

Extrait de Gregory B. Lee, *Chinas Unlimited*, 2003.

Chapter Three

Re-Taking Tiger Mountain by Television: Televisual Socialization of the Chinese Consumer

Over the past two decades consumer capitalism and market economics have been so integrally embedded in China's socio-economy that today Western market-analysts complain that China has a much less interventionist economy than Hong Kong's. indeed, finally such commentators are admitting that the representation of Hong Kong's economy as the concretization of the spirit of free enterprise is and always has been a myth. Consumerism in China, however, is a material reality.

The advent of consumerist, spectacular capitalism to China has left the Chinese state machine intact and even emboldened. While Chinese citizens have been inducted into consumerism, the Chinese state and its ideology have learned well the lessons of spectacular self-representation in late twentieth-century consumer capitalist culture. In the two sections that follow two kinds of televisual text are discussed: the first a Chinese soap from the early 1990s illustrates how Chinese official cultural producers have deployed television to introduce the Chinese spectator-consumer to the mores and modalities of consumption and everyday capitalism. The second text I discuss reveals the extent to which the potentially subversive redeployment of Maoist and nationalist iconography has now been successfully reigned in to be displaced by a sophisticated reproduction of nationalist ideology resituated in the new consumerism of emerging middle-class urban China.

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From what appears to be another successful implementation of cultural imperialism, at the conclusion of the century what has emerged in China is a new capitalist nationalist state underpinned by a negotiated accommodation with, and integration of, global capitalism (recently reinvented as "globalization").

Re--Taking Tiger Mountain

*Soap, Cola and 555:
Cultural Imperialism in Chinese Consumed Televisual
Production*

To confuse culture with a culture, the end of a time with the end of time, is the traditional mistake of traditionalists.

REGIS DEBRAY¹

Cultural imperialism, wrote Herbert Schiller, is "the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system."² This has long been a useful definition, and yet cultural imperialism is not necessarily and solely, as women and other minorities know too well, imposed from outside the nation, it also emanates from dominant formations within the nation.

There have been a number of recent works devoted to defining and mapping cultural imperialism,³ but here I shall redeploy the theory of the French cultural and political theorist Guy Debord, whose most useful contribution to critical thinking about modernity has been his elaboration of the theory of the "society of the spectacle" and of the power relations sustained by it.

Debord has described as "concentrated" spectacular power that ideology which is "condensed around a dictatorial personality;" a

¹ Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale* (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, Bibliothèque des Idées, 1991) 291.

² Herbert Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976) 9.

³ See John Tomlinson, *Cultural imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pinter, 1991) and Geoffrey Reeves, *Communications and the 'Third World'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

form of power that had "accomplished the totalitarian counter-revolution, fascist as well as Stalinist."⁴ The other form of spectacular power, the "diffuse" was that which drove wage-earners to use their "freedom of choice" to purchase the array of commodities available in post World War Two consumer societies. Debord arrived at these theorized conclusions in 1967. Twenty years later he discerned the emergence of a third and dominant form of spectacular power which would ultimately replace the other forms, a combination of the two based on "the general victory of the form which had showed itself stronger: the diffuse. This is the integrated spectacle, which has since tended to impose itself globally."⁵ Nowhere has that integration of the two forms of the spectacle been more thoroughgoing than in the China of the last decade or so. While capitalist practices have been steadily entrenched in a society where there have never been bourgeois forms of democracy, dictatorial practices have continued to thrive, so that market capitalism and its supposed "freedom of choice" are limited by the ideological needs of the state.

For instance, in October and November of 1993, the Chinese authorities implemented a range of censorship measures aimed at controlling distribution of information and cultural products and practices. The official New China news agency, Xinhua, announced the government's intention to close illegal dance halls, video game parlours and other types of entertainment categorized as harmful to "the body and mind of the people."⁶ Controls on publishing were also reinforced and publishing houses were closed down for printing "anti-government" books. Xinhua claimed that "some of the profit-oriented entertainment facilities" had been used as "gambling dens, brothels and for

⁴Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London & New York: Verso, 1990) 8. Translation of *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1988).

⁵ Debord 8.

⁶UPI, 28 October 1993.

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showing pornographic videotapes," and that pornographic shots had been inserted into video games "to corrupt young game lovers."⁷ Meanwhile, paradoxically many dance and karaoke halls are owned by the state's own government offices or the army.

In the last decade of the twentieth century the Chinese authorities have had to attempt to extend their control over an exploding domain of consumer products and services. In October 1993, the government banned the use of unauthorized satellite dishes, estimated to number in the millions, in an attempt to prevent reception of direct satellite broadcasts from Hong Kong and elsewhere. Subsequently invoking Proclamation 129 the authorities closed down several dish manufacturers. Yet despite these measures several months later it was estimated that 30 million of the 49 million viewers of Rupert Murdoch's Hong Kong-based Star TV was constituted by Chinese living in the PRC.⁸ In order to maintain and expand that audience, Murdoch announced in March 1994 that Star TV would cease to carry BBC World Service television news, a channel the Chinese authorities find odious.⁹ In the same month Singapore businessman Robert Chua announced an all-Mandarin station to be beamed from a mainland and overseas Chinese-owned satellite Apstar-1, which will have a footprint "stretching from Mongolia to Indonesia and Xinjiang in western China; the channel "is planned to be acceptable to Chinese authorities."¹⁰

In November 1993, the Chinese State declared a monopoly over forms of electronic communication including mobile telephones, pagers, telecommunications, and radio and television stations; at the end of 1993 there were 460,000 mobile

⁷UPI, 28 October 1993.

