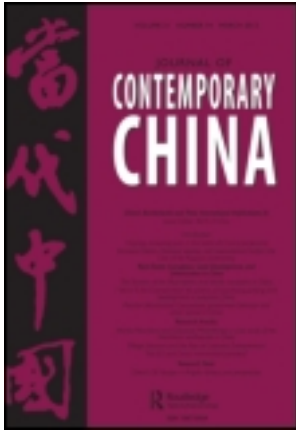


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Journal of Contemporary China

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjcc20>

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Version of record first published: 02 Aug 2012.

To cite this article: Liu Kang (2012): Searching for a New Cultural Identity: China's soft power and media culture today, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21:78, 915-931

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.701032>

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Searching for a New Cultural Identity: China's soft power and media culture today

LIU KANG*

The paper argues that China's global expansion and calls for its use of soft power are provoking an ideological crisis which is becoming one of the most critical challenges of the present time. Revolutionary ideology legitimated the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for 60 years, but it has become increasingly at odds with the rapid socio-economic development that began 30 years ago. This paper examines four aspects of contemporary Chinese culture: first the discrepancy between the CCP's ideological rhetoric and its pragmatic policies; second, the fragmentation of the state, the intellectual elite, and the grassroots population in terms of cultural expressions and values; third, the consumer culture which has unleashed materialistic desires; and finally, the emergence of a 'post-80s' generation urban youth culture amidst these tension and contradictions.

Introduction

On 13 January 2009, the Hong Kong-based English newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*, reported a RMB45 billion, or US\$6.6 billion, Chinese government program to fund international ventures undertaken by the state media.

The *International Herald Leader*, a Chinese-language newspaper of the official Xinhua News Agency, retold the story from the Hong Kong newspaper in Xinhua's website xinhuanet.com on 3 February, with the headline 'China launches national publicity campaign to improve its international image'.¹ It was reported that the plan will target global audiences by constructing multilingual versions of the China

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1. 'China launches national publicity campaign to improve its international image' ['Zhongguo quanmian qidong guojia gongguan gaishan zhongguo guoji xingxiang'], *International Herald Leader* [*Guoji xianqu luntanbao*], (3 February 2009).

Central Television (CCTV), Xinhua and the *People's Daily*. China wants its own CNN or Al-Jazeera. The news drew immediate worldwide attention and, not surprisingly, some sharp criticism from the West, too. *Wall Street Journal Asia* on 30 January carried an editorial—‘China’s new propaganda machine’—by Nicholas Bequelin, a researcher at the international NGO Human Rights Watch, which is one of China’s most vocal critics. ‘Can state-run broadcasters, whose traditional role is to be the “throat and tongue” of the Communist Party, really turn into competitors for the likes of CNN and the BBC?’ the author asked rhetorically. In conclusion, the author lectured the Chinese about ‘the soft and persuasive power that can only come with a free, unbiased media that informs rather than misleads’.²

A well-known Chinese journalist and popular columnist, Yan Lieshan, senior editor at the *Southern Weekend*, wrote in his Hong Kong-based blog in March, commenting on the grand state PR campaign or so-called ‘external propaganda’:

If you want European viewers to abandon CNN and watch the TV channel run by Xinhua News Agency, the first thing you need to do is to establish credibility and win trust. In my opinion, if foreigners believe that foreign and Chinese reporters are not free to report the truth in China, our new ‘great external propaganda’ drive will not fare any better than the overseas edition of the *People's Daily* and the English-language *China Daily*.³

To return to the beginning of the story, it is interesting to note that the story at the Xinhua official website vanished two days after its first appearance. Only two months later, on 14 April, did the *International Herald Leader* online version mention the news again, in a story entitled ‘Foreign media concerned about China’s deliberations of national publicity’.

Those familiar with Chinese political delicacies will note the intricate twists and turns in the above narrative. It can be understood as a meta-commentary on media and publicity or propaganda, since different kinds of media and news professionals were involved in the circulation and attendant commentaries of the purported major international media campaign by the Chinese state. The news itself should have come from one source in Beijing, particularly from the meeting of the Chinese propaganda administrators held on 4–5 January, in which Li Changchun, China’s highest official in charge of ‘propaganda work’, publicly announced that ‘enhancing our communication capacity domestically and internationally is of direct consequence to our nation’s international influence and international position’. The news of the RMB4.5 billion plan, however, took a detour by way of Hong Kong media, as an unofficial leakage to ‘test the water’ so to speak. Yet the criticism from the Western media was unanimous, and some liberal-leaning, outspoken Chinese intellectuals such as Yan Lieshan did not hesitate to voice their skepticism (again via a Hong Kong-based Internet blog), if not outright opposition. Guangzhou-based *Southern Weekend* is a popular herald for liberal-minded Chinese intellectuals and a weekly paper of investigative news that boldly exposes official corruption and other social ills. Guangzhou’s proximity to Hong Kong and Shenzhen—a Special Administrative Region and Special Economic Zone, respectively—makes it a haven for Chinese print media, enjoying a degree of press

2. Nicholas Bequelin, ‘China’s new propaganda machine’, *Wall Street Journal Asia*, (30 January 2009).

3. Yan Lieshan, ‘When in Rome—a few thoughts on “external propaganda”’ [‘Ruxiang suisu shuo waixuan’], available at: <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/2427560.html>.

freedom unmatched by any other Chinese press. Yet Yan Lieshan's commentary could not possibly appear in the newspapers, as the topic he touched upon was of high political significance and sensitivity. The thriving Internet blog, however, gives Yan a less restrained venue, raising a critical question of free press and propaganda, external or otherwise.

We detect several threads in the above-mentioned communicational loop, first the print media of the state-run Chinese newspaper and the Hong Kong newspaper, then the American media (also published in Hong Kong), and finally the Chinese journalist's Internet blog, concentrated on the three locales, i.e. Beijing, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou. Several layers of meaning can be construed from the narrative, too. Instead of dwelling on the political hermeneutics of the news story and the story of its transmission and circulation, suffice it to mention here that the story-within-story is indicative of the dilemma that China now faces in terms of its soft power or the arena of culture and media.

