CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN CHINA:
BEYOND RESISTANCE IN THE 1990s

DISSERTATION

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Jonathan Scott Noble, M.A.

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Dissertation Committee:
Professor Xiaomei Chen, Adviser
Professor Kirk Denton
Professor Pat Sieber
Professor Mark Bender

Approved by

Adviser
East Asian Languages and Literatures
Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN CHINA: BEYOND RESISTANCE IN THE 1990s adopts a multi-disciplinary and critical approach in engaging issues of cultural performance, global/local cultural subjectivities, and transnationalism within and between different media, including film, television, drama, fiction, and folk dance in China during the late 1990s. Theories of globalization and transnationalism, key to the dissertation’s theoretical framework, are in part developed from the works of Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, Rob Wilson, and Wimal Dissanayake. Theories of performativity and performance, adapted from a range of scholars (including Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Judith Butler), show how performance is an apt metaphor for cultural production in the 1990s as cultural bipolarities (e.g., local/global; official/anti-official; socialism/capitalism) are obscured by cultural hybridity.

The introduction, through a discussion of Li Yang’s feature film Blind Shaft, details my rationale and goals for applying performance theory to cultural production in China. Chapter 2 “Staged Ethnography in Guo Shixing’s Birdman and Bad Talk Street” discusses how Guo’s staging of ethnographic practices and cultural (re)presentation reveals the hybridity inscribed within a post-colonial discursive practice. Chapter 3 “The Re-cycling of Yang’ge by Senior Citizen Street Performers” illustrates how an urbanized folk dance
performance provides the opportunity for individuals in a social sub-group to assert their subjectivities in a process involving imagined and real individual and social transformation. Chapter 4 “Titanic in China: Transnational Capitalism as Official Ideology?” examines the emerging synergies between commercial and official cultural practices and discourses and suggests that such complicity between official discourse, global commodification of culture, and the traffic of transnational capitalism plays a critical role in China’s contemporary cultural production. Chapter 5 “Liu Heng’s Garrulous Zhang: Television Performance” elucidates the hybridity of television drama production in the late 1990s.

The analysis of different literary and cultural media reveals the continuities in practices of cultural production between media. Through the integration of contemporary cultural criticism and on-site fieldwork with literary criticism, the dissertation explores the intersection of multiple social and cultural discourses and practices and develops performance as the key theory for understanding the hybridity of cultural production in China during the 1990s.
Dedicated to my grandparents—
Emmanuel and Ethel Noble
William and Johanna Mieras
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VITA

August 6, 1972 ...................................................... Born – Jackson, Mississippi  USA

1994 ........................................................................ B.A. East Asian Studies, College of William
and Mary

1995 ........................................................................ Graduate Fellow
Graduate School, The Ohio State University

1996 ........................................................................ M.A. East Asian Languages and Literatures,
The Ohio State University

1996-1997 .............................................................. Research Assistant
Foreign Language Center, The Ohio State
University

1997-1998 .............................................................. Graduate Teaching Assistant and Research
Assistant
East Asian Languages and Literatures

1998-2000 .............................................................. Visiting Instructor, Chinese
Resident Director, Study in China Program
College of William and Mary
2002-...................................................................................................... Visiting Instructor, Chinese
Notre Dame University

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Articles


Translations


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Major Field: East Asian Languages and Literatures

Chinese Literature
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................... v

VITA ............................................................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER 1 ................................................................................................................................. 1
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 2 .................................................................................................................................. 44
STAGED ETHNOGRAPHY IN GUO SHIXING’S BIRDMAN AND BAD TALK STREET

CHAPTER 3 ................................................................................................................................. 103
THE RECYCLING OF YANG’GE BY SENIOR CITIZEN STREET PERFORMERS

CHAPTER 4 .................................................................................................................................. 135
TITANIC IN CHINA: TRANSNATIONAL CAPITALISM AS OFFICIAL IDEOLOGY?

CHAPTER 5 .................................................................................................................................. 164
LIU HENG’S GARRULOUS ZHANG: TELEVISION PERFORMANCE

POSTFACE ..................................................................................................................................... 213

ENDNOTES .................................................................................................................................. 216

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................................ 235
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Through the analysis of and critical engagements with selected genres of cultural performances in China during the period of 1998-2002, I suggest that a hybridity of discourses intersect Chinese cultural production in the late 1990s. Although all performances can be viewed as “cultural” in some way, this dissertation examines what I refer to as “cultural performances.” The adjective “culture”—rather than being redundant—emphasizes that throughout the dissertation the performances are all viewed from a critical cultural perspective as in some way staging or performing significant aspects of cultural production in China from 1998-2002.

The Problematic of Cultural Hybridity in the 1990s

At the dawn of the 21st century, illegal or unauthorized coalmines dot the central earthen plateaus of northern Shaanxi province in China. The number of workers, who out of desperation choose to toil in the depths of shoddily constructed mine shafts, continues to mount.1 The vast majority of the makeshift mines lack the safety measures and equipment required to adhere to the government’s construction standards. For many of these unauthorized operations, higher pay attracts miners who are willing to face the mine’s poor
conditions and life-threatening risks. Illicit mines are often allowed to remain open on account of pay-offs to local officials.

