

Transgressive Conformity: DVD and downloading in China

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Cynicism and the pursuit of enjoyment are, Žižek suggests, the predominant attitudes of the postmodern (developed) world – these being the attitudes most in harmony with contemporary capitalism. So, to what extent is this analysis relevant to China as it transitions from a command to a market economy, and from a developing to a so-called ‘moderately prosperous society’ (*xiaokang shehui*)? One way to examine the issue is through the widespread phenomenon of pirate DVDs and downloading in China which operate as a significant source of semi-illicit enjoyment running in parallel to the otherwise closely supervised official Chinese media. As such, it is the flip-side of China’s policy of ‘opening up to the outside world’ (*gaige kaifang*) and represents the tacit (partial) withdrawal of the state from totalitarian forms of ‘thought work’ (*sixiang gongzuo*), as the price to be paid for integration into the world economy. Indeed, it is here in the politics of enjoyment that we might expect to find symptoms of a Chinese postmodern subjectivity.

Of course, observers of China are rightly cautioned against blithely extrapolating theory (and/or historical precedent) from the West when analysing China's market transition which in its complexity has stretched the bounds of conventional binary categorisations of national and global, capitalist and socialist, elitist and populist, modern and postmodern and so on (Wang Jing 2001).¹ As is often noted, there is also a tendency for the West look upon Asia in ways that either flatter the viewer or at least disparage the viewer's enemies or targets.² For instance, Žižek has noted how American journalists seemed to take comfort in showing how young Japanese were turning from their 'inscrutable' traditional asceticism – or, rather, finding enjoyment in self-sacrificial renunciation – in order to embrace more leisurely (American) pursuits, with the effect of reassuring US readers of the ultimate superiority of their own way of life (Žižek 1993: 206). Likewise, Western media coverage of China also oscillates self-flatteringly between worried shock at the hot-headed nationalistic responses of young Chinese (implicitly in contrast to the 1989 democracy demonstrators) (e.g. Osnos 2006), and amused shock at the untraditional (and implicitly Western-oriented) behaviour of other, or indeed, quite possibly the same contradictory youth (e.g. Rampell 2004).

Harmony or explosion?

Self-flattery notwithstanding, current post-socialist China is, of course, a thoroughly contradictory place. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that Žižek himself seems in two minds about its current nature. First, there is the spectre of an efficient yet authoritarian 'Asiatic mode of *capitalist* production' provoking Western anxieties, but nonetheless constituting a false threat insofar as it is 'doomed to explode' under the pressure of the social forces it has unleashed (Žižek 1999: 357-358). But then there is the alternative prospect that that these very same forces will be successfully contained or 'harmonized', to use the current Chinese internet slang (a parody of President Hu Jintao's defining ideological mantra of a 'harmonious society' [*'hexie shehui'*]), leaving authoritarian capitalism, rather than its Western democratic form, as the dominant model in the world economy – 'a portent of our future', Žižek warns (2007).

Žižek's wavering (or Janus-facedness) is, nevertheless, perhaps the right response. The point here is not so much to expose inconsistencies in Western scholarly

reactions to the rise of China, for there is plenty of evidence for both the 'harmonization' and the 'explosion' thesis – witness the rise of so-called 'mass incidents' in the state's own statistics.³ Instead, it is much preferable to examine the extent to which 'harmonization' is possible and the mechanisms that enable it. The failure to examine such mechanisms can lead (with the cruelty of hindsight) to some obviously erroneous conclusions. For instance, Lull's research (1991) on Chinese reactions to the spread of television in the late 1980s suggested that rising expectations (driven by glimpses of the developed world in between reports of party leaders' doings) were a contributory factor in the discontent that erupted into the famous Tiananmen democracy movement. In the immediate post-1989 perspective, it was therefore perhaps only natural for Lull to see television not only as an intrinsically liberal-subversive medium that undermined party authority but one which would continue to do so as the 'cultural influences that helped stimulate unrest in the first place are still fundamentally in place' (1991: 127). However, as things turned out, rather than political transformation, it was its China's consumer and lifestyle revolution (noted in passing by Lull) which was ultimately triumphant, with the TV set as its archetypal symbol. As a result, the assumption that the events of 1989 had 'sharpened critical viewing even more' now looks misplaced, at least in the sense it was meant (1991: 218).⁴