The sharply divided line between the Western liberal views of a free press and what is being practiced in China's news media and cultural arena has not been easily crisscrossed, and as a legacy of the Cold War, Western liberal ideology as proselytized by the Western media is not well received in China, and is challenged by an increasingly assertive and 'nationalistic' Chinese public, consisting largely of young Internet users or 'netizens'. Within the great wall of China, and more recently within the so-called 'great firewall of China', i.e. Chinese cyber space policing, tensions are brimming and 'sectarian wars' are highly visible in different media forms and sectors, though fought mostly in the economic terrain. Entertainment-driven media, especially television, are vying for a market with an enormous population, which nonetheless has a decreasing appetite for the consumer cultural products that the media have tirelessly fed them. Aloft and cynical, Chinese intellectuals, particularly those self-styled crusaders of high culture, tend to further distance themselves from both the state ideology and the consumer popular culture, whereas not a few of them have managed to break the academic cocoons and become media celebrities, thanks to the consumer culture. Those once high-brow professors of literature and history such as Yu Qiuyu, Yu Dan, and Yi Zhongtian, now enjoy popular icon status by giving CCTV lectures popularizing Confucian classics and traditional literature, alongside popular-elected Super Girl singers, or more lately, Happy Girl singers, in addition to the ever-expanding host of Hong Kong and Taiwan-based, commercially manufactured pop stars.

In the tug of war between consumer popular culture and the intellectual elite, the state has seemed little disturbed, remaining in firm control over the 'propaganda work', or anything related to ideology, culture, and media. In China, all media organizations are state-run 'public service units' (*shiyew danwei*, a peculiar Chinese social entity created from the era of the command economy), while their operation and management are more like 'corporate units' (*qiye danwei*) from the market economy after the reform. This split character of the Chinese news media (as both the CCP's political mouthpieces and profit-driven businesses) spawns tensions and contradictions in practicing professional journalism and business operations. Providing the public with balanced and independent news is often at odds with the dictates of the CCP, while profit-driven business interests result in entertainment-oriented programs targeting higher viewers

ratings as their foremost objective, rather than serving the public good. The Internet media are more complicated, as many privately owned Internet businesses such as Sina, Tengxun-QQ, Sohu, and Netease, more blog sites and BBS (popular online discussion forums), and most recently *weibo* (microblog), have now become the most powerful alternative media with newscasts constantly breaking the state media's boundaries.

Underneath the sometimes anarchic and schizophrenic appearance of the Chinese media is a social reality that cannot be adequately covered or represented by the media and the ideological state apparatuses in general. Revolutionary ideology has legitimated the rule of the CCP for 60 years, but it has become increasingly at odds with the rapid socio-economic development that began 30 years ago. The crisis of representation, or the discrepancy between the state ideology and China's socio-economic reality, is reaffirmed paradoxically by the 'external propaganda' or 'China's CNN/ Al-Jazeera' campaign as an urgent call to revamp the propaganda machinery, only from an 'external' rather than 'internal' necessity. It is all too obvious that what the Chinese critic Yan Lieshan calls to 'establish credibility and win trust' applies to both 'internal' and 'external' media.

In what follows, I will first gauge the representational crisis at the current juncture. Then I shall discuss the fragmentation and separation of the state, the intellectual elite, and the grassroots population in terms of cultural expressions, forms, and underlying values. Thirdly, I will address briefly the prevalence of entertainment-centered consumer culture, which unleashes individualistic and materialistic desires at the expense of social cohesiveness and pursuit of public good, while serving to reinforce a facile political stability. Finally I shall try to outline a few features of an emergent cultural formation amidst these tensions and contradictions. This rising 'post-80s' generation urban youth culture will inevitably become a dominant cultural formation in China in the years to come.

The crisis of representation in the new phase of the PRC history

The current juncture can be seen as the beginning of a new phase of PRC history. The first phase of 30 years, from 1949 to 1979 or the Mao era (even though Mao died in 1976, his immediate successor Hua Guofeng did little to change his policy), left a controversial legacy. Notwithstanding the historic milestones of national independence and the establishment of the Communist state, the Soviet-style command economy and the culminating Cultural Revolution, the Mao era or the first 30 years passed on for posterity a revolutionary culture or ideological legacy with an enduring, significant impact on China today. 'Revolution' is now a passé word in China and elsewhere, except in phrases such as 'information revolution', 'digital revolution', or 'velvet or jasmine revolution' referring to the pro-Western political movements in the former Soviet republics or Arab countries. However, revolution and liberation are fundamental precepts in the CCP's 88-year history, and despite numerous revisions since Deng Xiaoping's *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening-up), revolution—or at least the revolutionary wars—has still been the legitimating, if no longer the ruling, ideology of the CCP. In the months of August and September 2009, the upsurge of popular books and TV dramas and films about the revolutionary wars prior to the founding of the People's Republic testifies to the powerful presence

of revolution as the lasting political unconscious or cultural imagining. These new cultural products are supposed to celebrate the PRC's 60th anniversary. Ironically, the celebrated images arise largely from the pre-PRC years or earlier period of the Korean War, rather than from the three decades from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The Deng era from 1979, known otherwise as the *gaige kaifang* or the New Era, has set in motion China's modernization and globalization, turning China into an economic giant and a significant player in world affairs today. The second phase of 30 years of PRC history both fascinates and puzzles the world for an obvious reason: the transformation of China's economy from an agrarian and command economy of scarcity to an industrial and market economy of relative affluence in merely 30 years has been led by the Chinese Communist Party in a one-party state, without going through any significant political reform. Set against the worldwide backdrop of the political seismic waves in these same decades that have ended communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, and fundamentally changed the global political landscape, the 'Chinese model' or the so-called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is all the more 'anomalous' to norms or common sense, which have been shaped largely by the Western model of modernization that lines up market economy and multi-party electoral democracy as inseparable twins. Is China's way a viable alternative, or at least a challenge to the accepted, Western model of modernization? This question now acquires new potency as the West is plunged into a deep economic crisis, while China's relatively strong growth pushes it into the limelight of the world stage.

