in the ten-day period up to December 27. Besides these responses on Douban, Xiliu's post was linked to the Tianya site, and also attracted 437,224 hits and 1644 responses in the film forum of the Tianya communities (up to December 27, 2010). Xiliu's review was hailed by netizens as an "expert post" (*jishutie*), for its ingenious use of the traditional Chinese critical technique called *suoyin*, or searching for hidden messages by relying on linguistic clues and a range of external sources, from historical writings to unofficial gossip.[10]

Xiliu's *suoyin* reading of *Let the Bullet Fly* draws out several "hidden clues" by comparing the changes the film made to the original story by Ma Shitu, *Tale of a Bandit Turned County Head* (*Daoguan ji*), one of the tales in Ma's *Ten Records of Evening Chats* (*Yetan shiji*), a collection of short stories written in the late 1940s that exposed the misery and hardship of the masses under the Nationalists and their corrupt local governments. Xiliu points out the "crucial detail" that the vague period of the original story becomes the specific year of 1920 in the movie, which highlights that the movie is about the 1911 Revolution and its consequences. He/she claims this is important for understanding the revolutionary theme in the film as well as the true identities of Zhang and Huang as "former revolutionaries." Further, based on the film's implicit references to the 1911 Republican Revolution and its impact on Chinese politics and society, Xiliu argues that the story is not a simple Chinese Robin Hood fable, nor even a typical, if outdated, anti-Nationalist diatribe, but rather contains well-hidden comments on China's revolution and its undesirable consequences: "Huang is not merely a simple bully landlord; he is a corrupted former revolutionary, a member of the faction in power (*dangquan pai*) … In Goose Town he is the spokesman for the merchant officials!" (Xiliu 2010).

Xiliu's "analysis" of the film's two main characters, backed up by frequent references to historical facts, including detailed calculations of the years and real historical events involved, had a strong influence on the kinds of political allegorical readings among fan audiences that we introduced earlier.

However, it was another unique argument in Xiliu's *suoyin* reading that really appealed to the young participants of Douban and other websites where this review was relayed and discussed. Xiliu claimed that besides the film's general social critique of official corruption and injustice, it was also more specifically a disguised attack on Chinese film institutions, in particular on the censors and government regulators: "I think Jiang Wen's gun is aimed at the world of film, or to be precise, the government's spokesmen in the film world." The author weaves together several clues based on his insider knowledge of film circles as well as on public rumors, to justify this unusual interpretation. The bandit hero, Pocky, who happens to be played by the director Jiang Wen, actually represents Jiang himself, full of bitterness and righteous anger toward the censors after his earlier film, *Devils on the Doorstep*, was banned. The two-faced cynical Ma/Tang represents the collective

"compromises" (or submissive kneeling down) of other contemporary filmmakers from Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige to Feng Xiaogang in the face of government power.[11] And Huang, a powerful and manipulative figure, but someone who always wields his power behind the scenes and out of sight, is actually Han Sanping, the CEO of China Film Group.[12] Han is a director-turned-cultural official who gained status and power in Chinese film through his control of China Film Group, a state-owned media conglomerate that still partly monopolizes the film market using state resources, especially in foreign co-productions and film import/exports, but he also exerts considerable influence over the licensing and approval of other people's films through SARFT.[13]

Xiliu's critical evidence for this outlandish claim is drawn, in typical *suoyin* fashion, from Han Sanping's nickname in film circles, Han Sanye, or Third Master Han, a title which illustrates not just Han's power but also filmmakers' awestruck attitude toward him.[14] Xiliu argues that in *Let the Bullet Fly* Jiang Wen has purposely changed the name of the bully in the original story from Huang Tianbang to Huang Siye (Fourth Master Huang) to correspond to Han Sanping's nickname. So the film should be read as a political satire that challenges the illegitimate power of the film bureau, the film censors, and their film industry representative, Han Sanping, which has caused the elite filmmakers to compromise their values and integrity to collaborate with the strongmen in their industry. It has also allowed the few remaining independent filmmakers to be ruthlessly bullied. As for the film's title, Jiang Wen's "gun" was once taken away when his earlier movie was banned, and *Let the Bullet Fly* is actually the bullet he has been waiting for many years to fire at the censors.[15]