How, then, does such harmonising (or hegemonising) work? Žižek, himself, (drawing on Laclau and Mouffe) has provided the means to examine such questions. Fascism, for instance, took deep-seated anxieties produced by capitalism and hegemonised them with nationalism and racism in an effort to protect the capitalist system itself. Christianity, likewise, carries with it the desires of the oppressed (e.g. 'the meek shall inherit the earth'), but has tended to organise them in such a way as to become a support to the existing hierarchy (e.g. 'render unto Caesar') (Žižek 1999: 184-186). A universal norm such as human rights, for instance, is therefore always hegemonised by a particular, supposedly typical case. For US welfare critics, it is the black single mother. For anti-abortionists, in contrast, it is the career woman (rejecting motherhood), even though this is not statistically the most typical (Žižek 1999: 174-175). In each case, it is a fantasy framework that enables this to happen and which determines how the issue is perceived. Thus ideology is split between the way it expresses the longings of the people and the ideological suturing of it towards a particular view that colours it.

End of the propaganda state?

In fact, the Communist party has always been very alert to the importance of China's 'symbolic environment' from which people construct their values, behaviour patterns and outlook, and the media has long been used by the party as a vehicle for 'thought work' by which it promotes 'socialist spiritual civilisation' (*shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming*) – a somewhat vague term but defined by a high-ranking propaganda cadre, interviewed by Lynch, as promoting collectivism (over individualism), as well as inculcating respect for education, science and art as interpreted by the party (1999: 242, n. 22). The success of this work influences the degree of legitimacy the regime enjoys and reduces the need to rely on its two other instruments of control, financial reward and explicit shows of force. In short, it creates the velvet glove masking the iron fist.

China's media policy therefore involves negotiating an uneasy balance between economic and ideological goals. Lynch (1999), in fact, argues there is a fundamental contradiction between the liberalisation and repression inherent to them – but one which its leaders refuse to acknowledge. In his view, the propaganda state has all but broken down in the post-Mao period under the impact of three forces: commercialisation, globalisation and pluralisation (of media outlets) resulting in administrative fragmentation, property-rights reform and technological change. Essentially, the argument is that the profit motive recognises no ideology and therefore the decentralised marketization of the Chinese economy makes control and censorship increasingly problematic. The proliferation of new communications technologies merely multiplies these challenges. Lynch also rejects the suggestion, academically popular in the mid-1990s, that this loosening of control might allow the emergence of civil society (i.e. groups independent of government) which could lay the foundations for eventual democratisation (see White, Howell, and Shang 1996). But, as many have noted, very few of these organisations have real autonomy and media institutions in particular, still fundamentally lack the freedom to act with political independence (Saich 2001). The result, according to Lynch, is a kind of unstable stalemate, neither democratically liberal nor totalitarian, but what he instead dubs 'praetorianism' (1999: 2), whereby different interest groups, both in and outside the party-state structure, struggle relentlessly for

advantage and influence, without any one managing to exercise dominance. Rather than developing civil society, China has therefore become an 'uncivil society' (1999: 236) where rampant self-interest undermines the state's ideological influence but the state still manages to suppress any alternative visions or sources of authority from organising effectively.

However, although this thesis (broadly echoed in many other descriptions of the Chinese media scene⁵) is fine as far as it goes, it only gives one side of the equation (i.e. the media industry's) and therefore tends to reduce the conflict to one between the forces of repression versus market freedom without taking into account the popular response to the 'praetorianism' it creates. So, though it may appear that market freedom has pushed China to the edge of ideological disintegration and self-contradiction, this very closeness to the abyss, as we shall see, also induces a corresponding desire in society to fill and cover the gaps in the symbolic order.