⁸*South China Morning Post International Weekly*, 19-20 February 1994, page 3. ; *The Economist*, 26-March-1 April 1994, page 76.

⁹*The Economist*, 26-March-1 April 1994, page 74.

¹⁰*South China Morning Post International Weekly*, 26-27 March 1994, page B2.

telephones and 6 million radio pager users in mainland China¹¹. Evidently the regnant authority is wary of losing control over the means of communication, the means of distribution of information. Official political authority always wants to control the power to be heard and dies without it: "a leader reduced to silence is no longer a leader. Just taking away his power of speech leaves him destitute; to tear away the microphone is to kill him."¹²

Such campaigns of restriction and suppression are rarely comprehensive, however, and often are followed by greater consumption of officially disdained foreign media consumer products. As Joseph Chan has noted, "after each crackdown there will likely be a spurt of growth. This may repeat until reception goes beyond policing, putting China in a state of 'illegal openness' to foreign media."¹³ The "spillover" phenomenon of television programmes from Hong Kong to the Pearl River delta ensures that at least twenty million viewers in mainland China receive terrestrial Hong Kong television programming, and there is also access to Hong Kong television through local cable; widespread piracy ensures that such programming is sold on to the interior of China.¹⁴ With increasing miniaturization of satellite reception technology, policing of extra-national satellite television will become increasingly difficult.

Despite the fears of the Chinese State, the liberatory effects of new electronic media and computer technology have been nevertheless overestimated, and there "is a tremendous

¹¹UPI, 6 November 1993

¹² Debray 318.

¹³ Joseph Man Chan, "Television in Greater China" [a useful overview of the television industry in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan] in John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka, Stuart Cunningham *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision* (London and New York, OUP, 1996) 155.

¹⁴ Chan 140-141.

utopianism about proselytes for electronic media."¹⁵ A succinct critique of this electronic network utopianism is provided by Sean Cubitt:

Undoubtedly, the enormous potential of such media is for a new mode of democracy, one intimated by the networks in which research, games and gossip are exchanged on a global scale already. But since these media are very precisely designed with profit maximization in mind, their design itself is a matter of concern. Whatever the technology in general is capable of...those capacities are being framed, contained and limited by decisions that have nothing to do with any production of the future. They are to do with the maintenance of the status quo, or rather with the extension of the status quo.¹⁶

The ultimate balance of the authoritarian "concentrated" form of power and the "diffuse" form giving full play to commodity capitalism is still under negotiation, and yet a consolidation leading to what Debord calls an "integrated" form of the society of the spectacle has certainly occurred. Debord wrote of the development of the "diffuse" form of spectacular power as an "Americanization," as "a process which in some respect frightened but also successfully seduced those countries where it had been possible to maintain traditional forms of bourgeois democracy."¹⁷ Now in the "integrated" society not just economic practices but ideological practices are conflated. Not only is commodity capitalism globalized but also ideological attempts to control. State authorities are, indeed, desperate to maintain ideological domination, but once again the only ideology available to them is nationalism which they attempt to nurture and exploit by appeals to patriotic sentimentality and its associated practices. The Chinese state authorities, for instance,

¹⁵Sean Cubitt, *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture*. (London: Macmillan, 1993), 156.

¹⁶ Cubitt 156.

¹⁷ Debord 8.

recently called for the national flag to be raised and for the national anthem to be sung at all meetings and popular activities.¹⁸ Is this the new "Americanization;" as economic and cultural globalization gathers pace, will allegiance to the national flag now be demanded in all societies of the spectacle, as a token obeisance to the vestiges of particularist cultures? And we are now living in a globalized world dominated by increasingly convergent cultural practices manipulated by forms of capitalist spectacular power becoming ever more similar. While then we may still talk of media imperialism or cultural imperialism, domestic televisual broadcast production as well as transnational or supranational broadcasting is exploiting, and reinforcing the same spectacular power. To think therefore that Chinese domestic production of soap operas is somehow liberatory or resistant to such spectacular power is to misunderstand the global nature and economic underpinnings of that power. Spectacular power may be wielded at a local level by state or official authority, but it is fundamentally however a form of the same capitalist spectacular power that deprives and suppresses the powerless around the globe. In terms of televisual production the only practice that does stand in potential opposition to the dominant media is independent video production, such as that produced by Asian American women video makers like Valerie Soe. A theorizing of that practice has already been undertaken by Sean Cubitt. This other practice is popular not in terms of consumption but in terms of production. Videotape and its technology is comparatively cheap, and anyone with a hand held camera can produce a video. Anyone then can challenge the way network and satellite television unites or reunites image and sound. We can use as video, as a means of critique alongside, or even in place of, theory.

But here again in the practice of video production, as in computer technology, "opportunities are being closed down as

¹⁸Agence France Presse, 9 November 1993.

rapidly as they are being opened." ¹⁹ Witness the opening up of inexpensive recording and distribution opportunities advent of the audio-cassette in the 1970s, and in the 1980s in much of Asia; for example, the massive diversification in sound recording that took place in India and which ended the monopoly of the American recording industry over music reproduction there). Yet, no sooner had the audio-cassette technology become almost globally available, was it challenged by consumption-dedicated CD technology.

In the Chinese televisual catchment area of Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, woman is portrayed, as in general in the masculinist discourse of MTV, soap opera, and television advertising, and the recently popularized supermodel fashion show on television, as the seductive, and seducible objectified commodity. Whether on the catwalk, in the TV studio singing the praises of the latest SONY products, or falling for a macho mate, the camera lens is probingly thrust in her face and at her body. In late twentieth century Chinese television the figure of woman as object of male desire is reinscribed again and again. Interleaved into the constantly repeated shots of woman-as-object, are the model MTV and TV beer commercial men: masculine, street-wise, male-bonding, and cool.

