

# Media “Schizophrenia” in China

David Moser

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Some rather astonishing changes took place in the Chinese media landscape in the 1990s with the advent of digital technology and the sudden availability of a vast number of bootleg foreign entertainment disks. The rapid and chaotic influx of so much foreign material into average Chinese homes caught the Chinese government off guard, and necessitated certain rapid and ad hoc adjustments to the general policy of combating “spiritual pollution”. This development, combined with certain features of China’s system of information control has resulted in a peculiar kind of “schizophrenia” in the Party’s treatment of entertainment media. This article will try to trace the factors that have led to this interesting state of affairs.

## **Brief overview of pre-digital media environment**

Though the fall of the Gang of Four and the end of the Cultural Revolution brought a political thaw to China, the Communist Party retained its rigid, centralized control over all forms of the media in the PRC. Foreign news and overseas media products were particularly controlled and essentially excluded from the broadcast landscape. The continued top-down control was made easier by the relatively small number of TV sets (in 1980 only about 5% of urban residents had a television), as well as the fact that citizens had no access to satellite dishes to pick up foreign broadcasts. No overseas media entities dealt directly with the Chinese media, or were allowed to distribute within China. Average citizens could not go freely in and out of the country, and those who did lacked the financial means to collect and bring back videotapes and films. Compact discs and DVDs did not yet exist. Exposure to foreign media was limited to those very few works that had been officially sanctioned and shown in theaters or on TV. A few politically-correct Russian films were familiar to the public, vestiges of the earlier Sino-Soviet alliance. American offerings were rare. In the late 80s, it was quite common to meet Chinese people who had seen exactly two Hollywood films in their life: *The Sound of Music* and *Gone with the Wind*.

Those at the very top, however, always had access to Western media. In the cloistered days of the Cultural Revolution, Mao’s wife Jiang Qing would watch Disney movies in the privacy of her quarters, while the masses were limited to her eight “model operas”. Similarly, during the 80s and early 90s, the elite cadres and their kids could enjoy HBO and foreign films in their satellite-wired residences, whereas the general populace was stuck with whatever CCTV had to offer.

The first foreign program to be shown on Chinese television was the American show

*Man from Atlantis*, which aired in 1979 (the same year CCTV began to allow advertisements). Toward the end of the 1980s, as Deng Xiaoping's reforms began to take hold, more foreign films, TV shows, and cassette tapes began to trickle into the Chinese entertainment market. During this initial influx, the mix of foreign media products that made it into China was random, chaotic and often bizarre. One early American TV show broadcast on Chinese TV was the banal *My Favorite Martian*. (I still remember vividly that the episodes were inexplicably missing the laugh track, which gave them an interesting theater-of-the-absurd quality.) This was quickly followed by other forgettable dreck such as *Falcon Crest* and *Hunter*, both of which enjoyed a devoted viewership ten times that of their earlier American audience. Disney made its first inroads to the Chinese TV space in 1986. When I was at Peking University in 1988, my graduate student friends would rush to the TV room after supper to watch Mickey Mouse cartoons. (Incredibly, the Chinese censors at the time actually considered some of the humor to be potentially offensive to Chinese audiences.)

During this pre-digital age, Chinese consumers were quaintly out of step with the rest of the world. As late as the early 90s, the most beloved US pop stars in China were The Carpenters and John Denver. (John Denver was, in fact, one of the first pop singers to obtain permission to perform in China, and actually had the privilege of a private meeting with Deng Xiaoping, whom he would later refer to as "his good friend.") French Muzak pianist Richard Clayderman, barely known in the West, became a phenomenally popular household name in China (and still is), selling tens of hundreds of millions of cassette tapes. With increasing viewership and new channels opening up during the 80s, Chinese television was suddenly starved for cheap entertainment fare, and more TV junk food like *Get Smart* and *Charlie's Angels* suddenly appeared on Chinese screens, sandwiched between Peking Opera and news footage of Li Peng.

As the 90s progressed, foreign TV and film became an integral part of the Chinese media. Movie goers could go see Arnold Schwarzenegger in the first-run showing of *True Lies* and watch highlights of the Oscar awards ceremony on their TV sets. Yet Chinese people were still essentially restricted to what foreign works the censors would allow on TV or in the movie theaters. VCRs were scarce, videotapes were expensive, and VCD technology was not yet commonplace. There were essentially no foreign video products commercially available for individual purchase and private viewing. The flow of foreign entertainment works was increasing, but the Chinese central government was still controlling the spigot.

### **The advent of digital technology and digital piracy**

This all changed in the mid-90s, when digital technology hit China like an atomic bomb. Virtually overnight, waves of pirated CDs, software, computer games, and VCDs became available through underground bootleg channels. The effect was not

merely the opening of a spigot; China was suddenly inundated with a veritable tsunami of foreign “memes” and intellectual products. Outdoor stalls in the open-air markets began to offer counterfeit versions of Windows 95, Jane Fonda workout videos, music CDs from Mozart to Megadeath, and movies from *Bambi* to *Basic Instinct*. Pirated versions of Western first-run movies could be purchased almost the same week they were released overseas, making Chinese movie fans instantly conversant with current film trends.