This echoes one of Žižek's major themes, namely, that (cynical) distance to ideology, or even a certain amount of transgression, does not necessarily prevent its effective functioning. Take, for instance, Žižek's analysis (2006: 81-83) of classic Hollywood in a scene from *'Casablanca'* (1942) where morally ambivalent messages operated, perhaps counter-intuitively, as a *support* to the existing order. Bogart and Bergman embrace – the scene then cuts briefly to a shot of the airport and quickly returns find Bogart now smoking by the window. What happened while the camera discreetly looked away is left ambiguous (with contradictory on-screen signals allowing both facets of the ego, conforming and transgressive, to be satisfied). The logical conclusion, however, is not that the censorious 'Hays Code' of 1930s Hollywood was perversely a threat to the social order (rather than its bulwark), but that it instead supported it more subtly by serving up a side dish of pleasure along with its prohibitions (a dish that would be absent otherwise) (2006: 85).

Yet, because China retains a socialist political system alongside its increasingly capitalist economy – a socialist head with a capitalist body as Yu (2006) puts it – the country necessarily has difficulty providing these illicit side dishes of pleasure, owing to residual political restrictions over cultural production. There is, in short, a fantasy deficit and as a result, pragmatically speaking, this role has been effectively outsourced by importing such 'transgressive conformity' via the flow of pirate DVD and downloading now entering China.

Outsourcing propaganda: ‘*The Shawshank Redemption*’

A striking example of this is how such films can now be used in Chinese formal ideological education in order to tailor the state’s message to the current young generation. This reflects the recent trend in Chinese political education to become less and less overtly political (or at least less theoretical), increasingly superseded by teaching that attempts to shape behaviour directly, rather than via traditional ideological ‘thought work’. As such, it conforms to the general pattern of de-politicisation across modern societies following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, though as Žižek argues, the trend merely conceals the highly ideological nature of de-politicisation itself (in Wright and Wright 1999: 72). Of course, unlike in the former Soviet bloc, political education courses in China cannot be entirely eliminated without undermining the formal basis of the system as a whole which still depends ultimately upon an initial revolutionary act for its legitimacy – something reflected, for example, in the everyday use of ‘liberation’ (*‘jiefang’*) to refer to the founding of ‘new China’ in 1949. Of course, this is the most successful form of ideology (and/or propaganda), namely, that which becomes integrated into everyday speech and habit, slipping beyond conscious knowledge (Žižek 1989: 21). De-politicisation in China, therefore, follows the same logic, concealing the political in everyday practices, not only as a pragmatic response to the unpopularity of political education, but also an implicit recognition that if such classes were to be taken at face value, they might raise potentially awkward questions. Indeed, using socialist slogans against the government was a tactic that enabled the 1989 student movement to get underway and has been sporadically used in more localised disputes and even the rule-stretching practice of, so-called, ‘edge ball’⁶ (*‘cabianqiu’*) journalism.

One response has been to consolidate political education at university (i.e. from eight courses to four) (Zhou 2006) whilst at the same time giving greater prominence to less heavily theoretical historical topics and also more individually-oriented ‘Morality and Self Cultivation’. In spite of its obviously disciplinary intent, such morality classes also promise some utilitarian value as they centre around themes of persistence and self-control, with films often being used to both convey and spice the message. As might be expected, some ‘politically correct’, so-called ‘main melody’ (*‘zhu xuanlu’*)⁷ Chinese films

are shown in order to illustrate these topics (e.g. *'Zhang Side'*, a 2004 biopic of Chairman Mao's self-sacrificing security guard). But, Hollywood fare is just as likely to be used – one student informed me that she had been shown *'The Shawshank Redemption'* (1994) no less than three times (i.e. in both 'Criminal Law' and 'English' classes as well as 'Moral Cultivation').⁸ In fact, this film is frequently mentioned as a favourite by Chinese students for encouraging people not to 'lose heart'. Like the US drama series *'Prison Break'* with which it was often compared, the film tells the story of an innocent man who, through much guile and persistence, manages to escape from brutal incarceration after 20 years of secret tunnelling in order to both win his freedom and expose the prison's corrupt governor. The teaching point made by the Moral Cultivation lecturer was that the film exemplified a proper response to injustice by resolving it patiently through one's own efforts.