Helping to make China cool is that classic vanguard commodity of American and global consumer capitalism, COCA COLA. Coca-Cola is post-modern, Coke is cool, Coke is zany: cartoon colours, cartoon Coke. Be cool, make China, a funky, masculinist, capitalist paradise, and BUY A COKE.

Chinese Soap

The terrestrially broadcast soap *A Beijing Native in New York* is also sponsored by Coca Cola. Thus, besuited professional white

¹⁹Cubitt 156.



men are portrayed sitting around sipping diet Coke, and chain smoking 555 cigarettes, a brand of American cigarette which is particularly popular in China²⁰.

Soft drinks and cigarettes, in the narrative of Western consumerism, have traditionally been the bottom rung of the ladder to consumer paradise to which the subjects of China's regnant authority are now meant to aspire.

The domestic television soap opera *Beijingren zai Niuyue* (A Native of Beijing in New York), a twenty-one part television series was aired on Chinese television in the autumn/winter of 1993. The Dallas-type of soap opera is the sort of ideological text to which Chinese viewers can relate their own common sense ideas, or popular ideology. This ideology is something of a

²⁰ Just as the Western music industry is depending on the Asian market to compensate for declining sales of its products in the industrialized nations, like wise the tobacco industry will substitute Chinese consumers for its declining Western markets.

mélange of pre-Maoist "traditional Asian values", of which Singaporean and Hong Kong politicians would approve, and remnants of post-1949 official Communism and nationalist ideology. A major element of that populist ideology is an emphasis on the family unit.

One of the earliest academic commentators on soap opera, Ien Ang, in her book *Watching Dallas* has noted how "personal life" provides the "ideological problematic" of the soap opera: "The family is regarded as the ideal cradle for human happiness. At least it should be."²¹ It is the external world, society, in *Beijingren's* case American society, which threatens the ideal. In *Dallas* the external world is the world beyond Southfork ranch: "The outside world, i.e. the world outside the family, is presented in *Dallas* as a hotbed of activity threatening to the family".²²

One of the hooks which attracts the viewer is an appeal to, and exploitation of, her or his dissatisfaction with the lack of fulfilment, and standardization of capitalist urban life, in other words with dehumanization and alienation. *Dallas* was tremendously popular with British audiences in the 1980s, mainly because the almost totally urban British viewing public has little or no idea of the reality of American life as lived by the majority in the USA, and were content to have the spectacle of America as configured in the British imaginary reinscribed. Just as the Hollywood movies of the 1930s-1950s had successfully lulled the spectators of Britain's cinemas through the depression and the war, *Beijingren* would nourish the secret yearnings of the long materially-deprived urban Chinese viewer. Despite the occasional negative representations of capitalist life in New York, despite the disintegration of his family and dreams of being a symphony cellist, the allure of protagonist Wang Qiming's two-storey palatial modern house in the New York

²¹Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1985) 68.

²²Ien Ang 70.

suburbia was tremendously powerful to the Shanghai or Beijing dweller who inhabits a comparatively minute apartment.

Because personal life, and families -- something that the viewers can relate to -- are always in a constant state of negotiation, however powerful certain characters may be none is "invulnerable, however, heroic, powerful or strong he or she might be."²³ This is intended to be tragic in a soap like *Dallas*, but it also surely signifies that if there is never a permanent winner, I, the spectator, therefore might not always be a loser, at least no more so than a major figure like J. R. Ewing. That the soap hero's survival under modernity is uncertain and precarious renders the viewer's own permanent state of domination and alienation more bearable.

JR, of course, is the classic soap opera dominator. By isolating him as a "bad guy", it renders the rest of the system, of which he is only an extreme example, seem almost decent, normal, and natural. In alienated capitalist modernity individuals are compelled to search for satisfaction of their egoistic needs by attempting to establish an alien power over others, and this is one of the foregrounded human motivations of soap.²⁴ As in *Dallas*, so in *Beijingren zai Niuyue* The major characters in both soaps are driven by the impulse to dominate, to establish an alien power over, others. Such domination is one of the prizes of capitalism. That both *Dallas* and *Beijingren* may project those characters who are the most extreme in striving to realize their dreams of domination is a function of the ideology that such soaps are instrumental in reinforcing, or perhaps in the case of *Beijingren*, in establishing. The ideology enforced or reinforced depends on a bourgeois morality of sentimentalism which the viewer is called upon to adopt, or which the viewer has already long ago internalized. Thus, capitalism need not be so morally repugnant, the "decent person" can profit from capitalism and still feel moral rectitude. Of course, the Chinese cultural

²³ Ien Ang 69.

²⁴ Karl Marx *Early Writings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 168.

producers who are mediating this visual introductory manual to capitalist life still have to negotiate the current official and popular ideologies and collective imaginary. Capitalism is shown to some extent to be problematic: loose morality, and hard-nosed individualistic self-reliance are just two among many blemishes of capitalism that *Beijingren* allows.

Wang Qiming asks his white American competitor in the garment trade why his friend the buyer didn't help him out when he was going bankrupt. It is explained to Wang that that is not the American capitalist way: "when you are in trouble you are on your own." American self-reliance is certainly a long way from Mao's notion of collective self-reliance (*ziligengsheng*), or is it?