In addition to bootleg music CDs, there suddenly appeared what were dubbed in Chinese as *dakou*, or “cut hole” disks and cassette tapes. These were overstock or discontinued audio products that had been shipped to China as junk to be recycled, but were diverted off to be sold for much greater profit on the street. Each tape or disk was nicked with a cut on the edge to render it unsellable, though this small mutilation did not usually impede the playing of the CD or cassette. Thus, urban Chinese youth could suddenly collect both mainstream and esoteric genres, for the first time directly sampling the true variety of Western music. Though average people were less likely to seek out these *dakou* recordings, they soon became the lifeblood of the rock and avant-garde scene.

The Chinese government was not quite prepared for these developments, which occurred virtually overnight, within the space of two or three years. The creaky government bureaucracy could only reflexively instigate new rounds of the usual “*sao huang*” (“sweep away the yellow [i.e. “pornographic”]) movements, and for a time CCTV news frequently aired clips of steamrollers smashing piles of confiscated CD-ROMS and VCDs. But this radically new technology could not be controlled with traditional means, and the xenophobic Chinese government could only watch in horror as a long-dreaded foreign Pandora’s Box opened wide.

The American protectionist response was more focused but equally ineffectual. US trade representatives like Carla Hills and Mickey Kantor on numerous trips to the mainland complained vociferously about the rampant piracy, but returned home with only vague agreements and empty promises.

Attempts to stem the tide were futile. First of all, this new contraband was fundamentally impossible to control. Digital information is inherently “leaky” – electronically transmittable and reproducible, and highly contagious – and digital products are cheaply produced in mass quantities, easily transportable, and extremely profitable.

Second, even when the perpetrators could easily be identified, the bootleg industry was – and still is – such a lucrative a cash cow for collaborators at all levels of the distribution hierarchy (including the PLA) that ordinary policing was ineffective. Byzantine counterfeiting networks already operating between the mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong were now co-opted and expanded to move the new digital goods.

Existing factories for licensed distribution of digital products were easily co-opted to overproduce thousands of clandestine copies to be shunted off to bootleg channels. During a 1996 trip to China, US trade Charlene Barshefsky could point to 19 specific offending factories and their exact locations and demanded that they be shut down. Such visits merely reaped some ceremonial handwaving, the temporary shutting down of one or two factories, announcements about “making progress”, and a quick return to business as usual.

The fact was that, much to the consternation of foreign media producers, digital piracy was a great boon to the Chinese consumer, the Chinese government, and a shot in the arm to the Chinese economy. In fact, since legal versions of these disks were (and remain) prohibitively expensive, many argued that the bootleggers were merely enabling China enjoy the benefits of the modern information age. Some analysts even half-seriously made the argument that digital piracy was like a new *zhiqiang*, or “self-strengthening” movement facilitating the incorporation of Western technology into China. The whole enterprise was win-win for everyone except the greedy Western media corporations. Why in the world would China want to put a stop to it?

Thus, as with the counterfeiting of other goods, a multi-billion dollar digital “underground” economy arose, technically illegal but carried out rather openly. And as with other such economies (such as drugs, prostitution or gambling rings), routine bribery, perfunctory crackdowns and occasional arrests were merely the risk of participating in this lucrative trade.

The result was the proliferation of now familiar bootleg DVD shops in China. One could soon walk into an audio-visual shop directly across from the Lido Holiday Inn in Beijing and browse through shelves of illegal DVDs (conveniently alphabetized!) selecting from a catalogue of titles that rivaled that of any Blockbuster Video chain store in the United States.

### **The effects on the average Chinese citizen**

*It is impossible to overstate the explosive effect this digital technology had on the consumption of entertainment media in the PRC.*

The Chinese *laobaixing*, the common people, living in one of the most culturally-isolated countries on earth, now had unimaginable access to a wide variety of mainstream Western entertainment products, and at a very affordable price. Suddenly current Western notions, images and cultural trends were *directly* and *immediately* available to virtually anyone, not just the Party elite, the super rich or the Westernized.

In addition, this consumption was now *individually* mediated, rather than a shared, collective experience. In the privacy of their own homes, Chinese people suddenly

had more freedom to map out their own media space, to sample and collect entertainment products according to their own idiosyncratic tastes, and to create sub-cultures based only on connections between like-minded individuals.

Most importantly, the Chinese could now be culturally in step with the rest of the world. No longer limited to the random assortment of quaint Kitsch generally available on TV, video or cassette tape, the Chinese were suddenly on the road to becoming savvy and sophisticated connoisseurs of global popular culture. (When Kurt Cobain committed suicide, millions of Chinese youth mourned along with the rest of global rock culture.)