Li Yang 李阳 adopts this poignant and troubling social issue in his 2002 feature film *Blind Shaft* (Mang jing 盲井). While the illegal operation of coalmines reflects, to a certain degree, China’s economic reforms and political state of affairs, Li Yang—writer, director, and producer of the film—weaves a captivating plot integrating suspense and intrigue, black comedy, social critique, existentialism, and a journey of spiritual awakening. The film tells a story about a duo of scam artists who defraud illegal mines into paying compensation out to them for the death of “blood-relatives” in mining “accidents.” After falsifying their relationship with the unsuspecting victims to the mine owners, the scam artists murder the victims while engineering the mine collapse to appear as having caused the victim’s death. The duo’s last target is a desperate but optimistic teenage boy, whose youth, innocence, and honesty spark doubts in one of the crooks about going through with the murder. The film concludes with the crooks killing each other in the depths of a mine seam, while the boy escapes the collapse of the mine and reluctantly collects compensation for the death of his “uncle.”

Lacking the permits required to legally shoot a film in China, *Blind Shaft* qualifies as an “underground” film. In addition to filming *Blind Shaft* in China, a considerable portion of the film’s post-production work was also conducted there.² Shooting *Blind Shaft* in an undisclosed location in the depths of an illegal opencast coalmine also added an additional dimension to its classification as “underground.” The film’s producers exploited the double meaning of “underground” as a promotional gambit after the film’s completion. However, a
number of aspects and considerations complicate the film’s “underground” status. First, the film’s production team gained access to the coalmines as a result of support provided by a local government official. Therefore, the production of the film critically relied upon “official,” although anonymous, support. Furthermore, the short story from which the film was adapted was published above-board without being officially censured. It also remains uncertain as to whether the film would have been denied the domestic filming permits had they been solicited. An “underground” film is clearly much more complex than simply a film that is presumed to contain anti-Party or anti-official content. This case exemplifies the pitfalls of equating “underground” with “anti-official” in cultural production in contemporary China.

If *Blind Shaft*’s status in terms of (anti-) official culture manifests a certain ambiguity, classifying the film in terms of national origin or a local/global binary proves to be an equally puzzling endeavor. Li Yang, although born and college-educated in China, moved to Germany in the late 1980s and later became a citizen of Germany. The vast majority of participants in the film’s production, however, were Chinese nationals. While Li Yang self-financed the film largely with money earned working in Germany’s media industry, he also raised capital for post-production work within China. When submitting the film to international film festivals, the film was identified as either originating from Hong Kong—where a company was registered with the express purpose of submitting the film to certain international film festivals without provoking China’s government—from China, or as a Germany-China co-production.

Like many new directors, Li Yang aspired to gain international recognition for his film in international film festivals. Frequent viewings of *Blind Shaft* for specially invited
international reporters and diplomatic cultural attachés from Japan, US, Italy, Germany, England, and Australia were arranged during the film’s post-production to attract publicity and media attention in Beijing and worldwide. The fact that part of *Blind Shaft* had been filmed underground in mining tunnels enhanced the currency of the film’s “underground-edness.” Participants in the publicity drives in Beijing felt they were involved in the film’s “underground” circulation. *Blind Shaft* indeed entered the international spotlight after winning the Silver Bear Award at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival. It was the only film from “China”—other than Zhang Yimou’s 张艺谋 high-budget (US$31 million) and star-studded (Jet Li 李连杰 and Zhang Ziyi 章子怡) *Hero* (*Yingxiong 英雄*)—to have made the official selection for the main competition.

“Local” culture and imagery, as exemplified in the scam artists’ unmistakable Shaanxi dialect and epitomized by their tireless intonation of the Shaanxi expletive “dick” (*jiba 鸡巴*), imbues *Blind Shaft* with its indigenous “authenticity” and exotic appeal. However, the representation of the “local” for mainly a “global” audience and by a “Western-trained” film director requires that a productive engagement of the film carefully examine the multiple intersections between various local and global trajectories of production, consumption, representation, and ideology. In consideration of the production team’s diversity and the film’s transnational financing, a transnational axis overlaps with the film’s “national” and Chinese identity, fragmenting and refracting an interpretation of the film’s meanings. The film’s status, as an “underground” film, vis-à-vis official culture seems more transparent, however, the film’s critical reliance on government support, albeit discreet and anonymous, also obscures the distinctions between official and unofficial cultural production.
The film—representative of key aspects of cultural production in China in the late 1990s and first few years of the 21st century—suggests the complexity involved in analyzing cultural products from this particular era. Cultural products, such as Blind Shaft, intersect and are intersected by complex relations and layers of discourse and representation. China’s rapid modernization, greater utilization of capitalist mechanisms, and accelerated global exchange of images, technology, ideas, enhances (and obfuscates) the complexity of cultural production during this period.

In terms of cultural hybridity, Blind Shaft is not a unique cultural product at the dawn of the new millennium. Rather, cultural hybridity has emerged as a key characteristic and cultural aesthetic for a diverse range of cultural products and practices in China. A wide array of different modes of cultural production, circulation, and consumption, from commercial culture (advertisements, real estate development, retail industry), education culture (English language pedagogy, textbooks), media culture, leisure and sports culture, health culture, to more defined cultural fields of architecture and urban design, fine arts, literature, drama, dance, and music, exhibit similar forms of cultural hybridity.