In a confrontation with his newly arrived but rapidly Americanized teen-age daughter, the one-time aspiring professional cellist Wang Qiming destroys her pop record collection in a fit of temper to demonstrate that he has no love for material possessions. She has accused him of being a capitalist. But, he seems insulted more by the inference that he has not worked hard, struggled and suffered (a good old fashioned ideological tenet of the capitalist work ethic) to obtain his wealth. The breaking of the record albums provides a brief moment of ambiguity in what is otherwise an unproblematic projection of objects of consumer desire. And yet only a moment, for the motives for acquisition are ideologically justified. It is the love of family that forces the individual to give up his/her motherland and personal ambitions (in Wang's case to be a professional cellist) to secure the future of the next generation. Similarly Wang Qiming who has lost his wife to his American business competitor, seen his daughter swept away by a young white high school student, and then by the student's father, and his musical ambitions exchanged for the proprietorship of a knitwear sweatshop, is redeemed by secretly paying for his ex-wife's medical school education. This prompts the glaring populist reading: If every Chinese emigrant family could achieve the good life at no moral cost except the sacrifice

of a Wang Qiming, maybe the American capitalist gamble would be worth it after all.



This television series is necessarily set in New York. Not Singapore, not Shanghai. Because Chinese capitalism *will* be different, the soap informs its viewers. But, of course, it will not be different, least of all for women. The capitalist post-modern affirmation of women as commodity object, sits nicely with the re-encroachment of feudal attitudes towards women. Witness the literal buying and selling of women in recent years.

Foreign broadcast television, and in particular MTV, screams at China and the rest of Asia, "Capitalism is great, capitalism is fun (especially if you're a man), capitalism is emancipatory." "Hi there Asia," grins the VJ, as glibly as if he were saying: "Hi, Chicago," "Good morning, Brooklyn". Chinese soap shouts back: "China, watch out for American-style capitalism. Stay at home. Enjoy Coca Cola with Chinese characteristics. Don't let your women get infected by idea of emancipation. Support traditional Chinese family values." MTV screeches: "Global capitalism is great." Chinese soap yells back: "Capitalism with Chinese characteristics: capitalism tempered with Chinese patriotism, Chinese food, and Chinese proverbs, will be better!"

***Backbeat of the Nation:
Chinese MTV and the Official National Imaginary***

Although performed by a private individual, in other words not a state employee, the text discussed in this paper is an officially sanctioned and broadcast song and video clip. While most independent popular music makers in contemporary China have been consistently excluded from official broadcast media, Gao Feng, a young Chinese singer and musician has been warmly received by the official media. In 1996 he produced a hugely successful (in terms of air time) song and video entitled '*Da Zhongguo*', 'Great China'.²⁵ The title may also be translated as 'Greater China', a space imagined territorially that would include Taiwan, and disputed areas over which China claims sovereignty. Greater China may also be understood non-territorially, as the framework for a culturally imagined space intended to appeal to overseas Chinese communities.

What foregrounds this song in terms of importance and meaning, is that it has been enthusiastically received by the national official broadcast authorities as politically acceptable. The song has also been broadcast on satellite TV, and commercial radio, beyond China's borders, and in particular in

²⁵ Lyrics and music by Gao Feng; performed by Gao Feng; video directed by Zhao Lei; cinematography by Feng Yan; art work by Shu Gang. All translations mine.

Hong Kong where it has even been covered by local Hong Kong singers.²⁶

But before discussing the song and video in detail, let me first address the context of the song in terms of the politics and music-culture of the past two decades.

In my previous work on Chinese popular music and music television, I discussed non-official musicians whose songs and performances had redeployed or diverted (*détourné*) ethnic or national ideologies and imaginaries.²⁷ I discussed the Chinese rock and roll singer, now turned jazz musician, Cui Jian whose mockery and defiance of the state and the party centre was represented bodily by a people's army uniform and red kerchief both worn in transgressive and unauthorised ways to emphasise the party's alienation from the people and its original principles. But there was also a vocal and instrumental unorthodoxy. Cui Jian redeployed the trumpet he'd learnt as a child in the People's Liberation Army orchestra in deliberately inharmonious ways, and sang in a raucous, guttural Beijing proletarian street accent, in contrast to the mellow undisturbing voice of official and centralized standard Chinese language singers found on state radio and television.

I also discussed a group named Panther which has now disbanded. Panther was a more middle-of-the-road rock group which in its video productions aggressively and physically

²⁶ Both the song and video were produced in 1995 and broadcast widely and frequently during 1996 on Chinese state television, and by the independent Hong Kong-based satellite television company Star Television whose footprint covers most of the Chinese-speaking areas of the Asia-pacific region. The song has also been broadcast on Hong Kong commercial radio. The song has also been covered on Hong Kong radio and Hong Kong terrestrial television variety shows.

²⁷ "The East is Red' Goes Pop: Commodification, hybridity and nationalism in Chinese popular song and its televsual performance", in *Popular Music* [Cambridge University Press] 14, 1 (January 1995), and *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press; London: C. Hurst & Co. 1996).



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occupied centralized national space, while again musically using a basic rock and roll as a representation of non-official, non-authorised noise against state control over the production and distribution of noise.

There was also a heavy metal band Tang Dynasty whose recuperation of national and ethnic space and history involved both the televisually forceful images of Buddhist temples on the desert fringes of the old empire, and the setting of Chinese classical poems to heavy metal rhythms. Tang's main ploy was to foreground the moribund ideology of the PRC state by squeezing it between a recuperation of past Chineseness and heavy metal masculinist Otherness.