Of course, this freedom of choice was not limited to Western fare. Though this article concentrates on Western media influences, it must be pointed out that the Chinese public was also avidly ingesting a diet of TV serials and pop music from Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. China was now in step with the rest of Southeast Asia, as well.

Other forms of piracy ballooned in the mid-90s, as well – counterfeit jeans, watches, tennis shoes, etc. – but only the digital bootlegging of VCDs and CDs was seen as an immediate threat to the government’s stranglehold on the minds and spirits of the Chinese people.

## **The Party’s dilemma**

In essence, the Chinese propaganda machine’s worst nightmare had come true.

Ever since the adoption of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of reform and opening up, the government had uneasily re-opened the door to foreign ideas, but with an attitude of distrust in keeping with centuries of Chinese xenophobia. First with a campaign against *zichanjieji ziyoushua* “bourgeois liberalization”, then *jingshen wuran*, “spiritual pollution”, and then a bout of whining about *heping yanbian* “peaceful evolution”, the Chinese government seemed to welcome foreign things with one hand while shooing them away with the other. Such political cleansing campaigns continued to be instigated and withdrawn, but the terminology remained throughout the 90s, the definition of the terms morphing according to changing conditions. The government very much treated foreign entertainment products as metaphorical prostitutes – superficially attractive, but laden with viral contagion that would gradually destroy the health of the consumer.

The Party was instinctively resorting to a variation on an old approach dating back to China’s first shock of Western contact in the Qing Dynasty: the *ti-yong* dichotomy – retaining Chinese “substance” (*ti*), while employing Western “practice” (*yong*). To update the strategy, the Chinese would have preferred to borrow western hardware, while disabling the social and moral software that came bundled with it. The

attempt was no more successful in the 90s than it had been 100 years earlier.

The problem with this new digital revolution was that it enabled the channeling of potentially dangerous foreign attitudes and ideas *directly* into the psyches of Chinese people, on a scale that previous media such as print could never achieve. It was as if the feared “spiritual pollution” was now being *injected* into the very bloodstream of Chinese culture. A cultural cataclysm was taking place virtually in the blink of an eye, as the Chinese populace suddenly enjoyed easy access to quasi-pornographic VCDs and violent video CD-ROMs from Hong Kong and the West. And at this point the ongoing battle being waged against bourgeois liberalization and peaceful evolution was effectively lost.

The rate at which utterly foreign and even shockingly subversive ideas entered into China during this period was astonishing. Fueled by images, ideas, and attitudes in the now pervasive digital disks, entirely new artistic subcultures and cultural movements began to appear, many of them adopting wholesale precisely the kind of avant-garde, iconoclastic, or downright nihilistic values the Party wished to shield China from. Deng Xiaoping may have famously quipped that “When you open the window, a few flies are going to get in,” but he could not have imagined the horde of nightmarish insects that rapidly infiltrated Chinese culture in those years.

The rise of a middle class and disposable incomes combined with a new plugged-in worldliness was setting the stage for massive cultural shifts. In particular, a white-hot youth culture had begun to explode that was as iconoclastic and contemptuous of traditional values as that arising in the 1960s in the US and other industrialized countries. Chinese young people, at long last connected to the vibrant global youth network, also began to sport outlandish hair styles, get tattoos, form rock bands, take drugs, developments that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. The Party’s thought control apparatus was apoplectic – not to mention countless Chinese parents. But the genie could not be put back into the bottle.

### **The Party’s reaction**

One might think that, faced with such a threat to Chinese spiritual culture, the Party would have brought out its big guns in opposition to it. But a strange thing happened; the official reaction to this new plague was strangely muted. Terms like “spiritual pollution” effectively disappeared from the editorial pages, and even in Party-controlled organs such as the *People’s Daily*, there was very little mention of the social effects of so many pirated Western pathogens released into the environment. Despite the inveterate conservatism of the Chinese leadership and Chinese society in general, the subject never became a hot media topic. Radio and TV talk shows didn’t touch it (except as an issue of intellectual property and trade disputes). There was no flurry of surveys gauging the effects of decadent foreign pop culture on the morals and lifestyles of the youth. There were no popular books warning of the

effects of absorbing so much mindless imported entertainment.

From the Western perspective, this may seem surprising. For those of us accustomed to the vast amount of ink and talking-head blather that is produced over each minor cultural tremor in the US, such a lack of public hand-wringing over what must have been a disturbing social trend seems puzzling. Why did they refrain from their usually reflexive moralizing in this case?

First, the emerging cultural crisis was disturbing, embarrassing, and in general just plain bad news. The Chinese Communist Party does not like to air bad news. And since the Party was virtually powerless to stop these developments, they merely chose to sweep the whole mess under the rug. This is entirely predictable, of course. (Chinese media also does not dwell on Shanghai traffic problems, suicide rates in the countryside, or angry citizens displaced by Beijing Olympics construction.)

