

Introduction to *Three Asias: China*

Zhang Zhen
New York University

In the past few years I have made several trips to the “Three Chinas” (to play on the title of this special issue)—China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The rise of China as a new economic giant in the last decade has significantly reordered the geopolitical dynamics of the Chinese-speaking region, with repercussions felt across the Taiwan Strait, in neighboring East Asian countries, around the Asia-Pacific region, and beyond. The 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai—the two greatest mass spectacles in recent world history—served as gargantuan display windows for a China self-conscious of its regained position as the “middle kingdom” in the new millennium. When I was trying to stop over in Tokyo for the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference to be held, rarely, outside Euro-America in May 2009, the conference had suddenly been canceled under pressure from the Japanese government due to the Swine Flu epidemic. In contrast, China and Hong Kong, where I continued my journey, seemed to be more or less business as usual, everywhere teeming with people, goods and signs and, above all, the pulsating or even excessive energy that I had experienced in the heyday of Japan’s bubble economy while living there. As someone who comes from the PRC originally and now as a New York-based film historian working on a project on the reshuffled or alienated kinship relations of three Chinese cinemas during the Cold War, I was particularly struck by the exponentially increased interconnectedness of the Chinese-speaking region, in the form of the ceaseless and speedy transregional circulation of money, people, and commodities of all kinds. Perhaps more than any transmitters of lifestyles and mindsets, popular music and moving images large and small, along with the stars and celebrities associated with them, seem to be the most contagious vehicles of a trans-border popular culture.

But what exactly are the components of this new trans-Chinese popular culture in the aftermath of the Hong Kong “handover” back to China (now a Special Administrative Region/SAR of China until 2046) and in the context of a paradigmatically “transformed” (*zhuangxing*) postsocialist China that has fully embraced market economy while retaining one party-rule and its enduring backbone of media censorship? How does the “popular” interact with or against the State-orchestrated

mass culture (or “mass ornament” to borrow Siegfried Kracauer’s term coined for a different but not irrelevant historical context in prewar Germany)?¹ In what ways does the current Chinese popular culture differ from earlier periods of modern Chinese history including the recent past of the reform era?

The limited space of the “China section” of this special issue does not permit comprehensive coverage of the current state(s) of the “three” Chinese popular cultures and their multifarious manifestations that change, combine, dissolve and resurge constantly. I regret that the five articles we are able to include here do not address Taiwan directly, except for Ying Xiao’s discussion of the “sinicized/synthesized” hip-hop culture where she names several Taiwan-born artists. This is due both to time and space constraints, but also perhaps obliquely to the giant discursive shadow that Mainland China now more than ever casts on its kindred neighbors. This “(in) significance” of Taiwan in colonial and postcolonial time and space, and particularly under the sign of globalization, as Shu-mei Shih has astutely argued, challenges, if often starting from a discourse of absence or invisibility, taken-for-granted notions of nationhood, sovereignty and cultural identity.² Indeed, the five articles in one way or another all reveal the porous and shifting nature of these categories in contemporary cultural productions in the Chinese-speaking region, and the underlying, even vital transborder engagement within the region and across the globe.

What these contributions share is a focus on highly mediatized and commodified forms of culture—cinema, television, manga, commercial (high) art, hip-hop, and cyberspace. The intensified media saturation following the advent of digital media, especially the Internet, and the concomitant faster and easier transnational linkages in real or virtual time, seem to be the ostensible conditions and markers of current Chinese popular culture vis-à-vis previous forms and periods that often separated the PRC from Hong Kong and Taiwan (the latter were commonly grouped as one entity as *Gangtaiwenhua*). The editors of *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society* (2002) observed the impact of an “information revolution” and “consumer revolution in postsocialist PRC,” and how this twin-revolution, along with other internal and external changes, has significantly eroded previous rigid

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated and edited by Thomas Levin. Harvard University Press, 1995. Comparisons have been made, for instance, between the opening shows of the Olympic games in Berlin in 1934 and Beijing 2008 directed by Zhang Yimou.

² Shu-mei Shi, “Globalization and the (In)significance of Taiwan,” *Postcolonial Studies* 6:2 (July 2003): 143-153.

divisions between the official and popular culture. While the tension and antagonism between the State and society lingers and takes on new forms, the editors wrote, the “new central tension is between different aspects of globalization.”³ This special issue of *Paradoxa* in general, and the “China” section in particular, builds on but also complicates this general rubric (indeed by now a cliché) by breaking down not just the official and unofficial divide, but also problematizes the dynamic between the elite and the popular, local and global, west and the rest, through careful case studies within multiply layered local, trans-local and trans-regional contexts.