None of these groups ever used lyrics overtly to challenge the centre. Rather it was the absence of direct, political content (either in terms of patriotic rhetoric, or the standard official lyric references to 'socialist' successes) that was sufficient to foreground the songs as anti-authority. Lyrics in both pre-modern and modern Chinese traditions have always been the target of a close political censorial gaze, and readers are adept at reading between lines. Similarly none of the musical and performative practices would have appeared at all transgressive if the ideology of the state did not privilege an official imaginary in which ethnic authenticity and purity was somehow intended to be inherent in "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as the current mode of capitalist modernization is known in China.

While in Europe and America rock music and its surrounding culture is no longer perceived as constituting a real threat to

regnant authority, in China it still is. For instance, in early 1996, in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin a concert featuring self-styled punk rocker He Yong was permitted by the authorities. However, the usual practices and aura of a rock concert were not permitted. The police authorities allowed no dancing or indeed even standing up, no exuberant behaviour of any sort. Police and security guards employed aggressive and insistent tactics to ensure compliance in the enforcement of their desire to suppress and control the rock concert ethos and its latent dangers for authority.²⁸

I should like now to discuss briefly the issues of ethnicity and nationalism in Chinese popular music. There are numerically large ethnic minority communities in China. The Tibetans are the best known outside of China, but officially there are over eighty recognized non-Han Chinese minority groups. Statistically the minorities constitute only seven per cent of the whole population. However, the 93% supposed Han ethnic majority is not a homogenous group, let alone a 'race', a category in any case no longer sustained by scientific analysis. 'Han', then, is an unsatisfactory term that refers to the dominant supposedly 'homogenous', invented and socially constructed majority, an 'ethnicity' referred to outside of China simply as 'Chinese'. But the ethnic can only be the national when an ethnically 'authentic' nation has been constructed, and this the Chinese central authorities have done as convincingly as any modern European state. Once the Han majority becomes represented as (almost) the whole nation, the marginalization of other 'ethnicities' as minorities follows as a matter of course, and minorities become, as Engels so bluntly put it, 'non-historic peoples' whose destiny is tied to that of powerful 'ethnically homogenous' nations.

It was against, yet also within, this monolithic discourse of centralized nationalised modernity that 1980s pop musicians

²⁸ As evidenced by CNN un-edited footage of which the author has a video copy.

were grounded. For even while they challenged the authority of the state, the discourse within which they did so was both national and nationalist, as it was for the students at Tiananmen square in 1989. The nationalist discourse was deployed against the central state authorities who themselves were not only propagators of nationalist ideology, but were also its product. But at least popular music culture, emergent Chinese rock and roll in particular, positioned itself oppositionally with regard to the central authorities. Now, however, that national space, the collective imaginary, the panoply of national symbols, has been recuperated in turn in favour of the centralized state by the singer Gao Feng, and so as to privilege official ideology.

At least in the Tang, Panther and Cui Jian performances one could read a dissatisfaction with central control, a critical stance that represented or exploited popular discontent with economic and social realities. Cui Jian pointed to the new consumerist materialism as one of his specific targets. And more than that there was a resentment against a betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution, and even of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) whose stated aims, if not its real results, were enthusiastically supported by Chinese urban youth in the 1960s.

But the oppositional music culture that so dismayed the authorities and that now seems to have been brought under control by the emergence of cultural producers such as Gao Feng, has never been a dominant musical idiom widely available to even the urban population of China. Musically, what followed the Cultural Revolution, that honeymoon period in Sino-American relations of the late 1970s and early 1980s, was an official music policy that permitted only the distribution of folksy, seemingly patriotic melodies and sentiments representing an imaginary homeliness, cosiness and harmony of American life. Such music was consumed eagerly by an audience that had only had access to the narrow and limited repertoire of Cultural Revolution model operatic music and military-style songs. For the regnant authorities, the clean, white, ethnically unproblematic music of singers such as Denver, and the

Carpenters, represented the acceptable face of American pop music, an acceptable model for China's popular music, unlike the 'miscegenated', hybrid, ethnically unclear and confused music constituted by rock, soul and blues. The traces of the official policy that favoured such musical models are to be found in the musical and ideological simplicity of the Gao Feng song I discuss here.

The rock and roll that emerged slowly and unofficially throughout the 1980s, was firmly identified with youth and dissidence, with what the authorities called 'bourgeois spiritual pollution', which in the official Chinese political lexicon translates as 'Western influence'. Rock and roll emphasised every social and cultural reality the state was engaged in occluding. Rock music culture foregrounded difference, divisions, Otherness, ideological gaps, and above all it positioned itself against official ideology and authoritarian control. Meanwhile the state broadcast authorities continued to air unsophisticated middle-of-the-road pop products that celebrated national, and ethnic and social unity in a banal and unfashionable style.

At the level of the lyrics, which are very simple, and yet which avoid the directness and over-deployment of patriotic terminology of official song-writing, the intention is to reinscribe and reaffirm the centralizing and totalizing construction of China as a 'naturally' cohesive and cohesive nation:

We all have one home its name is China²⁹
There are many brothers and sisters, the scenery is also pleasant
Within the home wind two dragons:

²⁹ The word I translate here as 'home' (*jia*) also means family in Chinese, thus facilitating the slide into representation of all Chinese as brothers and sisters is facilitated; the Chinese word for the nation, or country is *guojia*, the element *guo* meaning 'state'.