An increasing number of scholarly and critical works recognize the need to examine a range of cultural products across disciplines or fields. The trans-disciplinary approach, which assists in revealing the complexity of cultural hybridity at this particular juncture of China’s history, is emerging within the field of Chinese studies (and intersecting other fields) within China and the United States (Dai Jinhua 2002; Wang Jing 2001; Barmé 1999; Dutton 1998; Liu 1999b; Chen 1995; Kang and Tang 1993; Dirlik and Zhang 2000; King and Kusno 2000). My interpretation in this dissertation of China’s elite drama, popular television, folk dance, and film market practices, adopts and promotes the view that productive analysis of
cultural hybridity benefits from a pluralistic approach that resonates with the hybridity of the cultural products and practices analyzed.

**Major Socio-economic Trends in China, 1998-2002**

A version of cultural hybridity, as illustrated by *Blind Shaft*, developed during a particular juncture in Chinese contemporary history. A number of influential currents shape the socio-historical context of cultural production at this particular juncture (*circa* 1998-2002). During this period, the ubiquitous and prolific discourse of China’s integration with the world economic system and global community (as espoused within the official media and corporate marketing) intermeshes with the domain of everyday practice for China’s urbanites. The barrage of discursive campaigns, such as “getting on track with the world” (*yu shijie jie gui* 与世界接轨), “striding to internationalize” (*man xiang guojihua* 迈向国际化), and “creating a global brand name” (*chuangzao guoji de mingpai* 创造国际的名牌) have dominated everyday practice and conversation, encouraging the belief in the imminent arrival of a “globalized” reality.

China’s official accession to the WTO on December 11, 2001, and Beijing’s belated victory in its selection on July 13, 2001 to host the 2008 International Olympics, strengthened this discourse of global integration. The implicit teleological commitment (for economic growth and social progress?) and spatial re-configuration (re-centering China on the global map?) have gained ground in shaping the common and everyday fabric of urban life in China during this period. Although global integration has been a gradual process for
China in the post-Mao era, the WTO and Olympic bid accomplishments mark the period of 1998 to 2002 as watershed years in China’s ongoing socio-economic transformation.

In conjunction with China’s push towards the global integration, a consumer culture—largely radiating from coastal and urban areas—intensified as urban incomes increased, a middle-class burgeoned, home and auto ownership for white-collar families skyrocketed, and a diverse array of foreign products, brand names, and services entered the market. While consumption and commercialization were launched years earlier—in part sparked by Deng Xiaoping’s legendary 1992 Southern Excursion Talks—it is not until this period (1998-2002) that consumerism radically enters mainstream culture and informs everyday practice in China’s urban areas. What five years ago were luxury items accessible only to the *nouveau riche*—from cell phones and laptops to private autos and homes—such commodities became affordable, within reach and the talk of the town. The flood of commodities, joined by the processes of global integration, accompanied an immense mosaic of new images, logos, signs, slogans, and discourses.

The complex and controversial issue of nationalism’s role, and the pivotal function of statism (or, officialism) in China during this period, interweaves with these socio-economic trends of global integration and mass urban consumerism. Nationalism and statism, although often mutually reinforcing within the Chinese context, are best not conflated. Indeed, outflows of nationalism or national pride punctuated China’s proverbial “globe-rush.” Incidents such as the anti-American protests sparked by the US-led NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999 and the Sino-US spy plane standoff following the collision between the EP-3 and Chinese J-8 fighter on April 1, 2001 represent such trends in contemporary nationalism. Although China’s official media
apparatus promoted nationalistic responses to these incidents, nationalism cannot simply be equated with statism. Following the bombing of the Chinese embassy, China-centered nationalism, as well as anti-American inflected sentiments, circulated within the Chinese diasporic space. This is despite the diaspora’s location outside of the direct control of state media and organs.

The currents of consumerism and globalism appear as ultra-visible as the urban streets swathed in a montage of foreign and ostensibly consumable signs of Starbucks, Buicks, and Armani Jeans. Nationalism, however, despite its omnipresence, appears more visible when scrutinized, pieced together by the state, or revived from its sublimated position and congealed by an international provocative incident.

The critical issue of the state’s role and statism in China during this period deserves close scrutiny and examination from multiple angles. Suffice it here to suggest that during the period under discussion the state underwent a crucial transformation. Prior to 1996, the state perceived a loss of legitimacy. This resulted in part from the inevitable opening up of real and imaginary trajectories promoted by the increased flows between China and the world. As a result, the state sought to reinvent its legitimacy through the forging of alliances with the discourses, practices, and institutions of globalization, consumerism, and transnational capitalism. Such processes importantly contribute to the formation of China’s postsocialist state. The transformation of the Chinese state in recent years is sparking a serious reevaluation of the assumptions underlying a socialism/capitalism binary. During this period, the postsocialist state engaged in repackaging itself from a quasi-totalitarian configuration of coercive state apparatus that manipulates political and cultural ideology into a collection of collaborative synapses that are no less pervasive—but seemingly less
invasive—and cohere to form a quasi-authoritarian and (self-) regulatory system and body of governance.

**Cultural and Intellectual Trends in China in the 1990s**

As China experienced significant socio-economic and political changes, what major influential cultural and intellectual trends flourished during the period under discussion? More specifically, what were the intellectual standpoints and cultural strategies adopted within China to examine its cultural production during a period of significant socio-economic transformation?