What is quite striking here is that not only can a Hollywood film fit the requirements of Chinese political education, but that it could do so without recourse either to a nationalistic interpretation of a corrupt and brutal American prison system or, indeed, the class nature of the injustice – unlike the middle class escapee, most of the prisoners are working class men resigned to the inequity of the system. Instead, the lesson conveyed to students was both individualistic and realistic in the sense that it makes no attempt to disguise the implication that they themselves may come across injustice and corruption of one sort or another rather closer to home. It simply stresses that they should deal with it by drawing on the inner resources that higher education can provide. The key to the lesson's credibility is the way the realistic didacticism of the educational message matches the film's apparently realistic depiction of violence and corruption. Indeed, the use of Hollywood in this way is generally appreciated by students, compared to Chinese 'main melody' material, precisely because it avoided the tiresome and unrealistic idealisation of socialist models and exemplars. As one pointed out to me, in American films the actors (even those depicting heroes and leaders) swear and curse whereas in Chinese films, 'Chinese people are always gentlemen'. It is ironic, therefore, that in spite this surface realism, the central plot of *'The Shawshank Redemption'* ultimately rests on the scarcely credible notion that a tunnel could be hidden for years in a prisoner's cell behind a flimsy poster of a film star. Nevertheless, the American film's gritty, un-gentlemanly portrayal of everyday life offers plausibility to

the attractive fantasy that cool intelligence and persistence will necessarily win in the end.

In fact, Žižek himself suggests that *'The Shawshank Redemption'* is a rejection of ideological fantasy – in particular, the way the film depicts the fates of the escapee prisoners. Those who had accepted the reality of their incarceration were much more able to cope with their sudden escape than the one prisoner who had spent his time inside daydreaming of the world beyond and, as a result, hangs himself when finally confronted by the stark reality of freedom (Dilworth 2004). However, I am doubtful that this is quite how it works in the Chinese context where the appropriation of a foreign film provides credibility for a (de-politicising) political message to be conveyed, largely because the Chinese industry is constrained from doing so quite as bluntly.⁹ A plaintive blog posting by the otherwise apolitical martial arts star Jet Li illustrates the point: his dilemma is that, quite apart from avoiding obviously sensitive political issues, there have been numerous instances where his films cannot be shown in China merely for straying beyond the confines of literal mundane reality (e.g. depicting 'impossibilities' such as Chinese police chasing criminals abroad or foreign police entering China). Artists therefore find themselves boxed in, with little room for manoeuvre: as Chang Ping (then editor of the relatively liberal *Southern Metropolis Weekly* magazine) put it, '[f]iction does not tally with the facts, but realism is too sensitive' (Chang 2007). However, the American setting of *'The Shawshank Redemption'* distances injustice, thus allowing it to be covertly admitted as applicable to Chinese society. This surreptitious, but nevertheless, candid admission is sufficiently fresh (in the Chinese context) to allow the fantasy resolution to be enjoyed and more easily accepted (unlike the more overt sugar coating of domestic 'main melody' productions).

Covering the gaps: *'Mission: Impossible III'*

As we have seen, the use of *'The Shawshank Redemption'* reflects the tactics of incorporation by 'harmonising' (or 'suturing') into the system what might once have been regarded as subversive 'spiritual pollution' (*jingshen wuran*) in the interests of regime survival.¹⁰ That said, censorship has not been abandoned: the state still acts to ban, block and cut content using a number of mechanisms. Yet, the widespread availability of