Now in hindsight, the Deng era began as a fierce denouncement of the radical ideology of the Cultural Revolution. During his reign, Mao launched incessant radical ideological campaigns to maintain revolutionary zest within the populace, in a belief that those immaterial, moral, and semi-religious forces of loyalty, purity, and altruism would pave a way for fast regeneration of the Chinese nation. Such a hubris and fanaticism ended up in political chaos and with the opposition of both the bureaucratic and intellectual elite. Deng's *gaige kaifang* reversed virtually everything that Mao's radicalism embodied, replacing the pursuit of moral purity with that of material wealth. However, Deng insisted that 'Mao's banner' should never be abandoned, and with his astute pragmatic wisdom, Deng managed to salvage China from one after another political and ideological crisis, particularly the 1989 Tiananmen event. The 'banner of Mao' thus remains an ambiguous and ambivalent icon ever since the *gaige kaifang*, providing a legitimating rhetoric and cultural imagining on the one hand, and serving as a reminder of the CCP's ideological legacy on the other. The Mao banner that Deng and his successors have held on to, however, has resulted in sustained attacks by China's foes or the befuddlement of its friends.

As one may recall, the split character of the Chinese media, that is, as both the CCP's mouthpiece and a profit-driven business, showcases the ideological dilemma in an institutional sense. The media in Mao's time were nothing but the CCP's propaganda machinery. During the *gaige kaifang*, the media's ideological function was retained by the institutional structure under the CCP's propaganda department, whereas in reality or in substance, the media have become nothing if not corporate businesses. The institutional arrangement is meant to guarantee the ideological content that the media produce. However, as one looks at a newspaper or watches the TV news, it only takes one a little more than a few minutes to note the vast difference

between the front pages and headlines of the official news and editorials on the one hand, and the rest of the media programs on the other, dominated by entertainment products and other programs concerned with everyday reality.

The headlines and editorials of the *People's Daily* and its local counterparts conform to the CCP ideological guidelines minutely, in both rhetoric and content. The front page headline news on 20 August 2009, for instance, begins with these lines concerning the news of Taiwan's typhoon disaster: "'We share the same feeling with Taiwan compatriots, especially the ethnic minorities, who suffered serious life and property loss in the recent disaster. We are very much concerned", said Hu, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee', Glancing at the same day's *People's Daily* online, one finds under the section of People's Op-Ed such titles as 'Why the police cars dare to escort the pop star Fan Bingbing' and 'Warning on the rip-off ploys Japanese businessmen set up for the Chinese nouveau riche tourists' and so forth. While the variety of the 'non-stately' media content reflects a vigorous and complex social life, the political speeches and editorials of the CCP leadership can hardly respond to such a plurality of values and issues in a non-formulaic and plain language. Important messages are usually conveyed through the often highly abstract and ceremonial rhetoric of the political discourse, and those coded messages can only be understood by the well-informed insider. It is thus little wonder that a major task of Western China hands is to decipher the meaning of Chinese political speeches filled with ideological platitudes.

Over the years, the CCP leadership has tried to revitalize its ideology using several theoretical formulations, such as the ex-CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin's theory of the 'Three Represents' and the current General Secretary Hu Jintao's 'scientific concept of development' and 'harmonious society' as the 'core socialist values'. At the 17th Congress of the CCP in 2007, Hu Jintao for the first time called for enhancing the 'soft power' of Chinese culture, elevating culture to a high status as an 'important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength'.⁴ My previous study regarding the theory of the Three Represents suggests that the theory does not resolve the dilemma of how the CCP can represent itself, both politically and symbolically, as it faces these vexing contradictions in China.⁵ Hu Jintao's effort in the 'scientific concept of development' is to re-channel his predecessor's economist or developmentalist policy that focused solely on the growth of GDP to a more balanced reform to address the mounting social disparity, injustice and popular resentment. In so doing, issues of culture, ideology or 'soft power', a concept loaded with global strategic implications, return to the CCP political agenda with a new urgency.

A popular saying circulating in China now is that

in the first 30 years China under Mao rid itself of the military threat; in the second 30 years China under Deng rid itself of poverty; now in the third 30 years, China will have to rid itself of all blame!

4. 'Hu Jintao calls for enhancing "soft power" of Chinese culture', *Xinhua newswire* (English), (15 October 2007), available at: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90002/92169/92187/6283148.html> (accessed 15 October 2007).

5. Liu Kang, 'Emergent globalism and ideological change in post-revolutionary China', in Manfred Steger, ed., *Rethinking Globalism* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), p. 188.

Now the blame or disapproval of what China does circulates and transmits globally in a matter of seconds both inside and outside China, thanks to the rapidly growing and ubiquitous media technology. We live in a world of media culture. Denying or relegating culture's role to the periphery is only wishful thinking, however powerful that skewed view of culture has dominated during the Deng era. Avowedly pragmatic, Deng's *gaige kaifang* strategy is largely one-dimensional modernization in the economic sector, at the expense of other equally important areas of the political, social, and cultural. Granted, culture is a highly charged, politicized zone in the history of the PRC, from Mao's Cultural Revolution to the Cultural Reflection of the late-1980s culminating in the 1989 Tiananmen Incident.

The post-Deng CCP leadership, consisting mostly of technocrats and engineers, continued to defer modernization efforts in other areas indefinitely, political and cultural in particular. Yet modernization never occurs according to a state policy. The past three decades of *gaige kaifang* only show that Chinese culture has transformed beyond what any CCP policymakers could have imagined, in spite of the often repressive measures. The recent 'soft power' policy initiatives by the CCP leadership are primarily reactive, too. With its growing importance in global affairs, China is under more rigorous scrutiny, particularly by the ideologically opposed, skeptical and wary Western media. Faced with pressures both internationally and domestically, the CCP leadership has only reluctantly begun to address the question of its global image and soft power as an integral part of modernization, or in Hu Jintao's vocabulary, 'scientific concept of development'.