We begin with two articles concerning (but not limited to) cinema, an “old” popular medium in the new millennium. K. C. Lo helps set the scene within both the trans-East Asian context and a realigned relationship between the State and popular culture, through his probing analysis of several war films and the discursive contest in the regional comics industry that revolve around the historical animosity between China/Korea and Japan, and resurgent nationalism. Markedly different from the heavy-handed propagandist approach in the past, recent Chinese films and other televisual productions that tend to “humanize” the enemy are, argues Lo, part and parcel of the Chinese State’s strategic investment in the creative industries as an integral part of its “soft power”—as both domestic governing method and foreign policy—in consolidating the “harmonious” (*hexie*) socio-economic and political status quo. The retooling or revision of historical material of varying vintage, be it the Sino-Japanese war or Confucianism, ultimately expose the unruly nature of “soft power” and the ideological inconsistency of a neoliberal state of a postsocialist Chinese or post-Bubble Japanese variant, both with unabated regional and global ambitions. However, the rampant reification of history, especially the tendency to capitalize on nationalist passions under commercial imperatives, paradoxically both reaffirms the role of the nation state and the late-capitalist logics it adopts as its *raison d’être* and replacement of a structural ideological vacuousness.

The post-1997 Hong Kong cinema scene, partially embodied by producer-actor and community-builder Eric Tsang, the protagonist of Laikwan Pang’s contribution, contrasts in both scale and tone to the rather bleak view of an East Asian culture industry engaged in the rebuilding of the “imagined communities” of the nation state in spite or because of both the anxiety with and aspiration for globalization. The unique case of the veteran film industry personality, whose work and trajectories

³ Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), “Introduction,” pp. 2-3.

traverse the “three Chinas” and beyond, offers Pang an opportunity to focus “less on capital than on community” in a contemporary global film industry defined by risk-taking and transnational networks. Tsang’s virtuosity, versatility and capacity for collaboration have made him a Hong Kong legend, especially in the independent or small-scale filmmaking communities. Tsang’s communal or cottage-industry approach toward filmmaking sustained him through the glorious days of Hong Kong cinema. It was embedded in the Chinese kinship system, in the vernacular conventions of sociability, and in a “family business” model that runs through Hong Kong’s film history. Now, however, he faces new challenges in the Hong Kong–Mainland interface—the huge market demand as well as the pressures of assimilation and censorship. Ultimately, Pang is concerned with probing the meaning and nature of the community embodied by Tsang and his cohorts striving in a subnational yet inherently transnational film industry. Toward the end of the essay she engages with contemporary theoretical debates on the concept of community in relation to cultural production. This is of great interest not only to a struggling or “dissolving” Hong Kong cinema—once a giant engine of global popular imagination, after its integration with China—but also to other similar experiments in post-national (cinema) and non-identitarian practices of social organization or the “commons” in our times.⁴

Moving from the big screen to the small, old media to new media, the realigned tension between the State, culture industry, and the popular domain is examined from a novel perspective in Ruoyun Bai’s investigation of the role cyberspace plays in popular resistance to State media institutions and discourses, as evidenced in the Chinese Central Television Station (CCTV) and its star anchors. With examples of the latter’s recent sex scandals and a variety of word-and-image plays which “disrobe” the dominant media mammoth in China, the author performs a critical—and humorous—dissection of a recent Chinese form of popular resistance by a growing demographic of netizens, especially among the young and educated. Whereas this new form of popular dissent is apparently different from other direct or tangible practices in the form of street demonstrations or petitions, it carries over elements of a long tradition of political jokes and satire in China, now re-energized and spread wider and faster by new media. Bai locates this revamped form of playful resistance in *e’gao* (literally translated as “messing with the originals with a mischievous intention”), a parlance and practice (“practical jokes”) very much in vogue among Chinese youth today. The

⁴ For a recent influential study that reenergizes the concept, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

interactive nature of the Internet facilitates the creative consumption and subversive appropriation of official media content and form, resulting in a heavily mediated parallel universe—a vernacular space for not just parody and laughter but also interventions with consequences in terms of social justice. More than a “safety valve” in a social and media world still largely under the sway of censorship, Bai argues that the scandal-making and *e’gao* practices (through mash-up videos or spoofs) endows their practitioners with a unique form of agency as consumer-turned-producer of alternative media and socio-political discourse.⁵ These practices deflect and deconstruct the State media’s alternately clumsy or cunning attempts of self-legitimation in the era of red capital by stripping off its “façade of moral authority.” Yet Bai is also cautious about the impulse to romanticize the social and political significance of this “culture of playful irreverence” or techno-urban youth subculture, by underscoring the selective nature of its individual-targeted attack and its structural complicity with the dominant neoliberal and neo-nationalist discourse embodied and propagated by CCTV. The fuzzy and even co-dependent relationships between the State, commercial media, and “networked” society pose new questions and challenges to the study of “popular culture” today.