But perhaps more importantly, as the locus of behavioral authority, the government had simply painted itself into a corner over the previous half century. *The Party had no moral leg to stand on.* On what pious cultural precepts would they have based their injunctions? What moral principles could they have appealed to?

Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought? These ideologies were already thoroughly discredited, having utterly failed as a viable means of ordering the Chinese state. No one took them seriously, not even those at the very top. Only vestiges of their moral authority remained as clichéd slogans on billboards and in Party propaganda. The poor mummy of Lei Feng simply could not be dusted off and brought back to life, having been mercifully buried after the few laughable post-1989 attempts at revival. And at any rate, governmental coercion in communist China was always more in the political realm, seldom directly addressing pure ethical values in the Western sense. A cursory perusal of Mao's "Little Red Book", for example, yields virtually no mention of morality. The assumption was always that correct political consciousness would naturally lead to correct righteous behavior. But what if the underlying political basis itself had lost its power?

Confucianism perhaps? But Mao and the Party had supposedly expunged Confucius and the centuries-old Confucian value system from Chinese culture, condemning it as a feudalistic remnant of the *jiu shehui*, the "old society". Several generations had grown up forbidden to study it or espouse its doctrines. Confucian studies have only very recently been revived with the Party's nod of approval, but after relegating Confucius the dustbin of history, the CCP had neither the inclination nor the credibility to resurrect him.

Well then, why not simply appeal to "core traditional Chinese values"? But what were these, exactly? Having nullified most of the Chinese ethical and philosophical tradition, and having downplayed or degraded the longstanding social roles and

hierarchical familial relations during the radicalized 60s and 70s, the CCP had left good old Chinese values on rather weak foundations by the 90s. One of the most common complaints about modern Chinese society, in fact, is the moral vacuum at its core. One can note how hungrily young people latched onto foreign advertising slogans and English pop song lyrics during the 90s: “I believe I can fly”, “Just do it!”, “Take it to the limit”, etc. There were no comparable indigenous Chinese slogans – much less government propaganda slogans – on the lips of the young or old. The lame attempts at “patriotic education” and *suzhi jiaoyu* (roughly, “values education”) instigated in the schools represented a belated recognition of the failure of the Party in this area.

When George W. Bush denounces some phenomenon as “un-American” or “evil”, one knows that, sincerely or cynically, he is at least invoking principles and belief systems that are genuinely held by a large number of Americans (those in the Constitution, the Bible, etc.). The Chinese Communist Party, in declaring something “un-Chinese” or “immoral”, can only mouth empty slogans, since they have sabotaged the indigenous Chinese value system and offered up nothing viable in its place.

Thus the Chinese government, its hands full with a host of other problems, to a large extent retreated from the post of moral arbiter and censor in the domains of art and pop culture, essentially striking an uncomfortable bargain with the populace: “As long as you do not threaten the authority of the State, we will adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude toward artistic consumption and expression.”

And thus were the beginnings of a kind of schizophrenia in the Chinese media.

## **Schizophrenia**

The Chinese liken their society to a family. To the extent that this is true, it is surely one of the most dysfunctional families on earth. And as in all dysfunctional families, problems are often handled by denial, face-saving rationalization, sublimation, and the development of certain pathological adjustments and negotiation strategies that might be characterized as “schizophrenic.”

Once these co-dependent compensation mechanisms within the system develop and the arrangement stabilizes, everyone simply becomes accustomed to this state of affairs, and soon the mechanisms operate unnoticed and unchallenged. Blatant contradictions become invisible and smoothly accommodated. In what follows, I will try to point out three areas where this sort of dissociation manifests itself.

## **The split between “news” and “everything else”**

The easiest way to highlight this situation is to first sketch the media environment in

the country where the contrast is starkest: The United States. In the US the mass media has evolved to a point where *there is no longer any meaningful boundary line between news and entertainment*. Actors and entertainers become politicians (Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger), and politicians frequently appear on entertainment shows as guests, or even actors in satirical skits. Movie stars, senators and pundits hobnob and clink wine glasses at the same publicity events. For decades political humor has been the mainstay of stand-up comedy, and no *Tonight Show* opening monologue concludes without a jab at the president. Increasing numbers of Americans get their information from “fake news” shows like Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, which reports the political happenings of the day in smart-aleck sarcasm. Is Stewart a political commentator or a comedian? The distinction is no longer meaningful. Al Franken, another entertainer turned political commentator, has described himself as “the hardest working man in showbiz politics.” The line between the two domains has long been thoroughly blurred. News programming in the US corporate media is packaged as “infotainment”, and must compete directly with entertainment programming for advertising revenues. America is the extreme case in this regard, but to a lesser extent the same trend is clear in the other industrialized countries.