Fragmentation and separation: the state, the intellectual and the popular

A serious predicament for the current CCP leadership is the disenfranchisement and fragmentation of the intellectual elite. While the Western media focus on the political oppositions or dissent of the Chinese intellectuals, represented by such figures as Liu Xiaobo, whose political prominence rose during the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, and some exiled human rights activists and lately the signatories of the Charter 08, these are only a few extreme cases. The majority of Chinese intellectuals, who can hardly be called 'silent' with their active public roles today, remain nonetheless deeply divided and fragmented. Furthermore, because of the professionalization and corporatization of China's education over the last decade or so, Chinese intellectuals view themselves more as a professional or academic elite than as the public conscience. While the debate about a burgeoning civil society or public sphere has caught the public attention over the last two decades, such topics seem no longer able to arouse popular enthusiasm. The esteem and moral authority that the Chinese intellectuals once earned from the general populace, particularly in the early 1980s' Cultural Reflection period, seem to have all but vanished. As some critics point out, the critical spirit and social responsibility, autonomy and independence of Chinese intellectuals have been seriously eroded by the market forces of China's social life.⁶

6. For a critical assessment of Chinese intellectuals, see Edward Gu and Merle Goldman, eds, *Chinese Intellectuals between State and Market* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004). For a more detailed and updated discussion of the Chinese intellectual scene, please see my upcoming article "Dinner party of discourse owners"—China's intellectual

It should be noted that Chinese intellectuals are mostly the beneficiaries of the *gaige kaifang*, contrary to the claims made by some leading oppositional figures. Intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution were subjected to re-education campaigns led by radical revolutionaries and a significant number of them were humiliated and victimized, together with many bureaucrats, labeled as ‘capitalist runners’, with Deng Xiaoping as the arch villain. One of the main motivations of *gaige kaifang* was to redress the wrongs wrought on the bureaucrats and intellectuals, who then assembled under Deng as the most devoted supporters of the reform. The decade of the 1980s saw the ascendance of the intellectuals to the center stage of China’s social life, leading the socio-political movements of the so-called Emancipation of Minds, the Second Enlightenment or Cultural Reflection (also known as the ‘Cultural Fever’) respectively. These intellectuals, mostly in the humanities of literature, history and philosophy, invoked the passion and idealism of the May Fourth Cultural Movement of 1919 as the precursor to China’s modern culture, and in the meantime embraced liberal ideas from the West as China’s new direction of modernization. However, cultural movements in China inevitably fall prey to politics, and the turmoil and the ensuing bloody crackdown at Tiananmen in 1989 ended in another round of political repression. Contrary to the widespread apocalyptic prediction in the West of the return of Maoist radicalism, however, 1990s’ China witnessed much accelerated economic reform. During his Southern Tour in the Spring of 1992, Deng Xiaoping declared a ban on any ideological debate while encouraging privatization and marketization in economic sectors.

Consequently, division and fragmentation among Chinese intellectuals intensified, as the green light was now turned on for economists and business professionals, whereas a red light firmly blocked any motion of the humanists and other carriers of the Cultural Fever ‘viruses’. Deng’s successors, from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, consisted primarily of technocrats with almost exclusive engineering backgrounds; and those working in engineering and the natural sciences in China were much less affected by the ideological and political turmoil of the late-1980s than the humanists. Once again, their importance in building the scientific-technological infrastructure was highlighted in Deng’s new economic initiatives. In the latter half of the 1990s and early years of the new century, China began to increase the educational and research funds and expenditures, in an effort to make up the vast deficiency in the educational sector, the universities in particular. The reform priority was driven by pragmatic demands of immediate outcome from education and research. Hence the American style corporatization of higher education and research was implemented by the state, resulting in nationwide mergers of smaller colleges into mammoth universities such as Zhejiang University and Wuhua University, and the Ministry of Education’s annual research fund saw astronomical increases in less than a ten-year span.

However, the casualty of such a corporatizing drive was the humanities as the backbones of liberal arts education. Under such circumstances, Chinese intellectuals in the humanities were devastated not only by the political stalemate that deprived them of their high social status that they had begun to enjoy for only a few years in

Footnote 6 continued

scene today’, *Minnesota Review*, (2012), in which I argue that there is hardly any serious responses to the fundamental dilemma of the absence of social consensus and coherent social values now.

the 1980s, but also by the economic and material disadvantage, when the university administrators now distributed funding only by the utilitarian and quantitative calculations of academic production. All of a sudden, the Chinese intellectuals were faced with an identity crisis: the corporatization of education called for the swift professionalization of academics. The notion of being a 'professional' rather than an 'intellectual' in the changing social and academic environment was deeply alien to the Chinese humanists, whose historical lineage is traceable from the more modern period of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to the Confucian scholar or literati in antiquity. If the Cultural Revolution and other political campaigns during the Mao era often targeted the intellectuals, they were at least 'respected' by society and even by their persecutors, who acknowledged the significant symbolic power vested in the intelligentsia class. The marketization of Chinese society and the corporatization of education of the 1990s, however, simply denied them that symbolic aura, reducing or repositioning their status according to the logic of the market, rather than by the exclusive cultural upbringing and prestige.

It was now difficult for the humanists to reinvent their self-esteem by having recourse to the Enlightenment philosophy of subjectivity, as they did in the early 1980s. For one thing, while in the early 1980s, millions of millions young students embraced grand ideas and knowledge with a passion, the young enthusiasts in the 1990s were attracted to the more tangible and material wealth than ephemeral ideas. The philosophical propositions of Hegelian subjectivity gave way to the success stories of a Bill Gates or his sizable Chinese replicates. Moreover, the triumphant ideology or non-ideology in the age of globalization was that of neoliberalism, which substitutes a flexible, mobile, business executive or CEO as the prototype of postmodern agency for the now 'out-dated', class-based notion of the proletariat or bourgeois subjectivity. Neoliberalism in China was endorsed in academia by a majority of economists and social scientists, who have now taken over the academic central stage, and was popularized by the media with great interest in consumerism and marketization. The CCP's position towards such Western trends was always cautious and ambivalent, assimilating tacitly its market logic of efficiency and profitability without any public acknowledgement of its ideology of individual freedom and market capitalism.