films and foreign TV series on both pirate DVD and online means that for most viewers state censorship of entertainment media is a much less prominent concern compared, for instance, to more immediate worries such as cost or network speed. That is not to say that there is no interest in issues of freedom: in my interactions with Chinese university students, films depicting freedom from stifling convention and stereotypical role models were a popular theme for movie-watchers. Nor were they unaware of government control, at least in general terms. Awareness of specific recent cases of film censorship, however, was rather more patchy, not least because they can be entirely sidestepped by viewing on uncut pirate DVD or download versions. The secrecy surrounding censorship decisions and the nature of China's annual 20 film import quota usually results in a film not being bought in, rather than actually banned outright, which means that it is hard to know what has or has not actually been blocked by the authorities. In any case, with cinema-going comparatively expensive, except for cases that had caused a major controversy such as *'Memoirs of a Geisha'* (2006) (the target of patriotic attack on Chinese actresses playing Japanese 'prostitutes'), many viewers are surprised when told that a specific film they had watched had, in fact, been either refused a cinematic release or cut.

So, the obvious question here is why bother censoring foreign films if everyone is watching anyway?¹¹ A case in point, *'Mission: Impossible III'* (2006), starring Tom Cruise, was delayed in its scheduled Chinese cinema run in order for cuts to be made in a number of scenes set in Shanghai that were believed by the censoring authorities to show China in a poor light. Such delays are, of course, financially significant as they enable pirates to thoroughly flood the market ahead of screening, but what was no doubt particularly galling for the studio was that, as the script and filming had already been given official approval, it was expected that the appearance of a major international star in local setting would give the film a boost in the Chinese market (Frater and Coonan 2006). Indeed, the news of Cruise's presence attracted over 100 journalists to a Shanghai press conference during filming (Chinaview 2006). The offending scenes, as it turned out, were not overtly political: the main objection, apart from the portrayal of local police being taken unawares by a major crime, was that in spite of the spectacular shots of the futuristic Pudong area, there were also views of dilapidated buildings, shirtless mahjong players and laundry strung out to dry that were thought to be inconsistent with the image of a rising modern China. But the logic of censorship here is complex,

especially when considering that the scenes in question are in plain view to anyone who walks the back streets of Shanghai or any other Chinese city and, moreover, visible to the worldwide audience that viewed the film outside China. The oddity was compounded by a case of accidental 'product placement' in which a telephone number scrawled on a wall (for seekers of fake IDs or other documents) happened to feature just above Tom Cruise's left shoulder in one scene. After an internet forum posting of the frame was subsequently picked up by the newspaper *Information Times* (before the film's official release), the advertiser was inundated with phone calls from pranksters, journalists and other netizens curious to discover whether the number itself was real or fake (Xu 2006).



Product Placement in '*Mission: Impossible III*' (Soong 2006a)

The evident humour of this response, acknowledging the flip side of China's push for modernisation, marks it as another side dish of reality inadvertently served up by a foreign source. Without (pirate) DVD, it would never have been noticed. Moreover, without the general effort by officials to cover up, there would be no reason for noticing in the first place or delighting at what is otherwise a mundane sight of China's un-glossy 'backwardness'. Of course, the effect of this recognition is to create a brief sense of community among those who tweak the tail of authority and share the humour

embedded in the contradictions of their own society's modernisation. But more fundamentally, what it seems to point to is how the authorities' image-cleansing is not particularly addressed at the offending scenes themselves, but instead seeks to block the knowledge that outsiders may glimpse aspects of China that locals otherwise see clearly. Yet even this is an inadequate explanation, for virtually any Chinese can discover 'the view of the other' by watching uncut versions on DVD or online. The cover up is, therefore, revealed as primarily a matter of form; in Lacanian terms, a case of covering for the society's symbolic order, the 'big Other' (Žižek 1997: 107-108). Of course, prosaically speaking, one could say that it sends an extra reminder to Hollywood that great care should be taken when representing China, or to turn the question around, had the cuts not been requested, it might have been interpreted as a loosening of policy. Seen in this light, the cuts become a defence of the authorities' own image as the guardians of China's status in the eyes of the idealised foreign other (itself predicated ultimately on a notion of China's weakness). Even at the expense of some mockery for its over-fussiness, a measure of reassurance is therefore produced in a gesture to the idea that Western powers see, or at least ought to see, China as a rising power (and approaching equal), not just a picturesque backdrop for their own fantasies of high-tech, heroic daring.