In China, by contrast, a sharp line is drawn between news and entertainment. Political leaders never appear in entertainment venues, and entertainers are excluded from politics. Political satire does not (officially) exist. Entertainers dare not even mention the names of political leaders in their performances, unless it is in the context of a purely propagandistic event, and then the leaders can never be the butt of a joke, no matter how innocent. Even topics with potential political implications – such as traffic jams, corrupt police, or environmental pollution – are off limits. (Which is why comedians have such a difficult time being funny). News shows are decidedly not entertaining, and entertainment shows do not deal with the news.

This was not always the case, of course. The arts in China used to be wielded as explicit expounders of State policy, and were often suffused with political references. Why has the split now become so pronounced?

To take television as an example, between 1983 and 1993 the number of TV stations in China increased from 52 to 700, and continued to proliferate. Given the staggering amount of programming needed to fill the time slots, content monitoring and censorship became a daunting undertaking. The task was made easier by the decision to shift to a free-market strategy for entertainment products. Large government subsidies to TV stations were discontinued, and TV outlets had to compete for advertising revenues, resulting in programming with greater mass appeal. Thus, in a strategy mirrored elsewhere in the cultural sphere, the government simply relinquished control over much of the moral component of TV content, thus lessening the need for micro-managed censorship.

The result was a *de facto* separation between “news” and “everything else”, allowing the authorities to control news programming with an iron hand while relegating the vast bulk of general programming to a looser and less man-hour intensive monitoring system. The unwritten rule is: “Anything goes – as long as does not touch on potentially sensitive political issues.” But of course, in China the “politically sensitive” has quite a wide scope, and basically includes anything the government doesn’t want you to talk about. The result is zealous over-cautiousness and massive self-censoring on the part of media professionals. (See my article on [www.projectsyndicate.org](http://www.projectsyndicate.org) for a more detailed treatment of this issue.)

This partially explains a difference between the information control strategies of the United States and China. Given the more information-porous American media environment, the White House spends most of its time trying to “spin” and frame the troublesome information that is already out there. The Chinese government, having hermetically sealed off the entertainment sector, still spends most of its resources trying to block sensitive information outright.

The convenient artificiality of this arrangement is at the heart of the strange, schizophrenic quality of Chinese media. Enormous amounts of time, energy, money and creativity are expended every day in producing a staggering amount of entertainment products to satisfy the enormous demand. Yet despite all this well-meaning effort, the implicit injunction to exclude any content with political implications virtually *guarantees* that the resulting media products cannot address the lives of ordinary people in any truly meaningful way. The result is a kind of unrelenting stodginess. There is seldom anything jolting, thought-provoking or “edgy” in Chinese media.

The annual CCTV Chinese New Year variety show is perhaps the quintessential example of the socio-psychological sham that results from the exclusion of any challenging content. The lavish costumes, the unrelentingly upbeat tone, all the glitz and flashy production values seem designed to distract from the empty core of the affair, an over-compensation for the impossibility of offering anything that reflects real life. Since performers do not – and cannot in principle – relate to the audience in an honest fashion, the entire performance takes on the sterile, frozen-smile decorum of a formal dinner party. No wonder the shots of the audience so often reveal a sea of stony-faced spectators applauding robotically on cue.

Of course, this is not to say that many truly creative and interesting media products are not made in China. We see them all the time. But it is easy for producers and audiences alike to forget the fact that these are created in the context of a vast negative political space. Media workers are “dancing in shackles” as the saying goes, each movement and flourish merely serving to delineate the forbidden territory beyond the boundaries of the stage. The apparent freedom with which producers and artists create Chinese entertainment products disguises the stifling limits of their

expression – limits that they themselves take for granted and have often forgotten.

I was once a guest on a CCTV talk show, the topic of which was the Internet. Before the taping, the host reassured me “Just relax and say anything you want about the topic, and it should be okay.” I was struck by his nonchalance. “*Anything* that comes to mind?” I said with mock incredulosity. “Does that include how the government blocks sensitive sites and news sources? Can we freely discuss Internet pornography? Or how chat rooms are closely monitored and the content censored?” And so on. The host grinned sheepishly and said, “Yes, well, *almost* anything.”

This person was clearly in the grip the pathological state of denial I am describing. He had simply become so accustomed to the constant pretense required by his job that it had become an unconscious cognitive background process for him.