Xiliu concludes this "original" reading with some provocative words:

> Before too long, the fire initiated by the *Bullet* will spread, and other directors, screenwriters, actors and critics will hold up their guns and shoot out the bullet that has been hidden in their hearts for so many years. Jiang Wen will destroy the "reign of Sanye," which was a reign of censors [literally, "scissorhands": *jiandaoshou*].
>
> Xiliu 2010

Viewed objectively, Xiliu's reading is clearly a piece of wishful thinking based on flimsy shreds of evidence puffed up by strongly expressed emotions. Yet it does partly explain why this film and its director have received such respect and enthusiasm from Chinese film fans, who are generally notoriously critical and intolerant of domestically produced films (Yu 2011). In Jiang Wen, they believe they can vicariously satisfy their longing for a rebel who dares to challenge and break the iron house of state censorship of the arts and film in China.

Certainly, Jiang Wen is one of the only commercially successful Chinese directors who could still play this role. In the 1980s and 1990s, Jiang established his public image as a rebellious, masculine, larger than life hero through his roles in films and TV series such as *Hibiscus Town*, *Red Sorghum*, and *Beijing*

Sojourner in New York. His debut work as a director, *In the Heat of the Sun*, then cemented his reputation as an original and creative filmmaker who brought an alternative perspective to historical events that had previously become clichéd in Chinese film representations. His status as a challenging and edgy figure in the Chinese film industry was further solidified when he ran afoul of the censors with his second film, *Devils on the Doorstep*, which was banned from public release due to its controversial shades of grey take on the anti-Japanese war. After Jiang took the film to the Cannes Film Festival, he was forbidden from making films in China for five years. As a result, among young literary and film fans Jiang became the best-known case of how original creative directors could be damaged by the system. So with this established reputation and the subsequent release of *Let the Bullet Fly*, with its layers of ambiguous political innuendo, it is not surprising that online fans came to speculate on how such a film managed to get through the official approval system. Many attributed this to Jiang Wen's sophisticated blending of entertainment, farce, and old-fashioned revolutionary action that helped to conceal its more serious messages.

> By hiding his real intention and meaning deeply beneath the entertaining and commercialized surface, he delayed understanding long enough to allow approval by the censors, while still allowing audiences to decipher the meaning in their own time. This would be too late [for the censors to change their minds]: a very cunning use of film art.
>
> Xiliu 2010

In these fans' eyes, Jiang Wen has become a heroic strategist engaging in guerilla warfare with the cultural censors, using all his hard-won wisdom and experience. His ability "to make money without bowing down" (*zhanzhe ba qian zheng le*), to quote Pocky Zhang, demonstrates his courage and canniness, but also shows that an individual can beat the repressive institutional system.

In constructing Jiang Wen as a hero who dares to stand up against cultural officials, and who ridicules other filmmakers for their obsequious compliance with state censorship and control, these fans are actually expressing their own critique, resentment, and anger toward the absurdity and fallaciousness of most other Chinese films, as well as current Chinese cultural regulations and policies that greatly constrain the creativity and productivity of many Chinese filmmakers. Such views resonate at a deep emotional level with the literary youth and cinema fans who populate Douban and other online communities. They are increasingly less tolerant of film censorship, seeing it as a central cause of the general irrelevance and insipidity of Chinese film today.[16] Therefore, instead of seeing the film as a commercialized mishmash or a shallow black comedy incorporating all the typical elements of good entertainment, as some other critics suggested, they insist on viewing it as an intricately designed, profound political statement in the guise of a blockbuster

movie. In a way that contrasts directly with their "camp strategy" of ridiculing and parodying recent martial arts and costume dramas made by established filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige (Yu 2010), Chinese netizens have now turned frivolousness into seriousness, and the esthetic into the political.