In fact, although some of my Chinese student contacts had heard of the celebrated phone number case, relatively few had seen the film. However, one who had viewed an uncut version online did, indeed, raise an objection to scenes, ostensibly of old Shanghai, though they were actually shot in a couple of traditional canalled and tourist-oriented 'water villages' near Suzhou. Even as someone who acknowledged that Chinese films often presented an ideologically idealised self-representation, the film, in her view, showed an inappropriately 'old-fashioned' image of China, even if more recognisably 'authentic' in Western terms. That said, others who were shown the same Shanghai sequences (downloaded from a Chinese site) found nothing objectionable, but when probed, they were able to surmise which cuts may have been requested (i.e. shots of laundry) and also the reasons why. And even though they considered the censorship to be unnecessary as these were not felt to be serious distortions of the city's reality, it was nevertheless implicit in these judgements that censorship was potentially reasonable, even if, in this case, it was an over-zealous defence of China's image.

Foreign body

This relationship to the Lacanian big Other has meant that the apparently impossible mission of surviving the ideological dissonance between China's authoritarian socialist politics and free market economics has turned out to be, like the twists and turns of its celluloid counterpart, ultimately resolved in the end – up to now, at least. What helps shore up China's symbolic order in the cases that I have described here, apart from the standard narrative form (used and reinforced by Hollywood itself) is the fact that the West, (again, in large part represented by Hollywood), constitutes an ideal other, admired but also a rival. It is particularly at moments when the West attempts to represent China or use its symbols that these rivalrous aspects potentially come to the fore. This is seen in the periodic flare ups, often ignited on the internet, that are triggered by perceived slights to China's national dignity – from Chinese actresses playing 'prostitutes' in *'Memoirs of a Geisha'* to the use of a scowling Mao caricature in a Spanish Citroen advert (BBC 2008). What is reassuring, I would suggest, about censorship in these cases is not just that the government is there to protect or protest against such foreign outrages, but that it is also there to prevent Chinese indignation itself from getting out of hand. In other words, for young upwardly mobile Chinese, the most avid consumers of foreign media in China, it is not just comforting to know that authoritarian control is not so absolute to prevent one's pursuit of enjoyment (i.e. DVD piracy is pragmatically overlooked¹²). It is also that there is an additional sense of security in the fact that the authorities are still operative at both a symbolic and (potentially) a very real level against those who threaten to jeopardise China's integration with the global economy – as budding middle class professionals (like the hero of *'The Shawshank Redemption'*), it is they who hope to benefit most from this very integration. Indeed, one might therefore go so far as to suggest that the target of censorship in *'Mission: Impossible III'*, namely China's perception of its own backwardness, indicates that it is not so much the foreign that is to be excluded as it is the foreign body within – the masses of poor 'backward' Chinese (especially migrant workers from the countryside) who do not fit China's ideal image of itself.

So, although some of my student contacts were quite moved by films about China's peasants (Zhang Yimou's *'Not One less'* was sometimes mentioned

appreciatively), many were, nevertheless, quite impatient with the focus on rural or ancient lifestyles, suggesting that this was misleading about modern China. Instead, they wanted films that were 'closer to our lives'. When asked whether the American films and series they preferred actually fulfilled these criteria, they suggested that these were 'closer to American life' – by implication, closer to the lives they wished to live. So, although rejecting 'main melody' didacticism in favour of realism, it might be more accurate to say that what was wanted was a kind of aspirational didacticism. Certainly, such aspirations were fairly widespread among the student community, if not to actually study abroad (either family-funded or through a scholarship),¹³ then alternatively to get a 'good job' in a foreign or joint venture company. So, appeals for realism and closeness to life, in these terms, rather paradoxically mean closeness to life abroad in order that these aspirations could be brought closer and made real.