Neoliberalism and its variants have met with some resistance. The Chinese New Left, a very loosely defined and controversial cohort of intellectuals, has been at the forefront of critiquing the dominant neoliberal ideology both domestically and internationally, and their voices sometimes reach beyond China's academic circles and arouse interest from their Western counterparts. However, their often jargon-ridden and complex academic discourses cannot be accessible to the general public, and indeed, the Chinese populace have hardly heard of, let alone being persuaded by, those self-styled defenders of the disempowered, thanks to the mainstream media's reluctance to grant them access and their own sectarianism and proclivity to high-sounding abstraction. The media publicity and controversy over Chinese 'public intellectuals' has generated more confusion and aversion from the populace than admiration, since the media's parading of the 'public intellectuals', as shown by the naming of China's 'Top 50 public intellectuals' by *Southern People's Week*, a popular magazine in Guangzhou, was largely commercially motivated and the list

was produced quite indiscriminately, including such figures as rock pop star Cui Jian and Harvard professor Wei-ming Tu, an American neo-Confucian crusader. It eventually became a media event after the CCP leadership reportedly made a 'gray list' of those prominent figures who often voiced opposition and dissent to the CCP policies. As usual, it came to the attention of the Western media. Robert Marquand, a staff writer for *The Christian Science Monitor*, wrote on 30 November 2004: 'In a move intended to muffle the voices of some of China's most prominent and independent scholars and activists, hard-line elements in the new Hu Jintao government are seeking to eradicate the concept of "public intellectuals" in China'.⁷

It should be noted, however, that those 'independent scholars' or 'public intellectuals' with media publicity in both China and abroad were mostly liberal or pro-liberals with very few exceptions, especially among the academics mentioned in the so-called 'Top 50 public intellectuals' controversy. These liberal intellectuals are usually very active online, but in traditional media outlets they are covered only by Guangzhou newspapers. Their proselytizing of Western style liberal democracy is considered by most Chinese media as abstract and high-sounding at best, and politically dangerous at worst.

The Chinese version of 'political correctness' in the popular media can best be represented by Yu Qiuyu, Yu Dan, and Yi Zhongtian, who as media celebrities lecture the Chinese populace about classical Confucian values and historical anecdotes on highly rated TV talk shows and in their bestsellers, in a highly entertaining and accessible manner. Yu, Yu and Yi serve the public with their wisdom of the Chinese tradition in keeping with the state mission of building a 'harmonious society', by turning the classics of high-culture into profitable products of consumer popular culture. Nowhere in their speeches and books can one find commentaries on current affairs, yet one can always learn some good lessons about the meaning of life and society metaphorically and even poetically. Metaphor being the most influential figure of speech in China, especially in political discourses, one learns to be 'politically correct' by speaking and reading metaphorically all the time. Yu, Yu, Yi and their like, live in a world widely apart from those neoliberal 'public intellectuals' or New Left academics. It is the world of consumer popular culture and popular media, in which these 'popular intellectuals', so to speak, find their new identity in the consumer society Chinese style.

The neoliberal or neoconservative 'public intellectuals' in the US have constructed a 'market populism' by equating democracy and freedom with consumption.⁸ In China, however, to publicly advocate Western ideas of democracy and freedom is certainly unwise. It is nonetheless propitious and appropriate to promote ideas of social harmony and cohesion in China's market-consumption-centered society. One cannot equate Chinese popular intellectuals with the American neoconservative market populism in terms of their strategies and objectives, yet it is necessary to question the social agendas of the intellectual trends in terms of their relevance to the

7. Robert Marquand, 'China "gray lists" its intellectuals', *The Christian Science Monitor*, (30 November 2004).

8. For critical analysis of the neoliberal and neoconservative 'market populism' in the US, see Thomas Frank, 'The rise of market populism', *Nation* 30, (2000), pp. 13–19; and Lawrence Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America's Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), especially chapters 4 and 5 on neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the US.

compelling issues of justice, rule of law, and civil rights in China, the US or elsewhere. The ‘politically correct’ popular intellectuals of the likes of Yu Qiuyu remain completely silent on these issues, while the pro-Western, liberal public intellectuals’ critical voices reach out to only a small fraction of the intellectual elite in China and mostly to their outside sympathizers, leaving the concerns of the Chinese populace mostly unattended.

Entertainment: celebration of individuality and facile stability

The fragmentation and separation of Chinese intellectuals should be understood in the context of a media culture in which the relationship between intellectuals and the media has become more complex and intertwined than ever before. Apart from the sizable number of media professionals and executives who now consider themselves a distinct species of *zhishi fenzi* or intellectuals, the popular intellectuals of the likes of Yu Qiuyu have become an integral part of consumer popular culture as media celebrities. Indeed, Yu Dan, whose astounding rise from an obscure academic to a media super star or ‘the most famous woman in China’ on CCTV’s talk show of *baijia jiangtan*, Lecture Room Forum, is a perfect example of media packaging, or *meiti baozhuang*.