Intellectual trends and schools of thought—relative to cultural critique and cultural studies in the 1990s—largely emerged in China with such prefixes as “post” (post-Maoism, post-modernism, post-socialism), “new” (New Right, New Left, New Liberalism), and “neo” (neo-Marxism, neo-conservatism). The prefixes were affixed largely as a lexical strategy to distinguish critical viewpoints from the intellectual milieu of the New Era (xin shiqi 新时期) spanning the previous decade (1979-1989). Such nomenclature can neither convey the plurality of intellectual views nor fully acknowledge the various intersections between different schools of thought. Such labeling practices also emerged primarily as naming strategies adopted to distinguish certain viewpoints relative to other intellectual currents. However, despite skepticism towards such nomenclature, impassioned intellectual debate filled China in the 1990s, hinging on the socio-economic transformations discussed above—the rush towards globalization, rise of mass consumerism, and accommodating, if not appropriating, role of the state.
In particular, within the discussions over post-ology (后学 hòuxué), the debate over postmodernism, in particular, reflects the intellectual and political positionings of the intellectuals in the 1990s. Three major forms of postmodernism flourished during the 1990s and continue to command considerable attention in the beginning of the 21st century. First is an acknowledgment of the availability and general adoption/adaptation of Western postmodern theory and discourse in Chinese scholarship, arts, and professional institutions. Postmodernism, while largely peripheral in the 1980s, entered a broader range of cultural practices and discourses in the 1990s, especially in the last few years of the decade. Whereas the issue of (re-/mis-) interpretation is an important one, especially in terms of hermeneutics, I would like to suggest that a much wider community consumed the sign of postmodernism in the 1990s. As such, a form of popular postmodernism became widely accepted and circulated. A heightened discussion by cultural critics and others about a postmodern aesthetic within the arts and literature, including architecture, design, poetry, fine arts, fiction, dance, also accompanied the diffusion and reception of postmodernism as concept, theory, discourse, and sign during this period (Zhang Xudong 2000: 401).

In addition to popular postmodernism and aesthetic postmodernism, discursive postmodernism, developed as a social discourse pinned against the modernists, humanists, and ideologies of enlightenment and modernity associated with the New Era, emerged as the major intellectual current associated with postmodernism (Zhang Xudong 2000: 400). A strand of this discursive postmodernism is the argument that postmodernism is a historical necessity of culture in a postsocialist state, as conditioned by the rise of consumer masses and modes of cultural consumption. As Xudong Zhang notes, the “overlap and coexistence of a dazzling variety of modes of production, social structures, political lexicons, ideological
discourses, and value systems . . . constitutes the conditions of possibility of Chinese postmodernism” (2000: 425).

A new cultural conservatism as discourse and discursive strategy also gained force in the 1990s. Cultural critics both within and outside China identify the trend in new conservatism in terms of representing a rupture from the intellectual currents of the New Era. The new conservatism is described in part as rising out of the aftermath of June 4th and its subsequent reevaluation. In one of the more complete treatments of intellectual conservatism in the early 1990s, Xu identifies three major trends: cultural traditionalism, nativist postmodern-postcolonial theory, and new social evolutionist thinking (Xu 1999). The trend of cultural traditionalism (associated with Beijing University philosophy professor Chen Lai 陈来), says Xu, critically evaluates radicalism in China and defends traditional Chinese values in the context of an evolving Chinese modernity (175).

Xu also considers the practitioners, such as Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 (Associate Professor of Chinese at Beijing University), of affirming a type of Chinese nativist post-ist theory that belongs to a general trend of cultural conservatism. Whereas postmodern and postcolonial theory in the West is usually associated with more radical positions, Xu argues that in the Chinese context, post-ism asserts nationalist sentiments and the construction of Chineseness at the cost of disregarding or even negating the exigency of liberal democracy and enlightenment (177). Xu joins China-based intellectuals Lei Yi 蕾颐 and Wang Hui 王晖 in criticizing Chinese post-ist theory. He also critiques the positions of American-based proponents of Chinese postmodernism, clearly articulating his views: “By inculcating a nihilistic and cynical attitude toward democratic change, the enlightenment of citizens, and
social modernization, post-ist theories reduce sociocultural critical activity to cultural dilettantism and political quietism” (177).

Xu calls the third current in cultural conservatism “new social evolutionist thinking,” which he identifies with such influential intellectuals as Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Wang Yuanhua 王元化. In general, these proponents take a position that places economic development as an absolutely essential condition for social and political reform (181). This trend can also be associated with the New Right, which Xudong Zhang associates with Xu Youyu 徐友渔 and Zhu Xueqin 朱学勤, in their assertion of a tripartite of national well being (statehood), enlightenment (social change), and modernization (economic wealth) (Zhang 2000: 420).

A movement of New Leftism also emerged in the 1990s. New Leftism comprises more radical political ideologies that critique issues of commercialism, nationalism, gender, from multiple critical viewpoints, including those indebted to Marxist theory. As cultural critics, Li Tuo 李陀 and Dai Jinhua 戴锦华 represent the plurality of voices in New Leftism, in which the clarion for political efficacy resounds over the cacophony of the post-ist debate. Indeed, although not reluctant to engage Western theory, New Leftism in China is less about adopting post-colonial theory and post-modern theory that marks the Left in American academic communities. Rather, New Leftism in China focuses on re-acclimating certain Marxist strategies and recuperating a disengaged socialist history to reveal and explicate issues of nationalism, statism, consumerism, and gender in contemporary China.