The extreme political orientation of Chinese viewers' interpretation of *Let the Bullet Fly* becomes evident when one compares the reviews of the film in China with those in America and overseas, where it received lukewarm praise yet emotionally detached readings. The reviews from expert critics in print as well as the comments and critiques posted on IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes, on which the film received average ratings of 6.9 and 6.1, respectively, clearly indicate a lack of interest in or knowledge of the social and political dimensions of the film. They focus much more on the artistic aspects of the film, including its similarities to the "western-cum-comedy" tradition (John Anderson, *Variety*, 2011); its indebtedness to foreign filmmakers from Sergio Leone to Kurosawa (Philip French, *The Guardian*, August 19, 2012, and Maggie Lee, *Hollywood Reporter*, January 11, 2011); and its structural failures (Jeannette Catsoulis, *NYTimes*, March 1, 2012). This contrast surely results from the different social context of the reviewers, as the following observation from Michel De Certeau on written texts suggests:

> Whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust, the text has a meaning only through its readers: it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes a text only in its relation to the exteriority of the reader.
>
> De Certeau 1984: 170

Conclusion: popular media and the cultural public sphere

Two earlier studies of Chinese mass media from the 1990s focused their attention on the social meanings and uses of mass media products, and the possibility of linking them to the development of a public sphere in a post-socialist society. In her article on film discussion groups among ordinary film enthusiasts in Chinese cities, Mayfair Yang argued that even in the context of the state-domination of mass media production in the early 1990s, when film discussion groups were often attached to state work units and continued to serve as sites of state discourse, the resultant public film criticism and review-writing displayed some public sphere possibilities through critical reading practices, especially deflecting or neutralizing state discourses by reading past them or re-appropriating state discourse for other ends and meanings.

> This is because the act of viewing is a process which does not simply issue from the structure of the filmic text itself, but is also a selective and creative appropriation of elements in accord with larger historical and cultural patterns of discourse.
>
> Yang 1994: 120

Subsequently, Lisa Rofel's nuanced study of the social reception and meaning-producing surrounding the Chinese TV drama *Yearning* provided excellent supporting evidence for Yang's argument. Rofel demonstrated how a popular media text engaged, in varying ways, different groups among Chinese audiences, who "have taken up the tools of media for their own cultural production," and used them to imagine the potential for different forms of national identity (Rofel 1995: 316).

However, in the early 1990s, lacking effective networks or spaces to communicate their ideas more widely, these germinating sprouts of public sphere only existed in fragmentary and dispersed forms, and seldom developed into a fully-fledged public sphere. Indeed, it is only through the careful field work and recording of anthropologists like Yang and Rofel that we can catch a glimpse of these epiphenomena in their short existence. But since that time, there have been some remarkable developments in both the cultural industry and communication technologies that have led to changes in spectatorship practices, and consequently stimulated the rise of a cultural public sphere surrounding popular media. The conditions that were lacking for forming a critical public and associated public sphere in the early 1990s now appear to be increasingly present in recent developments in the arena of popular media production and consumption.

Among all the changes in the Chinese media environment, one of the most important is the emergence of active and "affective" urban middle-class consumers of the post-socialist generation. Growing up in an increasingly affluent and globalized society where media and technologies have gained increasing importance, and where there is a constant influx of foreign products and influences, this generation of Chinese consumers has grown impatient with the state's "paternalistic management of culture and information" (Zhu and Robinson 2010) and developed a proactive role in choosing its own preferred cultural commodities. These young urban consumers have constituted the main audience for unofficially imported and circulated foreign media and entertainment products over the last two decades, from pirated music CDs and film DVDs (Pang 2005; de Kloet 2010) to the more recent online foreign TV shows from East Asia, North America, and Europe. The broader access to global culture has in turn heightened their consumers' awareness of the limitations of home-grown media products, and sharpened their criticisms of both the quality and the ideological messages of mainstream Chinese movies and television shows.