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The Yangzi and the Yellow rivers
And then there is Mount Everest

.....
Look at the Great Wall that weaves in and out of the clouds
Look at the Tibetan Plateau vaster than the sky

While re-inscribing in these lines the Chinese state's territorial claims, what is privileged here is obviously unity and the monolithic nation. The sub-text alludes to the current incorporation of Hong Kong into the Chinese state, and the official long-term project of recuperating Taiwan, but also to maintaining the internal cohesion of state challenged by minority peoples such as the Tibetans and the Turkic people of the north-west border region, and major socio-economic inequalities across China.

Our great China
A great big home
that has experienced such inclement weather
Ah, my great China
such a big home
Forever, I say forever, I want to accompany her

The homeliness of the 'great big home', the sense of cogent and willing community, that has survived the trials of history, and the loyalty of the Chinese citizen/subject are all represented here. The 'inclement weather' can allude to the specific or the general tribulations of Chinese society over the past two hundred years: the encroachment and exploitation of foreign imperialist powers, the war against the Japanese, the Civil war, the economic disasters of the 1950s and 1960s, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), or more recently the massacre in and around Tiananmen Square that ended the political dissatisfaction and protests of 1989, described as a counter-revolutionary rebellion by the authorities.

However, more important than the lyrics, are the visual and musical aspects of Gao Feng's product which constitute a transformation of style and presentation in its re-presenting of the nationalist and centralizing ideology as positive and seductive. Instead of a cynical and ironic use of national memory and space, Gao Feng produces a music and imagery of celebration. In celebrating the national, the central, the ethnically dominant, the ethnically integrated, in ways that



parallel, or derive from, official ideology, with musical and video techniques that previously had been the marker of dissident and marginalized voices, Gao Feng renaturalizes a totalizing national popular imaginary. Rather than recuperate national and ethnic space for alternative visions of society, Gao Feng recuperates it for the nation, or rather for a quasi-official representation of the nation that effectively aims at rallying not the People, but a new urban middle class represented as the nation.

At the level of music, Gao Feng's simple folk-like melody, is accompanied by a heroic chorus. The tune can be listened to by anyone, but the tune is designed to appeal to, to give the impression of accentuating and emulating the 'local', that is in 'Chinese' terms, the national and the central. The pentatonic verse provides a constant reminder of the nativist, the 'authentic' with its almost Heideggerian conflation of national/racial/ethnic 'roots', while accommodating and recuperating the Western, the contemporary, the commercially popular. The chorus alludes to sort of Western folk-rock reminiscent of John Denver. There is also one musical phrase redolent of the revolutionary songs of the Cultural Revolution. The verse is not only pentatonic but folk-like. The folk element of state-sponsored popular song is

nothing new of course, neither in China nor elsewhere where state ideologies are dominated and formed by the project of nationalization and modernization. In China, state recuperation of folk song and folk dance date back even before the 1930s revolutionary era of the Yan'an communist guerrilla base; both left and right from the early twentieth-century had attempted to recuperate and deploy the academic yet 'patriotic' study and reinvention of the many regional varieties Chinese folk music or rather music. In the 1930s the collection, ordering and rewriting of Chinese folk songs became central to Chinese Communist cultural policy and since the Communist base was situated in north-western China, folk melodies and styles of that region not only became dominant, but thereafter assumed a certain revolutionary aura connected temporally and spatially to the terminus of the mythically important Long March that was Yan'an.

In an attempt to synthesize the supposedly typically 'Western' with the supposedly typically national 'Chinese', in an instantiation of Mao's formulaic admonition to 'make the West serve China, and the old serve the new', the pentatonic verse alludes to a generalized musical folk aura, while the folk-rock chorus provides the aura of the modern and the Western. In the effort to realize a synthesis in which the musical allusions to 'ethnic authenticity' are nonetheless not lost, the background, using a typical Western 1980s production, employs drum machines and synthesizers to evoke a convenient conflation of the ethnic and the national which is deliberately pentatonic. A heavy backbeat marking out time helps to bind together these disparate musical (and visual) elements, and a world beat is also invoked in the production of the music in the attempt to produce a cohesive texture.

And yet the percussion instruments we hear seem not to be the drums of the drum dancers we see, but a mere minimalist allusion to them. Visually, the folk dance alludes to successful cinematic redeployment of the folk-dance and its characteristic drumbeats in recent Chinese cinematic productions, again

drawing on the recuperated local culture that surrounded the 1930s-1940s Yan'an revolutionary base.

While this drum dancer sequence could also be read as a token representation of the geographically peripheral, I would rather conclude that the drum dancers of Shaanxi are in fact merely representative of a long-standing historical recuperation of a local peasant cultural practice by the state, by the centre. In a sense they represent and symbolise the legitimacy and historical revolutionary credentials of the centre, when the Communist fought first the Japanese and then the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi). These drum dancers then are not only folklorized but nationalised, and representative of revolutionary yet centralizing tradition that claims to embody the popular desire for nation, centralized, and cohesive construction of China. The dancers may also be seen as representing a nostalgia for what even the disillusioned and dissident perceive as an innocent national revolutionary moment; Cui Jian has produced cover versions of a number of pre-1949 revolutionary songs. However, that revolutionary moment and its musical and performative representation are now simply commodified.

While bells in various musical traditions seem almost always representative of calling communities together, especially in Western musical usage, in many societies the artefacts and the sound stand as tropes of both unity, and authority. In the Chinese case the bells are also visually and musically a marker of history, authenticity and tradition; even more so than the comparatively recent Christian church bell. Bells in China constitute the physical evidence not only of cultural but also of political sophistication stretching back three thousand years; such evidence of civilization and territorial continuity also constitute a trope of legitimacy frequently invoked internally and internationally by the modern Chinese authorities. Bells were important in ancient Chinese state rituals and in the Gao Feng video production the visual mapping onto the sound of bells

shots of ancient ritual bells invokes centralized court ceremonies and the illusion of “timeless” national authority.³⁰ But in the cultural product under discussion here, the use of bells have a further significance that I shall mention below.