Yu Dan is an associate professor of film and television at Beijing Normal University, both before and after her rise to stardom, with few scholarly credentials in classical Chinese studies. However, since the 2006 CCTV talk show and the publication of the collection of her lectures, *Yu Dan’s Insights into the Analects*, i.e. her personal and popular readings of the classics by Confucius, the book has sold millions upon millions of copies and Yu Dan, according to a portrayal by an *LA Times* reporter,

has been racing from college lectures to book signings, TV appearances and speaking engagements. The public can’t seem to get enough of this overnight sensation who has turned dusty old Confucian teachings into a Chinese version of ‘Chicken Soup for the Soul’.⁹

The American media have hailed her instant success as a modern fashionable way to fill the moral and ideological vacuum in China today by ‘making Confucius cool again’.¹⁰ From the account in the *Guardian*, a British media outlet,

the Chinese government is now reviving Confucianism as part of its strategy to promote the ‘harmonious society’, establishing Confucian MBA courses for the new rich and even setting up Confucian institutes around the world. It has distributed Yu Dan’s book to teachers, students and civil servants.

The *Guardian* book reviewer continues, ‘Classical scholars, though, feel no such reverence. They have called her “an illiterate with a higher degree who takes pleasure in castrating traditional Chinese culture”’; one turned up at a book-signing wearing a T-shirt that read: “Confucius is deeply worried”’.¹¹

Yu Dan, Yu Qiuyu, a male professor of Chinese literature at Shanghai Institute of Theater, and Yi Zhongtian, a male professor of Chinese literature at Xiamen

9. Ching-Ching Ni, ‘She makes Confucius cool again’, *Los Angeles Times*, (7 May 2007).

10. *Ibid.*

11. Sun Shuyin, ‘Chicken broth for the soul? No thanks’, *Guardian*, (7 May 2009), available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/17/confucius-from-the-heart-yu-dan> (accessed 17 May 2009).

University, take the same trail to media success. They all started out in some TV talk show forums, ultimately the CCTV Lecture Room, and then published their lectures on classical Chinese literature (Yi Zhongtian) and prose essays and travelogues (Yu Qiuyu), and their books were packaged and promoted by an enormous publicity campaign launched by the CCTV media chain and other media outlets, publishers, etc. Of course, these campaigns were not political tasks ordered by the CCP propaganda departments. They were primarily commercial advertising campaigns promoting consumer products—their books. Yu Dan's surprising success is owed, to a great extent, to her role as a program consultant for the CCTV talk shows, an insider or designer who ultimately designed herself to become a media star. As a consultant and designer, Yu Dan knows perfectly all the gimmicks of entertaining an audience. Television, as the most popular media outlet in China today, depends almost entirely on its audience—the viewers' ratings are vital indices for advertisement, and advertising revenue determines the fate of a TV station as a business entity. Entertainment, more than anything else, then becomes the most important and perhaps the only viable way to raise viewers' ratings, since the news programs at the state-run media are exclusively controlled by the CCP propaganda departments, and consequently can contribute almost nothing to boost the ratings, unless news of the Sichuan earthquake or events of such a magnitude breaks out.

It should be added here that entertainment does not merely serve commercial purposes. Being didactic and aesthetic, the age-old universal wisdom, especially valued by Confucian tradition, is now reinforced with a modified version of both entertaining and edifying in today's media culture. The popular intellectuals of the likes of Yu, Yu, and Yi fulfill such a dual mission of both the media and CCP propaganda departments, serving as entertainers as well as proselytizers of the dominant ideology in the media age. Undoubtedly, turning the classics and traditional values into entertainment products reduces the richness and complexity of tradition, and flattens the historical context in which traditional values were engendered and evolved, a deficiency readily recognized by both the intellectual and political elites.

Critical intellectuals from both the New Left and liberal camps unanimously denounce such trends to succumb intellectual values to pure entertainment in their assault on the dominance of consumer popular culture. Much worse than those 'vulgarizing' attempts at high cultural values made by Yu, Yu, and Yi, the widespread violence, sexual irresponsibility, and criminality seen in video games, TV reality shows, Internet pornography, pirated DVDs of Hollywood films, pop music, and tabloid stories of celebrity scandals, are now the main villains attacked by the government, educators, and parents alike, and are held responsible for widespread moral degeneration. What has been widely criticized is the prevalence of entertainment-centered consumer culture, which unleashes individualistic and materialistic desires at the expense of social cohesiveness and the pursuit of public good. However, entertainment in China is Janus-faced, both as the espousal of individual wish-fulfillment, and as the reinforcement of a facile political stability and public satisfaction with the present life.

Entertainment is now the single most important for of programming in Chinese television, garnering more than 50% of viewers' ratings. Television dramas (*dianshi ju*), a unique form of television serial, have consistently garnered the highest share of the

ratings of all television programs since 2000. In 2004, television drama accounted for 29.4% of all program ratings, followed by news programs (16.8%), variety shows (7.9%), special features (7.7%), sports (7.0%), and films (5.6%). Today, not only does television drama boast the highest ratings, it also covers a rich diversity of subject matter and genres: romance, domestic drama, martial arts, romantic and youth idol drama, crime, revolutionary drama, history, and so on. A huge number of TV dramas deal with the emperors, especially the glory of the Han, Tang Dynasties, and mostly the Qing Dynasty (1640–1911), the last imperial era before the modern time. Crime and revolutionary dramas are always popular, blending plots of anti-corruption, spies, gangsters, and revolutionary wars including the Sino–Japanese War and the Chinese civil wars, as well as the Korean War. One gets a glimpse of the revolutionary idealism and heroism amid highly entertaining ingredients of violence, espionage, conspiracy, and love affairs. It is interesting to note that in the last few months of 2009, revolutionary themes have tended to dominate the scene.

There has been an outburst of spy stories based on the history of the Communists versus the Guomindang (Nationalists) that spanned a significant portion of the first half of the twentieth century. The biggest hit of 2010 was the spy thriller *Lurk* (*Qianfu*), which depicts a spy's dangerous 'lurking' as a double agent for both the Communists and the Guomindang during the civil war period. The spy-hero forges a chameleon-like persona with everyone surrounding him—his Guomindang military spy colleagues and his faked wife, and a communist guerilla leader dispatched to be his assistant. But the drama singles out his loyalty—loyalty to the CCP and its cause, of course—as its central motif, taking pains to portray the hero and his comrades, including his lover and wife, first 'faked' then 'real', as a noble, dedicated, and selfless cohort. Such a task to reinvent revolutionary idealism under the current circumstances is quite thankless, as the rampant individualism and materialism in Chinese society easily sweep away any high-sounding idealistic preaching. Chinese viewers love the spy-hero for his multifaceted persona and his dignified yet very amiable personality, and critics hail the success of the drama as an innovative representation of the revolutionary motifs. As the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic approaches, a profusion of television drama and other cultural products celebrate the glory of the nation and its historical journey.