Moreover, the recent development of communication technologies, in particular internet-based social media, in many ways has fundamentally changed media consumption practices and enabled a participatory culture and a critical public to emerge. Increasingly, popular culture and mass media products are created, circulated, consumed, reinterpreted, and recreated in a multilinked interactive environment, and the ability to engage in such circulating consumption constitutes a key attraction of social networking and online communication among urban middle-class consumers. Now unprecedented numbers of critical voices

are appearing among ordinary netizen-viewers, who play an increasingly important role in constructing the critical discourse that used to be dominated by a small number of elite "official" cultural critics (journalists, writers, academics, and cultural officials). When "the overwhelming number of the audience in mainland China who watch film later become its critics" (Yu 2011: 137), it should be no surprise that the critical energies surrounding entertainment media have started to generate a new cultural public sphere.

One of the clearest examples of the emergence of this cultural public sphere is the "camp sensibility" and "camp strategies" recently developed among netizen/audiences, a playful, ironic, and mocking way of watching and talking negatively about Chinese films, including "laughing during the screening" and "parodying after the screening," as a critical reaction to the pretentiousness, emptiness, and social irrelevance of blockbuster films (Yu 2011: 145). Starting with Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), Chinese audiences began to express their frustration about being lured time after time to big budget spectacle films, but ending up disappointed by the artificial and improbable plots and their conscious avoidance of pressing contemporary issues. As Sabrina Yu insightfully observes, while camp taste "contributed to the rapid growth of Chinese blockbusters and the revival of domestic films," it also turned into "a powerful tool for deconstructing seriousness, classicism and authority" and functioned "as an effective approach to cultural democracy in the specific social and political circumstances in China" (Yu 2011: 146).

This trend came to national prominence in 2005 when a netizen, Hu Ge, posted a flash video online entitled "A Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun," in which the ridiculous plot of Chen Kaige's mystical epic *The Promise* was ruthlessly spoofed. Partly due to the indignant response from Chen, who threatened legal action against the video producer, the "Steamed Bun Incident" received widespread media exposure and became one of the "top ten internet events" of 2006. As Guobin Yang notes, this case "exemplifies a particular cultural contention in Chinese cyberspace," whereby an ordinary netizen/film fan was able to use his own creativity and access to technology to challenge a renowned cultural authority (Yang 2009: 81). It not only signified the huge potential public influence of internet cultural products, but also transformed film criticism from a "serious" top-down endeavor monopolized by a privileged few in the cultural elite, including filmmakers, official film critics, and scholars, into a discursive site for public contention in which any grassroots members of the audience feel they have the right to participate. The spoofing "camp" format has proven to be a favorite of online film/media criticism ever since.

Related to the emergence of "mass camp" viewings in China, another kind of public engagement with popular media that developed during the 2000s has been the collective production of new or hidden "meanings" of media texts. We illustrated this trend in the discussion of internet media fans' "creative" readings of *Undercover* (in Chapter 5) and *Let the Bullet Fly*. What is at stake in this meaning-producing process is the chance to relate the fictional world to the fans' real-life world, and hence to turn the film/media discussion into a

political and social commentary or a public forum for airing pressing current issues. Doing this through popular media reviews and discussions, rather than through direct criticism of government, may be politically safer but is certainly no less poignant in its reflection of the general discontent.

Partly because TV programs tend to be more closely related to the intimate everyday lives of viewers, it was initially TV dramas or TV events that provoked the most intense public discussions on a national scale, and popular TV dramas have consistently generated heated debates among audiences in the last two decades. In fact, audience reactions were often so strong that SARFT regularly felt the need to "restrict" certain genres and topics to "purify the screen" and prevent what they saw as social instability. This occurred, for example, with police and crime dramas in 2004 (Bai 2008); Red Classics and historical dramas, which contained thinly veiled comments on current politics (Zhu 2009); and more recently "dramas of bitter emotions" (as noted in Chapter 2). But with the exponential growth of the internet and its plethora of online fan clubs and media communities, the discussions continued in spite of official restrictions on broadcasting the dramas on screen. The 2009 TV drama *Narrow Dwelling* (*Woju*) was a case in point. It evoked a nationwide discussion of the skyrocketing house prices and the consequent deprivations of the emerging middle class; the business alliances and corruption among government officials and real-estate developers; and the cutthroat competition and problematic public morality of a materialistic society.