Media mediator

As noted above, for ideology to be successful it has to make a pitch at expressing the audience's desires and longings but then suture or hegemonise them into a particular viewpoint. The contention here is that, in the case of the current inflow of foreign films and TV series into Chinese society, it functions as a sort of visual Protestantism: i.e. educated youth use their new semi-licit media freedom to structure their own attitudes in order to make them compatible with the adoption of new middle class aspirations learned and negotiated through their viewing of foreign entertainment media. In one sense, they are loyal inheritors of Maoism, which in contrast to traditional Confucian disparagement of mere labour, instead promoted production and the accumulation of capital (for the state) in a manner 'not unlike that found in the Protestant ethic' (Ci 1994: 150). But, crucially, in post-socialist China, the means are rather different: 'red' is replaced by 'expert', economic self-reliance is replaced by 'getting on track with the international community' ('*gen guoji jiegui*').¹⁴

As we have seen, the way that the resulting contradictions in the symbolic order have been hegemonised is revealed at its most explicit in the popularity of '*The Shawshank Redemption*' and the particular instance of its use in political education. A series such as '*Prison Break*' has, likewise, achieved a virtual cult status in China (in

spite of never having been shown on any TV channel) for the way it expresses a yearning to escape the labyrinth of competitive life, but through the successful application of the competitive spirit itself. Notably, the type of hero presented here is not an over-muscled Rambo-like character, nor a Jacky Chan style (Chaplinesque) figure – nor, for that matter, the ‘singleminded, desexualized fighting machines’ (Lu 2000: 42) of martial arts stereotype – but instead, a middle class professional hero¹⁵ using his skills and ingenuity to escape a world he doesn’t belong in. Meanwhile, other popular US series such as *‘Friends’*, *‘Desperate Housewives’* and *‘Sex and the City’* also express a longing for freedom (and transgression) though this time through fashion, modern luxury lifestyles and ‘living in dreams’ which, in reality, can only be acquired (legitimately, at least) through exams, studying and saving up. Nevertheless, the portrayal of foreign middle class lifestyles in these series (even if understood as only semi-realistic) helps to covertly normalise them in the Chinese context: i.e. redefine what otherwise might be regarded as the wealthy as, in fact, ‘middle class’ rather than ‘elite’, and consequently, the poor as backward or ‘catching up’.¹⁶

The effect, therefore, is that foreign entertainment media acts as a virtual mediator from one kind of subjectivity to another. In short, it supplies the fantasy resources for a new model ego – a vision of how the new young aspiring professional subject both wishes to be and be seen. That is not to say that watching foreign films and dramas simply pulls young educated Chinese away from their traditional values and loyalties in a process of Westernisation. The use of the magnetic metaphor here can easily fall into the trap of assuming that there is fixed set of characteristics Chinese society necessarily wishes its young to remain within. Instead, the situation is more as Duara (1993; 2005) suggests, with identity boundaries constantly ‘policed’, but the ‘laws’ subject to revision. Moreover, foreign entertainment is not merely corrosive of the status quo, but also performs a repair function, providing the fantasy resources to shore up, explain and clarify the tensions in Chinese society on its route down the capitalist road. Its functioning is, therefore, full of paradoxes. It provides leisurely respite from the pursuit of modernisation, but in the form of modernisation itself (via technology, DVD, downloading etc). It provides a taste of First World goods and the aspirations they represent, but without the need for First World incomes. It provides a sense of travel without moving, and a sense of freedom from political restriction, whilst reaping the benefits of that restriction – lack of strikes, subsidised urban living,¹⁷ and a greater sense

of security for those who hope to benefit from the system. It also provides periodic opportunities for nationalist indignation at distorted portrayals of China (but, simultaneously, opens the opportunity to legitimise the supervision of such outbursts). Under these terms, the foreign can thus be tacitly incorporated as an authentic ideal ego, whilst those who do not fit it are covertly re-designated as aliens within.

Notes

¹ Though perhaps a tricky location for scholarly applications of Western-originated theory, we should also note that the modern Chinese state (both its socialist or capitalist face) can itself be seen as the embodiment of such an application.