Cultural critics distinguish the intellectual and cultural trends of the 1990s against the backdrop of the former decade’s cultural positionings. However, scholars of Chinese
contemporary culture have already begun to note the emergence of another turning point or juncture in the second half of the 1990s. For example, Jing Wang (2001) highlights the intense transformation of this period in her bold analysis of the Chinese government’s co-option of culture as discursive, symbolic, and economic capital through certain state policies and strategies governing leisure in the late 1990s. She designates the period as a critical juncture in the transformation and emergence of the postsocialist state as a polity able to “condense a constellation of different social, cultural, legal, and economic practices and discourses into a complex formation of alliances” (Wang Jing 2001: 98). The transformative role of the state, intensified global integration and transnational flows, and massification of consumerism, gradually erode certain binaries—between socialism/capitalism, local/global, official/anti-official—throughout the 1990s. It is precisely the period under discussion in this dissertation (1998-2002) in which such binaries become less qualified to inform analyses that seek to explore and represent the plurality of the cultural products emerging and circulating during this historical juncture.

**Politics and Performance in the 1990s**

Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (1990) contributed a pioneering study that demonstrates the value of adopting an interpretive framework based on theories of performance. For them, the events in the spring of 1989—infused with deep political, historical, and symbolic significances and problematics—were want for critical methodology that could provide the loci of incidents with universal as well as historically and culturally specific meanings. The historians’ analysis adopts political theater, and specifically political street theater, as an interpretative solution to what they viewed as a massive body of
literature comprised of studies that were either problematic, inadequate, or both (836). Their application of performance as not just a framework but also as a theory moved the main function or purpose of their analysis from truth-value to the performed and received symbolism of the utterances and actions (856). In their study, the historical, political, and social meanings of the events are interpreted in relation to historical practices and rituals, which they view as re-staged performances by the protesters for the leadership, public and international media.

The events of 1989 can be productively engaged from a model of theatrical performance. Twelve years later, the 2001 US spy plane imbroglio—a major political incident for Sino-US relations in the 21st century—also begs for an interpretation based on the aspects of performance. In the 2001 EP-3 US spy-plane incident, in which the plane was grounded and detained by Chinese authorities on Hainan Island, many of my friends from the US assumed by living in China at the time I was having to take extra care to look after myself in such a hostile environment. This assumption and perspective primarily developed from the replaying in the US and international media of interview clips in which average-looking Chinese menacingly expressed animosity towards the US and Americans. Many of the American friends and family who were concerned for my safety, of course, were also wary of the potential sensationalism in the media and its tacit conviction and proclivity to overstate conflict.

Significant meanings of the event and its transnational reception are better understood if the context and motives of performance are taken into consideration. First, we may ask the question of whether a person in China, most likely of Chinese nationality, could really express anything different than hostility, even if inclined, towards America to the
international or American media. Of equal or even greater importance is the ethical dimension of the reporters and personnel representing the media: Would they really be willing to jeopardize their Chinese interviewees by taping and broadcasting a Chinese national expressing a view in direct conflict with the official Chinese version? The performances of the interviewees and media personnel contribute to the broadcasting and reception of the event in China and abroad. In turn, the broadcasting informs public opinion in the United States and plays a factor in shaping foreign policy. Such performances indeed matter and do impact China-US relations and politics.7

The introduction of performance into the interpretive framework reveals a much more complicated context and subtext, enabling a more pluralistic and bi-directional analysis rather than just a simplistic debate regulated by notions and degrees of opposition (i.e., “yes/no” and “to what extent”). However, the performance-charged analysis of the political events in 1989, in light of the historical context, interpreted the performed events largely in terms of “acting against” and hence as political street theater. However, following certain changes in China’s socio-economic conditions, I suggest performance can be applied to the late 1990s as a productive analytical and theoretical framework to diffuse the elusive binary between “acting with” and “acting against.” Similar politics of performance constitute a major logic of cultural production in China in the late 1990s.

Performance as Theory and Trope for Chinese Cultural Production, 1998-2002

As illustrated by the example of Blind Shaft, cultural production during this period is more productively engaged by adopting critical interpretive models that can accommodate and explicate the hybridity of cultural production. Therefore, I propose that interpretive models
that tend to relegate contemporary Chinese cultural production to a position of resistance, either vis-à-vis the West or the Chinese Communist Party, reduce or obscure the hybridity of cultural production during this period. Performance theory assists in the goal of representing the hybridity of cultural production for this period. In addition, performance theory contributes to the task of addressing the politics inherent in the circulation and reception of performances, which are informed by both local and global discourses and cultural practices.