Clearly there is increasing public interest in blending social commentary, moral debates, and political critique with their responses to entertainment and esthetic experiences. Qiu Liben, the chief editor of *Asian Weekly*, made this point when identifying the unique social context that led to the audience participating so enthusiastically in such political (mis)reading: "In the barren wilderness of political commentary, this film [*Let the Bullet Fly*] has become a trigger for free speech: only through watching and talking about the film can they speak out what they think and release their long suppressed creativity and imagination" (Qiu 2010).

And the trend shows no signs of receding soon: indeed it seems to be spreading beyond the virtual entertainment environment to broader cultural and political forums. For example, a recent film entitled *Piano of Steel* (*Gang de qin*), which depicts a group of laid-off steel workers who try to make a piano in their closed-down factory, stimulated a serious discussion among internet communities of a range of topics including not only cultural issues, such as the problematic representation of former state workers in Chinese TV dramas and films, but also political and social debates on the current state of China's working class and the legitimacy of the privatization of state enterprises since the late 1990s (Wu 2011). Articles by famous public intellectuals and opinion leaders were widely relayed online, leading to further public discussions in numerous different online magazines and communities.[17] University students also organized film screenings and seminars. At Peking University, the Marxist Study Group invited renowned Marxist/feminist

scholar Dai Jinhua to give a talk and lead a discussion on the theme of class (Dai 2011).

Yet finally, the fans constantly use popular media texts, such as *Let the Bullet Fly* and *Undercover*, as a springboard to create their own entertainment products and engage in extensive social bonding. Online fan clubs, such as the *Bullet* and *Undercover* net bars and the various chat rooms that have sprung up around TV shows like *Are You the One?* are self-organized groups defined through their members' common interests and emotional dedication toward certain media texts or cultural activities. Through the affective communication of their esthetic experiences with their fellow netizens, the middle-class fans of these films and TV shows build social solidarity and a community of shared values based on common emotions and sentiments. Whether they are venting their complaints and grievances about inequality or injustice (Chapter 2); their anxieties about survival and relationships in a rapidly changing society (Chapters 3, 4, and 5); or their protests over cultural hegemony and social control (Chapters 5 and 6), they are doing so as part of a likeminded group often numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and they can expect a large proportion of other netizens to support them and share their ideals.

As Grossberg reminds us: Consuming media images and forming relations in various spaces of consumption signal a form of passionate or affective search for a map of daily lives, their subjectivities, and a resource critical for their struggle for a sense of place in the domain culture (Grossberg, 2010). These interactive interpretative communities sprung from consuming popular media should be recognized as a new form of public engagement, cultural activism, and civil organization in a mass-mediated information society, where formal political participation and civic rights movements have become less and less influential and relevant to ordinary people, especially younger generations. Instead they have turned to express their citizenship through cultural practices and lifestyle politics, including the choices they make when consuming various media and material goods. This function of popular entertainment media as a triggering site for public engagement and debate is particularly important in a country like China, where the formal public sphere is largely undeveloped and media censorship is omnipresent.

Without dismissing the importance of formal political engagement for the future, we should thus realize the significance of a cultural public sphere in China, formed mainly by China's increasing numbers of cultural consumers who are searching for their cultural identities and public voices through their media consumption. This cultural public sphere demonstrates "a diffusely cultural aspect of the public sphere with obviously a symbolic rather than directly instrumental relation to politics" (McGuigan 2010: 27). By registering affects, reorienting sentiments, enabling criticisms, and facilitating social bonding, this cultural public sphere is itself a form of civic engagement where social communication and public discourse can be launched and debated. True, this sphere is still not fully formed—its civic potential and public functions are still only partially developed and constantly risk being diluted or hijacked by

various political and commercial interests (Hu 2012, and see Chapters 1, 3, and 4)—and the discussions and debates it engenders may not necessarily lead to obvious political or social actions and reforms. Yet its emergence in the popular media environment does provide compelling evidence for the exponential growth in public democratic communication in China, the articulation of public opinion which is critical for the formation of a democratic culture and for future collective action. In this sense the cultural public sphere shaped/articulated through engagement with popular media is surely helping to inculcate a cultural citizenship mindset in its participants and laying the groundwork for the development of the civic values and skills that are necessary for creating a true democratic culture in the future.