² That said, Asian views of Asia are hardly immune from this critique.

³ There is general agreement that outbreaks of public disorder seem to have been on the rise in recent years, though as Soong (2006b) points out, there are both interpretative and methodological problems with such statistics.

⁴ Of course, some works of the period lurched to the opposite conclusion, suggesting that Chinese traditions of political repression would stifle economic reform (e.g. Jenner 1992), but few foresaw the interdependent relationship between authoritarian politics and liberal economics. To an extent, the same blindness has been encountered in scholarship and reporting on the development of the Chinese internet. Although it is now accepted that 'China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world' (*Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study* 2005: 4), there has been a widespread assumption that this effort would ultimately prove futile: as US President Bill Clinton remarked (in 2000), 'There's no question China has been trying to crack down on the internet [...] Good luck. That's sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall' (Dickie 2007).

⁵ Descriptions of the Chinese media in the reform era have ranged from 'producer of social knowledge', 'arena of improvisation', 'Party Publicity Inc.', 'junk food manufacturer' to 'watchdog on party leashes' (He 2003: 197). What they have in common is that most of these accounts have been questioning (either explicitly or implicitly) whether the Communist party can maintain its political monopoly under market transition.

⁶ Referring, literally, to a table tennis shot that just clips the edge of the table: see http://www.danwei.org/side/2007/11/southern_metropolis_plays_an_e.html

⁷ 'Main melody' material, according to one official, opposes '...the trend to regard the economic profit (of television drama) as more important than its social benefits, to regard enjoyment as superior to orientation, to promote historical themes over realism, farce over serious drama, long form over short form, epic themes over ordinary themes, and productions

that use foreign actors to those that use locals' (Hong 2002: 32). ('Main melody' films follow much the same prescriptions).

⁸ I worked in the English departments of two universities in Beijing between 2004-05 and 2006-07.

⁹ That is not to say that all Chinese films shy away from confronting contemporary social realities, but that they must do so within certain bounds if they are to be exhibited at home. '*Lost in Beijing*' (2007), for instance, was only shown after making substantial cuts. Its screening licence was subsequently cancelled and its director punished after the deleted scenes were circulated on the internet (and the full version was submitted to the Berlin film festival) (Martinsen 2008).

¹⁰ As Žižek suggests, capitalism is rather more adept than communism at the incorporation of subversion (note how the sixties' counter cultures quickly become mainstream), hence perhaps China's need to do so tentatively, often through indirect, and in this case, imported means (1999: 328-329).

¹¹ According to students from rural areas, even in relatively remote towns, many Hollywood releases are available in pirate versions.

¹² According to one report 'The police come from time to time and we close until they've gone. But they come back in private and ask us to give them free DVDs. Then we open again' (Watts 2006).

¹³ Statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education showed that in 2006 more than 130,000 Chinese went abroad for further study (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-12/07/content_7216561.htm).

¹⁴ The phrase 'getting on track with the international community' was widely circulating amongst managers of state enterprises in the 1990s (Guthrie 1999: 150-151).

¹⁵ According to the '*Prison Break*' official website, '[b]eginning with an immaculate record at Morton East High School, [Scofield, the hero of the series] would later graduate Magna Cum Laude with a B.S and M.S. in civil engineering from Loyola University of Chicago. Scofield then found employment in Chicago as a structural engineer at the prestigious firm of Middleton, Maxwell and Schaum.' (www.fox.com/prisonbreak/bios/bio_scofield.htm).

¹⁶ By strict sociological definitions, the middle class barely exists in China, however, by self-evaluation and aspiration, it is pervasive (Wang 2005: 542-545). Žižek, however, argues that the very notion of 'middle class' is an attempt to exclude the extremes of poverty and wealth as aberrations, and therefore to minimise any concept of social antagonism (1999: 186-187). For an overview of this vexed issue in the Chinese context, see essays in Goodman (2008).

The 'hukou' system of residency permits, although more flexible than before, still restricts the movement of rural dwellers and their right of access to urban services – most notably, schooling for their children.

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