Amid the media blaze celebrating the anniversary, there has been a peculiar imbalance of cultural representations. Take the TV drama for instance. While an increasing number of dramas focus on pre-1949 revolutionary wars, the history of the 60 years of the PRC is hardly mentioned. Such an absence is striking, but mostly unnoticed by the media and the populace, who have been braced for a more stringent economic downturn yet to come, despite the upbeat, festive atmosphere that the Chinese media and the CCP propaganda departments have pumped up. The year 2009 was, for China, a year of high hopes and deep worries. Its global presence and importance has been bolstered in no small way by the global economic recession, and at the same time, the rising social discontent has been affected by China's own lopsided, GDP-only development and by worldwide economic woes. The legitimation crisis lurking behind the astonishing economic growth ever since the *gaike kaifang* has resurfaced over and over again. The collective aphasia or loss of speech on precisely what should be mostly talked about at the time of the

commemoration, namely the entire span of the 60 years from 1949 to the present, strikes one as symptomatic of a deep-seated identity crisis, that an entertainment-driven media and popular culture is by no means capable of unraveling and analyzing, let alone remedying.

The use value of entertainment in China is now seriously challenged, as the discrepancy between its own dual functions, that is, gratification of individual wish-fulfillments on the one hand, and promotion of political stability and public support on the other, is widening. However, it would be too simplistic to condemn it as a irredeemable sin, citing the popular dictum of ‘amusing ourselves to death’, a convenient dismissal now as popular in China as the popular culture it is intended to castigate.¹² Indeed, in the world of media culture, or the consumer popular culture, no one is ‘dead’ or dying; quite the contrary, it is all thriving and lively. China’s hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics was an enormous boost to the ‘creative industry’ or ‘cultural industry’, now widely celebrated as a powerful opportunity for the next round of economic growth and GDP increase.

Also, in China’s consumer popular culture, the passion for catching up with the latest chic or coolness is endemic and relentless. Suffice to mention in brief the two uniquely Chinese events in show business: the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala and the Super Girl Singing Contest at Hunan Satellite TV. If there is a single television entertainment program that can attract the largest audience in the world, it is CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala or celebration show (*chunjie lianhuan wanhui*). The Gala debuted in 1983. A spectacular variety show filmed in CCTV’s giant studio that includes dance and musical performance, sketch comedy, and cross talks with appearances by national celebrities, it is broadcast live on Chinese New Year’s Eve, the traditional time for family reunions, from 8:00 pm until after midnight—New Year’s Day. In the 26 years since its debut, the program has boasted ratings of more than 90%, or approximately 1 billion viewers. It has now become part of the Chinese New Year celebrations—a new custom. No other entertainment program embodies the mainstream ideology of a ‘harmonious society’ better than the Gala, as the four-hour long show tries most painstakingly to include all that is hot and chic in pop culture as well as the current CCP propaganda outlines.

Compared to the CCTV New Year Gala, the Super Girl Contest is a grassroots product with much less pomp than the CCTV show, but no less popular with the numerous teenage fans who show a fanaticism unmatched by any other groups, unless one wants to draw an uncanny parallel with that of their parents in their teenage years as Red Guards, dating back some 40 years ago during the height of the Cultural Revolution. Revolutionary passion being long gone, the new fanaticism is aroused by the instant success of stardom and the fanfare, vanity, and promise of immense material benefit as a media celebrity. Modeled after the popular US television show *American Idol*, Super Girl is a blend of reality show, singing and dancing contest, beauty pageant as well as incorporating popular votes from viewers through cellular phones (over 300 million viewers cast their votes by cell phone in 2005), attracting thousands of millions of young teenage girls and their families to apply, participate, and vote for their favorite singers.

12. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1986). This book is a bestseller in itself, and its Chinese 2004 translation is frequently cited by Chinese scholars and students of media and cultural studies.

However, because of the scandals and ‘vulgarity’ it involves, Hunan Satellite TV finally canceled the show in 2007 after three years in existence. Now after a two-year lapse, the Super Girl made a comeback in 2009, changing its name to Happy Girl. As it turns out, the Happy Girl’s ‘happiness’ is greatly scaled down, as too many restrictions on the participation and broadcasting of the program, as well as the viewers’ fatigue, are now taking a toll on the program. Yet a veritable ‘Super Girl culture’—with its fans, rituals, and coded language—has become widely accepted by the urban youth, the generation known as the ‘post-80s’ *baling hou* and now the ‘post-90s’ *jiuling hou*. Entertainment has become an integral part of the experience of growth for this younger generation. The impact of the consumer popular culture on changing social values and lifestyles is most visible in China’s urban youth, born at the early *gaige kaifang* years of the 1980s.

The post-80s generation: emergent cultural formation

Chinese youth, mostly those born since the 1980s, are the main beneficiaries of reform in terms of material and economic prosperity, but they also bear the brunt of the social transition—confusion and the loss of values and ethical norms, as the revolutionary idealism of Mao’s era has been rapidly replaced by consumerism and egotism. The beginning of the twenty-first century marks the coming of age of the new generation. A distinct urban youth culture is taking shape, nurtured largely by an electronically based consumer culture. As such, this youth culture is the embodiment of globalization: it draws its icons, styles, images, and values mainly from the ‘global’ (read: Western) consumer culture and entertainment industry. In the meantime, the younger generation has a much stronger desire for a distinct cultural identity and for marking their individual differences than did their parents’ generation, who were Mao’s children, born in the 1950s.