In discussing in detail no more than the eighteen second long opening sequence of the video production, it is possible to deconstruct and elaborate the ideological intent of the whole four-minute visual, lyric and musical production.

The bell chimes that open the song and the music video ring out that internationally recognizable tune ‘The East Is Red’. ‘The East is Red’ is not the Chinese national anthem, but is nevertheless probably China’s best known tune and song eulogising that national and revolutionary hero, the late Chairman Mao; the first lines of the song are ‘The east is red/The sun has risen/China has produced a Mao Zedong’.

‘The East is Red’ has the same place in the national imaginary and produces the same patriotic sentimentality as Elgar’s ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ in the English imaginary. The song itself has numerous historical connotations, but the chimes version alone is laden with significance. Every Chinese knows that the chimes sound on the hour at the clock tower of Beijing’s main railway station, and thus the chimes also occupy a place in the national imaginary, akin to that of the centralized and nationalizing chimes of Big Ben in London.

In a production intended not simply for domestic consumption but also for propagation amongst the overseas Chinese communities, the Chinese diaspora, the musical cliché of ‘The East is Red’ also clearly identifies this particular nationalist patriotic narrative with the Communist PRC version of nationalism, indeed the ambition is to naturalise that version of nationalism, to have all Chinese everywhere accept it.

³⁰ A comprehensive study of chime bells and their importance to the feudal Chinese state is to be found in Lothar Von Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music: Chime-Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

The chimes evoke and represent at once, revolutionary history, and the unity of China assured by and at the centre. The chimes represent also both the beginning of the long narrative of the Chinese nation, and mapped onto that the historical narrative of the People's Republic of China. This is foregrounded visually by the first shot of ancient Chinese bells in the sunrise; evoking both the birth of the nation and the words of the song 'The East is Red'. That shot is succeeded by group of children (always represented as the hope of any nation and, of course, always also the excuse for adult suffering while awaiting the nation's millennium) who walk determinedly forwards, towards the camera, and thus into the future of the nation. This opening shot also constitutes a mimicry of a well-known scene from the photographic record of Mao's life. The children release doves into the air as a sign of desire for peaceful progress, and hold up lit candles in the dark in a quasi-religious gesture. As the garishly coloured head of a lion dancer twirls across the screen, the soundtrack switches from 'The East is Red' into Gao Feng's melody. The lion dancer represents tradition and Chineseness and constitutes a visual segue into a Western-style popular music mode. Similarly the Chinese women dancers in white robes enacting Buddhist, and thus traditional, beliefs, facilitate the shift to a seemingly less Chinese musical practice; this allusion to Buddhism may also be read as emblematic of the national subject's, China's, historical capacity to absorb, naturalise and nationalize external cultures and thought.

There are several shots of Peking Opera characters in the first few seconds of the video. Their function is to supply national colour, and the aura of tradition, but their use probably also is linked to the recent successful exploitation of traditional opera in sophisticated made-for-export Chinese Fifth Generation cinema. The Peking Opera woman character (who appears to be in the lead role of a famous patriotic, militaristic Chinese opera *Women Generals of the Yang Family*) twirls away from the camera in front of Tiananmen and the famous picture of Chairman Mao fixed onto the grand podium that overlooks Tiananmen Square;

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you will note that ‘tastefully’ we never actually see Tiananmen Square itself, although the camera is shooting from that position. Here again while visually the exoticism of Peking Opera is deployed, there is little or no attempt at a musical representation of the very different, very Other, music of Peking Opera. Indeed there is nothing in fact to fix these actors as representative of Peking Opera rather than any other Chinese opera of which there are many varieties. Peking Opera is one of many local operas, with the distinction that it has been elevated over the centuries into the court, and thus the centralized, national sung drama form. Musically, like the Yan'an folk drums, traditional Peking opera music then is indicated musically only by its absence. But then, given that each region has its own opera sung in its own dialect, only the visual can effectively represent a national image. Aurally, then there is only a lack of specific musical references, so that while the rapid visual changes overlap with the musical continuity in this production, the visual allusions to traditional music culture nevertheless digress from and even oppose the music that would normally be commensurate with the images.

Cutting to the next frame of the video, four or five middle aged couples are shown running into each other's embrace against the backdrop of the red PRC flag which fills the screen entirely. The camera pans out to reveal those embracing as members of various ethnic minorities, known in China as ‘minority nationalities’. The first shot of singer-performer Gao Feng shows him in classic Mao pose, overcoat flapping, one hand held high in emulation of the well-known Chairman's greeting. Representations of Mao had been previously been used to protest against the political order, and remind the authorities of the revolutionary idealism on which the state was founded; it is a clever *détournement* of an iconography to which the authorities could hardly object. But here we see Gao Feng striking well-known Chairman Mao poses, long etched into the popular imaginary, not to critique contemporary authority but rather to

affirm and celebrate it. We had seen during the Cultural Revolution Mao as pop idol, now we see pop idol as Mao.