As for news shows, a similar form of denial manifests itself. Unchallenged by independent voices or the intrusion of public opinion, the Party is free to construct its own insular version of reality without the interference of inconvenient opposing views. The CCTV-1 news anchors stare solemnly into the camera and read with a straight face what is essentially a carefully crafted wish-fulfillment fantasy. The nightly news pretends it is the only game in town, that the BBC, the Voice of America, CNN and the Internet are not creeping into the Chinese media world, and that no Chinese have access to these alternate versions of reality. The fantasy is of a single, collective Chinese consciousness, one unified public will. No one really believes this, of course, but the face-saving farce is played out every night, as the news stubbornly continues the pretense of holding the same monopoly on truth it always had. Indeed, despite the remarkable changes in Chinese entertainment programming over the years, CCTV-1’s nightly news broadcast has not effectively changed its basic format or overall presentation style in 20 years.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century China was one of the most highly politicized countries on earth, and politics was front and center in all aspects of daily life. Nowadays explicit political propaganda is becoming rare in the mass media. As TV and pop culture no longer pummel audiences with political messages, and as official news simply cannot be taken seriously, the result has been a general disconnect with politics in general. An increasing number of people are now happily apolitical and ignorant of policy issues. Just as few Chinese people could actually name the Four Modernizations, almost nobody now knows or cares what Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” represent. Though the influence of the Party on the fate of the nation has not diminished, the Party’s ideas have simply lost any hold on the public imagination. In the complex new information era, they have retained control of the message, but no one is interested in hearing it.

## **The official-unofficial split**

The digital revolution resulted in a dividing of media consumption into two realms: the official and the unofficial. Chinese citizens now had access to another technically illegal but routinely and openly tolerated market that was totally unregulated. (The Internet would later add interesting new complications to the equation). Having been the sole provider of entertainment to a billion people for 30 years, CCTV and the other government-controlled media outlets now had competition. In schizophrenic fashion, however, the officially-sanctioned media continued to operate as if this lively new domain did not exist.

In truth, however, the staid official media could not have competed with this wild and wooly new market on its own terms. Though TV stations and movie theaters were now beginning to operate according to market principles and vie for audience share, they lacked budgets of Hollywood proportions, and could not program large amounts of pirated material outright due to the thorny copyright issues.

But there was another overriding consideration. While movie theaters were given freer rein, the Party was insistent on keeping the broadcast medium a more conservative bulwark against decadent Western influence. As late as 1997, at a conference of the Chinese TV Arts Association, Tang Weiguang, head of CCTV was still invoking some of the old “spiritual pollution” language: “The task facing Chinese television is to protect its own base by using high quality programming to satisfy viewer needs, by fighting against the invasion of Western television and by preventing the infiltration of corrupt Western culture.” The head of the propaganda department Ding Guan’gen also said that TV should “talk politics, maintain the correct orientation of public opinion and improve the level of guiding public opinion.” While TV producers were not about to “talk politics”, it was clear that television was also not going to make any great leaps forward in content. Such top-down decisions to maintain the ideological purity of television further drove a wedge between the official TV and the unofficial bootleg media.

This may have been for the best. In virtually every country on earth, indigenous local TV programming is always by far the most popular among citizens and receives the highest ratings. Chinese TV under government control has remained conservative and safe, tightly restricting foreign content and concentrating on cheaply produced but quite popular “lowest common denominator” programming such as game shows, variety shows, historical costume TV serials, and calculated clones like *Feichang Nannu* “Special Man and Woman”, and *Chaoji Nusheng*, “Super Girls”.

Thus, despite some overlap, the official and unofficial domains seem to have arrived at a pattern of co-existence, the prim Dr. Jekyll tolerating but not openly acknowledging the darker Mr. Hyde.

The most striking dissociation here is the two-tiered economic sector that piracy created. It is often noted that 90% of the digital products for sale in the Chinese audio-visual shops are bootleg. This, of course, represents great economic losses to both the foreign and Chinese media industry. Few commentators mention, however, that there are now entire sub-sectors of the above-board Chinese economy that are parasitically dependent upon this illegal counterfeit economy. The explosion in the market for VCD and later DVD players, for example, was obviously sparked by the sudden availability of pirated disks. Popular movie magazines like *Kan Dianying* and the many current movie websites could not have arisen without a readership of savvy Chinese cinephiles, whose film sophistication is entirely due to the bootleg DVD market. Skyrocketing sales of the electric guitars, keyboards and drums used in rock and popular music are almost directly due to the pirated foreign music CDs that have flooded China in the last decade. And on and on. In short, the importation of incorporeal ideas and “memes” (cultural software) always spurs the creation of lots of physical stuff with potential economic value (cultural hardware). The synergistic effect on the economy becomes enormous.

Should the powers that be shut down this unofficial bootleg economy tomorrow, it would be a minor disaster for the official Chinese economy – not to mention for most mainstream broadcast media, which would now have a difficult time functioning without recourse to pirated products.

The following photo depicts an interesting juxtaposition that typifies the blatant contradictions and dissociations of the current Chinese system. Here we see a bootleg DVD shop in Kunming – situated right next door to a police station.



(Photo courtesy of the blog “My Life in Kunming”, [www.jonathaninchina.com](http://www.jonathaninchina.com).)