Notes

1 The quotation of Jiang Fangzhou, a post-1980s generation writer and critic, is from her personal miniblog (weibo) December 20, 2010, www.weibo.com/jfz. The translation is mine.
2 Admittedly many of these are "viral advertisements" now employed by marketing firms to hype every big budget media product, but it's also true that the film's success is an intriguing mixture of commercial efforts and social responses. Also, the online materials I used in this study are mainly audience/netizen-based, thus they are appropriate for my purposes if used with caution.
3 One such example is the influential post by "Xibanya yan" on Ang Lee's *Lust Caution*. See Xibanya yan 2008. Originally posted on Tianya, this review is a scene-by-scene "professional" analysis that indulges itself in every technical and political speculation on the meanings of the film. It exemplifies the extreme enthusiasm and (perhaps misplaced) ability of a generation of young media savvy viewers as engaged critics.
4 The *chengguan* are the official agents employed by cities across China to tackle low-level crime. The agency is widely disliked by the Chinese due to the alleged abuses of power of its officers, who often target desperate stall owners, beating them and confiscating their goods. This conflict in recent years has led to several manslaughter cases and caused widespread public outrage. The most recent case was that of Xia Junfeng in Shenyang, who killed two *chengguan* officers in self-defence and was controversially executed on September 25, 2013, after four years of deliberation by the courts.
5 Note that many of the points made in Fenghuanghuo's post are in fact largely drawn from a review posted on December 24, 2010, on *Blog China* by Cao Feiyun entitled "The Trap of Political Science Fantasy in The Bullet" (Cao 2010). Cao's review is discussed in more detail below. Despite the fact that Cao's original post has a much more coherent argument, Fenghuanghuo's post picks up the most controversial points and makes them more distinctive, incorporating other readings along the way. This example thus also indicates the hybrid state and lack of original argumentation in many public discussions on BBS sites.
6 These comments are all located at Fenghuanghuo erhao 2011.
7 See for example, Xuelang, 2010, which was first published on a military BBS, and later widely reproduced on many personal blogs and BBS sites. See also an article by Xia Ge (2010) published on the Strengthen the Nation BBS, which claims that Jiang has consciously used film to reflect Chinese history, but has wavered between rightist (liberal) and leftist (revolutionary) ideas.
8 In my search for audience interpretations online, I found the issue of authorship a tricky one. First, compared with conventional media there isn't a strong sense of

authorship and copyright on these online forums. Not only do many posters use different net names, disguising their true identities, but also their works are frequently reproduced without acknowledgement. In this particular case, Fenghuanghuo's post seems to be based on Cao's original, but he or she not only completely destroys Cao's original logic but also inserts some lines which are not in the original. Maybe, therefore, we should treat these texts as "collective knowledge," in Jenkins's terms, a kind of unique internet interpretative practice.

9 While netizens have competed to find the most controversial "political allegorical" meanings within *Let the Bullet Fly*, the usually sensitive "official voice" has been remarkably tolerant. In fact, official comments have tended to downplay any political ramifications of the film. In a CCTV news report on *Let the Bullet Fly*, Wang Renyin, one member of the government's National Film Review Committee (*Guojia dianying shencha weiyuanhui*) declared that "this is a film full of fun, with great entertainment value. As for its content, one could hardly say there is any deeper meaning" (CCTV News 2010). The official newspaper, *People's Daily*, also hailed it as one of the best quality New Year commercial films, "winning both big revenues at the box office and a positive reputation among audiences" (Wang, Y. 2011).