Against a dark background the spotlight sweeps across Mao/Gao Feng to reveal him now on a studio concert stage. The audience includes children and again national minority members who in this video are always represented as smiling, seemingly contented women dressed in attractive colourful costumes, imagined as “feminized”, innocent, harmless markers of their difference that accord with the official ideology’s construction and representation of non-Han minorities, and incidentally supply supplemental, peripheral colour. But here, not just the minorities and children smile, all the audience smile, all sway in time with the music, hands in the air in a gesture of responsive salutation, and almost religious exaltation as they sing along with Gao Feng’s patriotic celebratory song.

Space, history and multitudes have been repeatedly employed in Communist China to reinforce national pride and to establish national authority and to invigorate the nostalgic dream of a national return to a Chinese golden age of political and military supremacy. As the Chinese saying that forms part of the popular discursive negotiation of everyday life has it: *lishi chang, difang da, ren duo* (‘history is long, the place is big, and people are numerous’). Each of these three elements of common-sense ideology is alluded to here both visually and musically. The chorus and crowds of children and concert spectators imply multitude, while the bells imply both length of history and providing a sense of aural space.

Ultimately, this music video production constitutes a successful attempt to recuperate national iconography, to reinscribe and reaffirm the associations of party with nation, of an integrated people inclusive of yet beyond minorities, in which

the image of a dominant Han majority at the centre metonymically represents the entirety of Chinese society.

‘They must be represented’ wrote Marx, and yet in this production where are the workers, the peasants, where indeed is the rest of China? Where are those who are Other to China’s consumer and industrialized capitalist cities? Indeed, metaphor of difference, spatial tropes of marginalization, of centre and periphery may be less suitable to the representation of the socio-economic reality than more traditional, established hierarchical models. Where in this video of celebration are those relegated to the lower echelons of the socio-economic hierarchy, where is the representation of the reality of beggars and prostitution, and what of the so-called floating population of 100 million plus unemployed (twice the population of France or ten times the population of Portugal), those constantly dependent on the arbitrary regulation of the economy by the global market, state planners and local implementers?

Gao Feng’s song and its televisual presentation constitute a response to a fear of national fragmentation. The yawning inequalities that daily fragment and threaten the integrity of the Chinese nation-state, the daily peasant uprisings happening somewhere and everywhere in rural China, even more than local or ethnic difference, are well concealed beneath this mask of national centralized well-being represented in this video. And yet the social fragmentation and increasing economic inequality is not of an order than can be negotiated or contained within national boundaries. As Étienne Balibar recently noted:

the territorial distinction between the developed regions and the under-developed regions is less stable, the polarisation of economic statuses translates less directly into territorial structures, the interference or the overdetermination of class differences and ethnic discriminations are produced equally in the North and the South, so that everywhere internal exclusion replaces external exclusion. An ‘underclass’ which is not at all a neo-proletariat, seems to be being constructed on a world scale, while at the other extreme a transnational privileged

class is striving to establish common interests and a common language for itself.³¹

At a stage in world history when populations are “at one and the same time completely atomized and yet irreversibly mixed”, the language of alterity becomes increasingly inadequate.³²

Thus it is not a critique focussed on the exclusion and marginalization of the ethnic Other that will suffice to counter discursive strategies such as we see and hear deployed by Gao Feng. Rather what is required is a response framed by the real universality which marks this historical stage in which “for the first time, humanity is not simply an ideal, a utopian notion, but has become the condition of existence of human beings themselves... a condition that coincides with the generalisation of conflicts and of exclusions.”³³

Ultimately, Gao Feng’s production eulogises not simply a nationalist ideology, but also a new economic order whose beneficiaries however can only ever be a minority of the people’s existing within China’s border. But this economic expansion “abolishes neither political domination nor economic inequalities”, and on the contrary is part of an unprecedented stage of “polarisation of wealth and misery, of power and powerlessness”.³⁴ While Gao Feng’s product may have served to bolster the ideological underpinning of the relatively wealthy and powerful, a little satisfaction may be drawn from the fact that the miserable and powerless have at least not had to endure it.

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³¹ Étienne Balibar, *La crainte des masses: Politique et Philosophie avant et après Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1997) 429-430. All translations mine.

³² Balibar 430.

³³ Balibar 430.

³⁴ Balibar 425.

Debray has written that "liberal capitalism apparently has nothing to fear...from economic self-regulation [*l'auto-contrôle économique*]." ³⁵ Yet, over the past five years or so, it has been noticeable in the "liberal capitalist" societies the state has increasingly encroached on this "self-regulation". Perhaps this is merely a manifestation of the convergence of the two forms of spectacular, the diffuse and the concentrated. Of course, in reality, televisual distribution and consumption has never been totally "free". Again as Debray observed, in capitalist societies, "nothing is forbidden but not everything is sellable, and if the citizen has the right to see and hear everything, distribution has its constraints."

If there is to be optimism for the future in China or elsewhere in the capitalist and unified world, if there is to be "resistance ", it will not come from satellite TV (Chinese or non-Chinese), nor from Chinese-produced soap, or MTV. If there is a window of hope in televisual production for the marginalized and the poor in Asia, in other words, the majority, it will not to be found on the e-mail or TV screen.

However, I would not want to deny the usefulness of the medium of televisual representation in terms of its critical potential. Over the last decade alternative video-makers in Latin America and Nigeria have been exploiting the potential of the VCR to evade the centralized mass media system and produce independent material for the home video market. ³⁶ There can be radical makers of video just as there are radical writers of books and newspapers; television and video is not *the* new culture, merely a new cultural technique. Optimism should be tempered, however, by the thought that while the techniques may have changed, the manipulators of power relations and the ideology they seek to enforce, and reinforce, have not.

³⁵ Debray 318.

³⁶ Reeves 68.