### **The foreign-Chinese split**

Finally, the imported nature of most of the digital material naturally gives rise to all sorts of dichotomies between foreign and Chinese, some of which overlap with the official/unofficial split.

A rather vivid example of this kind of split arose when CCTV was contemplating airing the popular American sitcom *Friends* on Chinese TV. For many years *Friends* had been one of the most popular bootleg DVD items among Chinese young people, and many fans could practically recite entire episodes by heart. Thus it seemed a natural programming decision to air the show on the official media.

In an article in the online version of the *People's Daily* (January 17, 2004), Qin Mingxin, deputy director of the international department of CCTV's Entertainment Program Center expressed his misgivings about the proposed broadcast. “I had thought the play focused on friendship, but after a careful preview I found each

episode had something to do with sex. Also, the attitudes of the six close-knit young friends in the play cannot be generally accepted by Chinese audiences yet,” he said. Furthermore, Qin explained why merely cutting the references to sex wouldn’t work: “Most youth on the Chinese mainland have watched the play and feel passionate about it. If we make too much trimming, I'm afraid they will not agree. But it is also impossible to accept it uncritically. First, a large number of slang and jokes are hard to convey...Second, much content of *Friends*, considered healthy in the United States, still seems unacceptable to the Chinese.”

Here the CCTV official is exhibiting a rather confused mental state typical of living and functioning amidst these conflicting parallel domains. This article is framed by the implicit knowledge on the part of the reader that *Friends* has already been available and popular in China for years. Yet he informs us that the attitudes of the characters “cannot be generally accepted by Chinese audiences.” In the next breath he acknowledges that “most youths on the Chinese mainland have watched the play and feel passionate about it.” Then he then loops back to his original evaluation, telling us that, though the sexual content is accepted in the US, it “still seems unacceptable to the Chinese.” Well, which is it? Is the youthful audience “passionate” about the show or made uneasy by it?

Here is my Freudian analysis of this official’s split personality. Though *Friends* had already effectively been market-tested in China and found to be a success, the official media feels uncomfortable acknowledging that the unofficial bootleg stratum even exists, much less that it is already an intrinsic part of the Chinese media world. Thus, oddly, Qin vacillates between admitting that “most Chinese youth on the mainland” have already seen *Friends*, and speaking as though he were somehow *protecting* those same Chinese youth from the unhealthy influences of the show. He has difficulty dealing with the obvious fact that, due to the bootleg sector, *the media censors have long ago simply lost this battle*. In addition, the obvious competing interpretation of the facts would be that Chinese youth were attracted to the show precisely *because* of the sexual content, but Qin, in his official capacity, is either unwilling or incapable of openly entertaining such a possibility. It’s unclear who he thinks he’s fooling, but the result is a very pronounced dissociation from the real world.

Secondly, we see here the by-now familiar double standard with regard to all things foreign. “It’s okay for them, but not for us Chinese.” One sees this attitude often displayed in the Chinese commercial environment. (Think of all the Chinese condom packages that feature romantic photos of semi-clothed *foreign* couples – as if sex were not something that any self-respecting *Chinese* couples would engage in!)

Thus there is a stricter moral code applied to indigenous Chinese entertainment fare than to foreign products distributed in the same market. For example, director Stephen Chow’s movie *Kung-Fu* was criticized in publications such as *Beijing Youth Weekly* for supposedly being excessively violent, and for a time CCTV discouraged

several of its channels from using clips from the movie. Yet during the same period of time one could turn on Chinese TV and see scenes from Hollywood films that far surpassed the cartoonish violence in Chow's film (such as the horrific opening beachfront battle scene in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*).

The role the underground bootleg economy plays in this foreign-Chinese double standard is quite interesting to contemplate. For example, box sets of *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and all sorts of freewheeling Hong Kong and Japanese sex comedies are openly available in bootleg DVD stores. Clearly there is an appetite for this kind of genre in China, yet the prudish mainstream Chinese media does not provide it. The bootleg market in this context functions almost like a special niche market (such as optional cable TV channels like HBO) where consumers can enjoy shows whose content is not suitable for the relatively sanitized prime-time slots. The bootleg market has become merely an alternative channel specializing in, among other things, foreign entertainment that the official media cannot air.

Thus the double standard allows the official media to retain its pretense of maintaining pure "Chinese" values, while being free to sample, exploit, or censor foreign media as it wishes. In this way, the bootleg sector does not threaten the official media, but merely supplements it.

### **A new information control paradigm?**

This possibility that the underground bootleg sector is tolerated for more than economic reasons brings us to another issue. It seems likely that the Chinese government has slowly been gravitating to a less coercive but more sustainable framework for information control.

With the Chinese Internet explosion in the early years of the new century, all of the above problems were exacerbated ten-fold. The World Wide Web, being interactive and dynamic, represented an even greater threat to government control than that posed by passively consumed decadent digital products. The only response to this threat was a technological one, and the government sprang into action in an ambitious effort to at least stem the tide of unwelcome websites. It is usually estimated that around 30,000 people are currently employed by the government to police the Internet, with the help of several Western corporations who cooperate with China on its Internet infrastructure.