10 *Suoyin* was an interpretative practice developed by literary commentators who believed that works of fiction, drama, or poetry should be read as political allegories and that the authors were using literature as a secret weapon to attack their corrupt enemies in the government. This practice enjoyed great popularity among Chinese critics over the centuries, becoming particularly common during the Qing dynasty, when the state engaged in strict censorship of political writings and many writers were persecuted in literary inquisitions. *Suoyin* commentators relied mainly on indirect linguistic clues that they "discovered" hidden in the text, often by breaking down Chinese characters into their component parts, and identifying homophone characters for the names of government officials. These commentators often sought further evidence for their interpretations in a range of external sources, both historical writings and unofficial gossip memoirs—a very important source in a society where interpersonal networks prevailed and publication was restricted. Probably the most famous *suoyin* reading relates to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the great eighteenth-century domestic novel, which *suoyin* scholars read as a critique of royal politics. The influence of the *suoyin* style has also played a role in political events in contemporary China. The political allegorical interpretation of a play by the dramatist Wu Han, which saw it as a veiled criticism of Chairman Mao, was one catalyst for the Cultural Revolution in 1966. And more recently, the internet has become an extremely fertile site for such readings, not least because of the relative anonymity that it provides and the efficiency with which it can be used to spread unofficial rumours and gossip, along with the continuing publication restrictions placed on the official media.

11 Xiliu also uses another piece of evidence to support this reading: Feng Xiaogang, who plays Tang at the beginning of the movie, is later replaced by Ge You's Ma pretending to be Tang. This character is exactly the one who utters the phrase: "in order to make money you have to kneel down." It is public knowledge that Feng Xiaogang and Huayi Brothers, the private media company that produces Feng's films, have developed a very good relationship with SARFT and with powerful officials like Han Sanping. It is also well known, partly through Feng's memoir *I Devoted My Youth to Film* (*Wo ba qingchun xian gei ni*) that, since the mid-1990s when his early experimental films were censored, Feng has willingly collaborated with powerful cultural officials such as Zhang Heping and Han Sanping to develop his New Year Comedies, which were highly profitable but politically compliant films.

12 Han's status and influence in Chinese film is best demonstrated in the making of *Founding of the Republic* (2009), a main melody film about the CCP's victory in the

1940s civil war, co-directed by Han and Huang Jiangxin and produced by China Film Group. Over two hundred Chinese film stars, including those from Taiwan and Hong Kong, competed to "voluntarily" play whatever roles they could get in the film, without asking for remuneration, knowing that this would be good political capital for their future careers in China.

13 China Film Group (CFG) is a state-owned film conglomerate, restructured from eight former state institutes in 1999. It is a mega media group that was developed "to establish the dominant position (of the state) in the newly expanded film marketplace," as well as to "exercise the State's total market control" (Yeh and Davis 2008).

14 "Ye" in Chinese, is an underworld slang term like "boss" in English, which can refer to mafia-type leaders.

15 This reading certainly has validity in many fans' eyes. One reviewer mentioned that the gun and firing is a persistent theme/trope in Jiang Wen's movies and those of some other independent young filmmakers such as Lu Chuan. Jiang Wen actually lent big support to Lu's debut *Searching for the Gun* (*Xunqiang*, 2002) and played the main character in the film.

16 Recently, despite its policy of encouraging film production and co-productions to boost the industry, the state's persistent ideological control has become even more intrusive, especially when regulating subjects dealing with contemporary life. In 2009, the much-anticipated Chinese road film, *Nobody's Zone* (*Wurenqü*), by highly acclaimed and well-loved director Ning Hao, was refused public release, to great popular indignation. Recently, the celebrated director Xie Fei, in an open letter on Sina Weibo (December 12, 2012) urged authorities to stop censorship and implement a film rating system instead. Many other filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai responded to his call, followed by some industrial figures such as Yu Dong, the CEO of Bona Films, and Wang Jianlin, the owner of Wanda group, which had just acquired the American theater chain AMC entertainment.

17 Some examples of online communities and print media that dedicated special issues to the film include: *Jintian* (Today); *Zuoan wenhua wang* (Left Bank Cultural Net); and *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekend).

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