A parallel and perhaps more popular form of Chinese youth culture in the new century finds its expression in the hip-hop trend and in rap music, also heavily penetrated by new media. While the cyberculture of scandals and *e’gao* directed at a paramount State media organ has more affinity with traditional forms of political satire, and is in its content and scope more nationally circumscribed, the Chinese hip-hop culture is decidedly transnational in origin and orientation. Ying Xiao’s article focuses on Chinese rap as a newly formulated hybrid music genre, and examines its complex institutional and expressive characteristics as well as its ambivalent relations to a rising consumer culture, to reform in the Chinese music industry, and to paradigmatic social-cultural transitions at the turn of new century. Reworking the lyrics of MC Hotdog, a prominent Taiwanese rapper also widely popular on the Mainland and in Hong Kong, Xiao argues that Chinese hip-hop culture and rap music are a “double-edged sword” and a “prism through which wide ranging forces and ideologies are reflected.” Echoing Bai’s observation on the subversiveness as well as political limitations of the Internet-based “culture of playful irreverence,” Xiao also finds in this popular music

⁵ On “*e’gao*” video practices and its place within the framework of the politics and poetics of “lightness” vis-à-vis “legitimate” culture, see Paola Voci, *China On Video: Small-Screen Realities* (Routledge, 2010), especially Chapter 5, “*Egao* Movies: Wicked Fun, Participatory Culture, and Enlightenment.”

culture a paradoxical mixture of articulations of youthful rebellion, “flexible” relations with State ideology, a voracious commercial appetite, and a creative vernacular form with a critical edge. At the core of the global hip-hop phenomenon in general and its Chinese translation in particular lies the thorny problem of the authenticity of this peculiar “art” (or “an opaque culture form”) and its authorship, as the highly language-based vernacular culture both easily lends to and challenges the discourse of globalization in the era of digital (re)production and reception.⁶

The “State-market-transnational” nexus that anchors Xiao’s analysis of a vernacular youth culture also informs Xiaoping Lin’s article on the changed status of Chinese “avant-garde art,” a category previously hardly appropriate to be discussed under the rubric of “popular culture.” Lin offers a fresh on-site report and reflections on two interconnected events in the Chinese art world in the fateful 2009, a year filled with important anniversaries for Chinese art and politics in modern history. Focusing on the convoluted involvement of various players or agents behind the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and Beijing’s “798 Biennale,” Lin deploys Adorno’s critique of the paradoxical relation between art and administration for investigating the new phenomenon of the Chinese State’s paternalizing intervention in a once maverick art practice. The State patronage of “high art” is in line with its strategic use of “soft power” in the creative industry generally, as observed by K. C. Lo. Meanwhile, the once marginal avant-garde artistic community has been catapulted onto the stage of the international art market and has repositioned itself as a mainstream cultural component. The multiple powers or sources of influence and control from the Chinese State and from transnational capital exerted on the Chinese “independent” “avant-garde” art has leveled its once potent counterculture energy and turned it into a veritable form of institutionalized bourgeois art with heavy post-cold war and postsocialist accents. While the Venice show as a whole turned into a cosmopolitan “summer entertainment” for cultural tourists, the Beijing 798 Biennale—(taking place inside the by now notorious headquarters of the creative industry of “high art” within a socialist factory complex)—devolved into a “sociological farce” in which parts were played by State officials, diplomats, gallery-

⁶The questions of authorship and ownership of audiovisual material in the context of globalization resonate with those related to copyright and piracy in the region. See, for instance, Laikwan Pang, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copy Right, Piracy, and Cinema* (Routledge, 2006) and Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

hoppers and media-crazed party-crashers. Such spectacles and the 798 phenomenon as a whole have convinced many that the contemporary art boom has turned into a novel form of popular culture in the service of the dominant culture of “all business” in China. Lin’s critical report on the state of art or the art of a changed State in China ends on a rather pessimistic note. It seems that the level of conformism and cooptation by the neoliberal regime is far more visible in the domain of the mainstream or co-opted cultural elite than among other sectors of popular culture, such as the online “*e’gao*” and the hip-hop culture. Perhaps generational differences along with other factors such as technology matter here. The fancy biennales built on the infrastructure of a modernist ethos and by now a near-bankrupt bourgeois public sphere have become rapidly reified and serviceable to ideological manipulation and transnational capital. Meanwhile, the worlds of netizens and hip-hop culture and other emerging forms of popular or unpopular culture with far wider social variables and cultural bases and agendas are generating crevices and passageways that seem, as described and analyzed by the studies here and elsewhere, not yet easily contained and open to wide-ranging and sometimes unpredictable social, cultural and political imaginations and experimentations.

Zhang Zhen is an associate professor in Cinema Studies and History at New York University. Her publications include *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1895-1937* (2005; MLA “Honorary Mention for an Outstanding First Book”) and *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (2007). She is currently working on a new book on the melodramatic articulations in Chinese film history and two co-edited volumes, *Screening Trans-Asia* and *DV-Made China*. Zhang Zhen is also a widely published poet and essayist.