We can see that the government's approach to the problem effectively mirrors the strategy it employed for the 1990s influx of digital products: namely, a schizophrenic separation is maintained between "news" and "everything else". Apart from a certain number of puzzling or seemingly arbitrary blockages, the Internet nannies do not bother with entertainment, commerce or games, and have even given up for the most part on pornography. As long as the Chinese "netizen" is searching Yahoo for

essentially harmless apolitical material, there is an illusion of almost total freedom.

It is only when a threat to the established power is sniffed out that the censorship mechanisms take hold. The enforcement operation is wide-reaching, sinister, moderately effective – and ultimately futile. Considering how porous and leaky the Internet is (and indeed the entire new digital universe), the government simply cannot realistically maintain the kind of control mechanisms that rely on monitoring, blocking and restricting. (The last-gasp attempts to do so seem increasingly laughable. To this day, one still occasionally finds offending pages from articles about China simply torn out of copies of *Newsweek* or *The Economist* purchased at hotel kiosks. A quick visit to the magazine's website provides access to the "censored" material.) Attempts to keep information out are increasingly felt as mere annoyances rather than roadblocks.

Is the Party on its way to a new information control paradigm? Beginning in the 1990s, the government's censorship apparatus began to stumble upon a solution that seems to be the *de facto* mechanism already in place in the U.S. Simply put, the mechanism involves distraction and placation rather than restriction. A populace that is (1) inundated with a constant barrage of stimulating and addicting entertainment, (2) made to feel powerless politically, and (3) at the same time given a great deal of economic and consumer freedom, soon becomes less likely to notice or care about the machinations of government that might have detrimental effects on personal liberty and well being. Thus the control is not overt or top-down, but rather is an emergent epiphenomenon, a side-effect, of the way information is accessed and consumed. There is no longer a need for hands-on censorship in such a system, since the citizenry becomes largely apolitical and uninformed, and simply has no interest in any subversive information that is out there. Dissenting voices become harmlessly marginalized or ignored. Those in power need only put the proper spin on a news item to effectively neutralize it. (It is difficult to adequately describe this state of affairs in the short space of the present article. Readers are directed to writers such as Michael Parenti, Robert McChesney, Noam Chomsky and the late Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* for detailed analyses of how this information control system works.)

One can already see the trajectory of this process in China throughout the last two decades. The loosening of controls on outside sources of information that accompanied reform and opening up has not necessarily resulted a more politicized or informed populace. In 1989 no one knew who Wei Jingsheng was because his name never appeared in the official media, and the average Chinese had access to no other sources of information. In 1999 no one knew who Wei Jingsheng was because everyone was too distracted with Madonna, the latest soap operas, and buying a car.

It is my experience that today even English speaking, Internet-savvy young people seldom know the names Wu'er Kaixi, Chai Ling, or Wang Dan. Content to shop for

sneakers and DVDs while listening to iPods and sending short messages, these people find politics increasingly irrelevant to their lives. “Wired” as they may be, they often know more about lives of movie stars, NBA statistics, and the price of laptop computers than they know about the history and policies of their own government. The New York Times not long ago quoted a Peking University student who said he had heard “rumors” that people were shot in Tiananmen Square, but was skeptical until he could see “some proof.” That such proof was a mouse-click away is testimony to the stubborn force of apathy.

Even when shaken out of their lethargy by politically volatile events, Chinese people are more likely to get their basic information from the usual Chinese-language mainland news sources, despite the sea of alternative information available to them. In the aftermath of the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the collision of a Chinese jet with a U.S. spy plane in 2001, most Chinese tended to accept the bare facts presented to them by the official Chinese media, and did not bother to delve into the complex nuances swarming on the Internet and in foreign news outlets.

Of course, my Chinese friends note that many Americans today can’t name the two Japanese cities that the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on in WWII, or still believe that there were WMDs in Iraq just prior to Bush’s invasion, or can’t find China on a map. Despite the freewheeling information environment, Americans do tend to be insular and blissfully ignorant of history and world affairs. But it is precisely such commonalities that suggest that the Chinese system is peacefully evolving into something more resembling the American one. If recent history is an indicator of what is to come, we can predict that the Party will maintain its artificial division between “news” and “everything else”, but the “everything else” will become increasingly unrestrained and unruly. At the same time, the gradual unblocking of foreign news sites over the past few years suggests that the Party’s information control system will continue to loosen its monopoly on political content, as it slowly realizes that dissent poses no real threat if the dissenting message is safely drowned out by the babble of distracting entertainment and consumer enticements. Or to put it another way, “schizophrenia” will perhaps give way to a kind of mindless, drug-induced stupor.