Performance theory gained currency within a diverse range of disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences, including linguistics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, folklore, theatre, political science, critical theory, and cultural studies, in the last half of the twentieth century (Carlson 1996; Goodman 2000). Several scholars of contemporary Chinese studies, in addition to the historians Esherick and Wasserstrom (1990), have applied certain notions or concepts of performance in their critical work (Liu 1999b; Meng Yue 1993; Chen 2002). For example, Meng Yue 孟悦 (1993) articulates the multi-layered discourses inscribed in the evolution of the different versions—folktale, folk opera, model theater, ballet, and film—of *The White-Haired Girl* (Baimaonü 白毛女). Although Meng does not directly refer to Western performance theory, her critical discussion is also an engagement of the performances of divergent discourses (political, aesthetic, social) as represented within different historical performance genres. In her comprehensive study of modern Chinese drama in contemporary China (from revolutionary model theater to post-Maoist theater), Xiaomei Chen (2002) also reflects upon how notions of performance assist in articulating multiple layers of discourses, such as race, gender, and nation/state.
Within her discussion of the television serial *Beijing Sojourners in New York (Beijing ren zai niuyue, 北京人在纽约)*, broadcast in China in October 1993, Lydia Liu (1999b) keys in on “a single parodic performance” [italics my own] that provides insight into the ideological confluence of the processes of transnational capitalism and postsocialism. The performance Liu details is the act of Ningning calling her father Wang Qiming a “stinking capitalist.” Liu finds the articulation doubly ironic as: 1) the younger and expatriated generation cites revolutionary language; 2) such language has lost its critical relevance due to political and social reform in contemporary China enacted by the same Party that had generated the revolutionary language (768). As mainstream American capitalist values and China’s postsocialist political ideology extol entrepreneurs, the expression “stinking capitalist” reveals through its performative utterance what Liu identifies as the “transnational co-authorship of the ideology of business entrepreneurship between the postsocialist official discourse of China and that of the mainstream American media” (790). Although Liu’s only mention of “performance” is her reference to Ningning’s “parodic performance” of the Maoist expletive, Liu also examines what I consider the performance of diverse discourses in terms of the global media industry and reception in the Chinese diaspora.

The aforementioned studies suggest an exploration of performance theory within Chinese Studies. The ideas in this dissertation regarding cultural performances and their demonstration of multiple layers of discourse are indebted to the studies briefly mentioned above. However, no scholar has yet methodically explored performance theory’s potential to engage contemporary Chinese culture and contribute to the interdisciplinary collaborative efforts in developing performance theory. This dissertation suggests the insights that can be
achieved by such an approach; however, the discussions contained here within are far from being exhaustive.

**From Culture and Performance to Cultural Performance**

Viewing “cultural performances” as “culture performed from a cultural perspective,” requires a closer look at how exactly the concept or notion of culture is to be adopted and applied. The social sciences and humanities experienced a “cultural turn” in the second half of the twentieth century. “Paradigmatic” of such a cultural turn, from one perspective, is the Kuhnian revolution, in which Kuhn suggests that the sciences are embedded within a certain relativity informed by cultural positioning. Another proverbial signpost is what Geertz (1980) refers to as the “blurring of genres”— a major refiguring of the conceptual frames and practices in the humanities and the social sciences within the 1970s. Culture hence became a major category subject to trans-disciplinary academic inquiry, witnessing the rise and flourishing of cultural studies as an orthodox mode of practice for academics on both sides of the Atlantic.

Since this dissertation explores the boundaries between disciplines such as anthropology, media studies, folklore studies, theater, literary studies, and Chinese studies, it is appropriate to develop a theorization of culture useful in navigating such boundaries. Cited above, Clifford Geertz was one of the most influential figures in the twentieth century in reconfiguring the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities. His “interpretive” approach to ethnography was borrowed from literary studies, while at the same time Geertz’s work inspired a body of theory for literary critics adopting a more anthropological or ethnographic mode of criticism and analysis.
The understanding of “culture” employed in the concept of “cultural performance” throughout this dissertation is in part indebted to Sherry Ortner, whose notions are developed from Geertz. Let us first recall Geertz’s major contributions to the conceptualization of culture. As developed in his *Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz argued that “culture” is embedded in real life and must be interpreted much like literary texts. Culture is composed of “webs of meaning” based on and encoded in symbolic forms such as language, artifacts, rituals, etc. Cultural analysis is “sorting out the structures of signification” (1973: 9). Geertz’s notion of “thick description,” developed from Gilbert Ryle, placed emphasis upon the cultural construction of the cultural actor’s needs, desires, and feelings in forming subjectivity or agency: Geertz, also forecasting the inward turn in ethnography in his well-known citation of Wittgenstein, notes “finding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience” (Geertz 1980: 13).

Ortner, one of Geertz’s most loyal and prolific disciples, acclimatizes Geertz’s definition of culture to the contemporary context. Culture, according to Ortner, is bi-directional, symbolically constructed and contextualized and emphasizes how culture negotiates boundaries. Secondly, she emphasizes how cultural meaning is mediated and constructed by symbols; culture is negotiated and re-negotiated through a web of meanings; meaning is made rather than discovered or uncovered.12 Lastly, citing Stephen Greenblatt, Ortner situates the importance of situating cultural analysis within historical and sociopolitical contexts: “Culture is not an aesthetic object but the grounds of action and the stakes of action, with the real outcomes in the real world and with powerful representations in literature, drama, and art” (Ortner 1999: 10).13
Following these strategies in constructing how the “culture” in performances is staged and received, we can turn our attention to the historical contextualization and tropification of performance. Common definitions of “perform” include: fulfill, carry out, present, give a rendition of, function, and to play (as in “give a performance”). As we see in these definitions there is a division between “perform” denoting the carrying out of an action in accordance with certain prescriptions or constraints – as in to fulfill certain expectations or requirements – and “perform” signifying the presentation or acting out of a constructed artifact. The former stresses disciplined and fulfilled action while the latter emphasizes creative agency and ongoing world making. Recent performance theories, and their precursors in linguistic, sociological, and anthropological disciplines, examine the borders between these definitions and inherent ambivalences—namely, “perform” as embodying both prescriptive and creative aspects.