The Internet serves as an interface between the self-identities of urban youth, consumer culture, global fashions, and cultural trends. Urban youth today are much more inclined to pleasure-seeking, sensuous or aesthetically pleasing lifestyles, and self-expression. The Internet hence provides these techno-savvy youth, who sometimes label themselves Newer New Humanity (*xinxin renlei*), with a much freer and trendier (or ‘cooler’) venue for self-expression in artistic and literary forms. At the turn of the century, the so-called beauty-baby authors (*meinu zuojia*) were the products of the Internet and the consumer bestselling market. Wei Hui’s novel *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei*, 2000) is generally considered the most well-known work of the ‘beauty-baby writers’. The novel depicts sex, lust, and drugs among contemporary, young Shanghai women who have both leisure time and money, creating a subgenre of ‘body writing’ (*shenti xiezu*)—i.e. writing about feminine bodies or using (displaying) feminine bodies as tools for writing. Since then, numerous post-80s writers, pop singers and other media celebrities have emerged, including writers such as Han Han, Guo Jingming, the Super Girl singer Li Yuchun, etc., who use the multimedia channels such as the Internet, television and printed books, magazines, and others to write and perform, with strong corporate support from the information and communication industries and show business.

A distinct feature of the post-80s generation is their Internet language. In 2001, the e-fiction *The First Intimate Touch* (*Di yici qinmi jiechu*) by Taiwanese cyber writer Bum

Cai (Pizi Cai) marked the beginning of vibrant online writing filled with Internet slang and ‘cool’ language invented by young Internet users. The cyber writing that Bum Cai’s e-fiction initiated has since created a ‘liberating’ language that mixes English acronyms with Chinese shorthand and swear words, and even obscenity with high-tech jargon. The interactive nature of the Internet allows young users to experiment freely with newly invented cyber slang or colloquialisms.¹³ Blogs have thus gained tremendous popularity in China, as a blog (*boke*) provides users with a space in which to freely write and post multimedia materials (photos, sound bites, and other forms) through hyperlinks about their personal experiences and opinions in diary form. Blogs are more personalized or customized than BBS or public forums. As a media form, blogs in China also tend to focus on individual experiences and feelings of love, romance, leisure, and entertainment, as opposed to BBS and chat rooms, which primarily deal with issues of public interest. Another powerful telecommunication tool is cell phones. The rapid development of cellular phones has provided thousands of millions of Chinese with an instant, flexible and affordable means not only of communication but also of entertainment, which allows the users not simply to call each other, but to exchange a good deal of information and entertainment. Cellular phones can be connected to the Internet, to allow the users to download popular music as ring tones, flashes from the web, and, above all, text messages.

The digital network of communication, information, news, and entertainment has opened up not only a market with staggering economic potential but also a formidable social space, especially for the post-80s generation of urban youth. Compared to all the preceding generations, the post-80s urban youth in China marks a distinct new cultural formation and values. Their parents, born in the 1950s, grew up during the Cultural Revolution and shared an unbroken chain of cultural heritage and values in Mao’s revolutionary era. Chinese culture in the most part of the twentieth century can be described as a revolutionary, radical culture in the throes of China’s modernity. Only after the *gaikai kaifang* of the late-1970s did Chinese culture begin to move into a post-revolutionary phase, marked by a series of fundamental displacements, discontinuities, ruptures, and breakthroughs. Maoist collective idealism gradually gave way to individualism and pragmatism.

The coming of age of the post-80s generation coincided with this fundamental cultural change, and their cultural formation embodies this historical cultural transformation by its own historical vision deeply rooted in contemporary media culture. History is ‘liberated’ from history textbooks and integrated into the everyday life by way of popular media culture: films, television dramas, talk shows, and bestsellers, including biographies and historical anecdotes. History appears as nostalgia, as entertainment, as consumer popular cultural products. The historical vision of the post-80s is thus pluralistic, and paradoxically non-historic, in the sense of the denial of history as a continuous and unbroken lineage governing the ways in which to think and to live, or history serving as dominant social values. To the post-80s generation, history, modern Chinese history in particular, is nothing more than any other history, American, Japanese, or French, as entertaining stories with little practical relevance or implication for their life today.

13. Liu Kang, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 154.

However, 'history' as one of the primary figures of speech in Chinese culture, or a central metaphor in China's social life is still dominant, and the post-80s generation's patriotic pride or nationalistic sentiment, largely derived from China's fast growth into a world power, are registered in a historical narrative of modernity of development and progress, from the humiliations and backwardness of the 1840s Opium War to China's rise as a significant player in the world today. A surprising show of social and political activism by the post-80s generation appeared in the aftermath of the 2008 April Tibet riots and the disruptions to the 2008 Olympic torch relays in Paris, London, Los Angeles, and other Western cities. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students studying in Western countries were mobilized by the Internet, and rallied to protest what they conceived as the distortion and demonization of China by the Western media. During the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008, the post-80s youth became a major force of volunteers for rescue and charity work. The display of strong public sentiment by the post-80s generation this time was fundamentally different from that of the earlier years of the 1980s, culminating in the political upheavals of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. History was a latent cause this time, as the young generation's sensitivity to the Western biases in the protests and the public volunteerism in the earthquake were, in large measure, aroused by a historical sense of responsibility, not imposed by the CCP propaganda departments or by the schools, but by a volunteerism with a historical understanding of progress.

Perhaps the post-80s generation's often contradictory and paradoxical sense of history of China as progress and history as entertainment, linked with their national and personal identities and delinked at the same time with their everyday lifestyles and their individual dreams, can offer us some clue to the understanding of their searches for a new cultural identity, a search for each concrete individual as well as for China as a nation. Amidst all the tension and contradictions, however, a 'post-80s' generation urban youth culture has emerged and will inevitably become a dominant cultural formation in China in the years to come. It is media-driven, globalized, and in the meantime more inclined towards its own cultural heritage, and should be understood as the core of China's soft power competing in a global new order.