“Performance,” in constant oscillation between the disciplined and productive poles, is a historically apt and productive metaphor for China’s cultural production in the 1990s. This conceptualization receives a certain degree of urgency from the international perspective of global politics. On the world’s stage in the post-Cold War era, in which economic development in the matrix of global capitalism is the dominant teleological and eschatological paradigm, China, is scrutinized and appraised from within and without on its economic performance. All world economies perform, but China’s economy, as an economy neither openly capitalistic nor centrally planned, is in a unique position at this historical juncture to perform up to certain standards and expectations. Of course, throughout the 1990s, it was not just China’s economy that was in the global spotlight, but also China’s population, human rights record, environmental policies, international relations, military
buildup, etc., not to mention China’s performances in the Olympic Games (Summer 2000) and in relation with the bid for the 2008 Games.

It is important to emphasize that the evaluation of China’s performance can be identified on domestic and international levels. The ideological or political rationale and motives for the evaluation of the performances are usually viewed divergently from these different levels. The domestic evaluation, defined here as China’s official or semi-official stance, tends to evaluate China’s performance with a more or less implicit goal of bolstering national solidarity, exemplified by the intense and media coverage of the 2000 Olympic Games. International evaluation tends to judge China’s performance from a developmental or socio-economic evolutionary perspective that highlights “universal” standards such as free trade and human rights. Despite such an oversimplified dichotomy between the domestic and international evaluation criteria, such a framework can assist in constructing an awareness of the important role China is made to perform, from within and without, always being measured up to certain ideologically motivated prescriptions or standards on the global stage.

The dismantling of the Iron Curtain in the 1980s made the Cold War era’s global balance of power strategies obsolete. China’s reforms initiated under the Deng Xiaoping era have shifted the policy of the world’s major “democracies” from one of containment to engagement. An awkward dramatic dialogue has characterized China’s relationship with America in the 1990s, one in which key political issues and stances have become more and more infused or elided with transnational flows of capital, as China’s realization of both internal and externally enforced “performance standards” demand inflows of foreign investment and outflows of exports. In the 1990s, China and the world moved beyond a global politics that in previous decades had been shaped mainly by linearity and opposition.
If the 1980s in China was a decade in which drama resonates aptly as a politico-cultural trope, the 1990s changes into an era more aptly described by performance—a location and time traversed and mediated by transnational flows of images, capital, and diasporas. Victor Turner’s social dramas, which emphasize the process of social redress, find resonance in the social and cultural history of China in the eighties. In the 1990s, however, performance characterized by relational positioning and “citational iterability”—constitutive of performativity—more aptly engages and expresses the particular historical and cultural milieu. From drama to performance, redress is replaced by re-play. Reflexive spectacles of hybridity supplant the ritualized reconciliation of difference.

**Development of Performance Theory**

If performance is adopted as a trope for Chinese culture in the 1990s, the project at hand is to contextualize the historical juncture of China while positioning the theoretical development of the notion of performance. Rather than ostensibly embedding China within a fabric of theoretical discourse, in which China’s contemporary culture is merely processed and catalogued by convenient theoretical tools, the contextualizing process is informed by a dialectical process. Chinese culture in the 1990s is better viewed through the exploration of the intersections between the historicity of the theoretical frames and the historical positioning of Chinese cultural production under examination.

Performance Studies has gained currency in the humanities and social sciences, in particular, in the development of gender and ethnicity studies and post-colonial theory—areas germane, if not critical, to cross-cultural hermeneutics. One purpose of this introduction is to locate how this dissertation engages notions of performance. What follows
is a brief discussion of the construction of an operational definition of performance, along with the historical development of performance studies vis-à-vis theoretical applications and institutional positioning.

Since the 1960s the category and notion of performance has gradually been more widely adopted across disciplinary boundaries. The more pervasive application of performance within academic institutions refers to a diverse number of cultural activities and practices, including but not at all limited to popular entertainment, speech acts, folklore, political demonstrations, conference behavior, rituals, medical and ritual healing, cooking, fashion, film computer simulation, music, and aspects of everyday life.16

The rise in the currency of performance is accompanied by the paradigmatic shift in the social sciences, the blurring of generic distinctions, and the reallocation of institutional resources towards inter-disciplinary studies. Academic interest in performance continued to grow as the field of cultural studies expanded within areas such as media studies, intercultural studies, gender studies, and post-colonial studies. Moreover, while performance seemed to offer new approaches that navigated the boundaries between more often than not contrived institutional and academic disciplines, theories of performativity were being developed and articulated as a mode of critical theory. Theories of performativity were adopted within various critical rubrics, including semiotics, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and post-modernism, the latter of which made definitive attempts and claims to interrogate certain Western-centered mainstream ontological and epistemological underpinnings. “Poststructuralist conceptions of the human subject as de-centered by language and unconscious desire and postmodern rejections of foundational discourses (especially totalizing conceptions of gender, race, or national identity),” as Elin Diamond
observes, “inspired the adoption of performance and performativity as major critical and interpretive tropes in the last two decades” (1996: 4).17

The emergence of performance as a more prominent critical trope within the humanities and social sciences is closely interwoven with the parallel theoretical developments in the cultural and critical turn of performance and performativity. The commonplace or traditional view of performance, as inherited from the Aristotelian concept of drama as illusion espoused in *Poetics*, is that performance is a “second-hand version of some primary reality” (George 71). Critical discussions challenging simplistic theories of the proscenium and mimesis have become more or less canonized within the disciplines of theatre and drama. Recent performance theorists, for example, study how cultural values are re(presented) in theatre and drama, as well as in different types of performances, inclusive of rite, ritual, and play. Victor Turner identifies such cultural performances as “sites of liminality.”

Victor Turner used the term *limen* (Latin, threshold) or *liminal* in his work on anthropology and performance to describe a certain marginalized space that offers the potential generation of diverse forms, structures, conjectures, and desires. In Turner’s own words: “Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a string after new forms and structure” (1990: 12). By associating performance with liminality, Turner has defined performance as certain practices used by cultures to define and re-define their values. Richard Schechner, continuing in Turner’s footsteps, developed a model in which performances are constituted by a liminality that interrupts and reaffirms cultural values. While Schechner’s approach tends to prioritize the universal or structural above the
historical or contingent, what he does show is that performances are important in diverse cultures as practices negotiate different cultural meanings, values, and tendencies. And if we adopt a Foucauldian view, performance can been seen as a staging of divergent discourses vying for legitimacy and authority in a matrix of power relations.

Pragmatic linguists J.L. Austin (as well as John Searle) have exerted an indelible influence on the development of the theorization of performativity. Many philosophical, theatrical, sociological, and cultural discussions of performativity are in part derived from Austin’s (1962) seminal notion of “speech-act,” developed to show how the performativity of utterances is constitutive—rather than merely extra-linguistic—of locutions. Derrida’s (1988) development of the notion of “citation,” which has exerted a powerful influence on theories on the construction of identities and subject formation, is indebted to Austin. At the same time, it challenges Austin’s exclusion of “etioloations”—or citational practices—from ordinary speech-act performances. Derrida argues, rather, that “etioloations” show how speech-acts are similarly structured by the same iterability, closing the gap between stage and world (Parker 1995).

Within the academic area of Gender Studies, theorists such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler revived the work of Austin, through interpretations by Derrida, to explore the function of language in producing the subject and constructing a gendered subjectivity. As Elin Diamond (1996) points out, the development of Butler’s theorization of gender identity can be seen in terms of her conceptualization of performance and performativity. In Gender Trouble, gender is conceived and theorized as a fictional ontology: “Gender is a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment . . . performance both affirms and denies this evacuation of substance” (5). Throughout Gender Trouble, the implicit assumption is that
gender can be chosen and performed by subjects. The influence of Derrida is strikingly evident in Butler’s development of the theorization of the relationship between performativity and gender in her canonical *Bodies That Matter*.

Performance acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power . . . If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse . . . This is less an “act,” singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power . . . Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary “act” emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions. (Butler 2000: 168)

Butler relies on Derrida’s theorization of the “citation” as a theoretical tool to negotiate the location of performance acts within the nexus of social and sexual relations, both inscribed by and enacted as such. The measure of a performance’s potential lies not so much in intention for Derrida but in its historical context and positioning: “Could a performative succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance . . . if it were not identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’?” (1988: 18). The performative succeeds in as much as it relies upon a certain authority accumulated through a type of citational build-up. While the performative relies on such sanction, at the same time it is contained and limited within that domain of citational uses. The performative is also a conceptual tool capable of searching out the meanings embedded in the disciplining of the subject in addition to the subject’s creative energies for *bricolage*. Butler also relies on Derrida’s theorization of the performative to emphasize the importance of minority discourses to stake claims in the defining of key terms: “What this also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the
terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity . . . In this sense, it remains politically necessary to lay claim to ‘women,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘lesbian,’ precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing” (2000: 169-170).

The embodiment of a tension or disjuncture between an act accomplished and an act of becoming is likewise an important characteristic of performance and performativity. Thus, the potential of performance, in addition to the performance’s historical limitations, are constitutive of the performative act. Performativity, traced by Butler, from the philosophical theorization of Derrida to its adaptation by feminist scholarship, is deemed an important tool in revealing the nexus of power relations, discourses, and acts of becoming. Diamond suggests that performance—as constitutive of what has become and what can become—is replete with cultural meanings and performance should be understood from a cultural and historical materiality approach:

Performance, as I have tried to suggest, is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated. When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. Performativity, I would suggest, must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance. (1996: 5)

Performance theorized as embodying the act as done and the act as becoming creates a vast array of terminology adopted to describe performance from both of these aspects. As noted by Diamond, the use of the prefix “re” indicates the repetition of the performative and acknowledges certain preconditions or constraints, while other terms such as embody, configure, inscribe, and signify are employed to express the potential of generating
something that goes beyond the present knowledge. Thus, cultural performances, according to Diamond, bring to our attention the “fissures, ruptures, and revisions” which as “unstable improvisations” are caught in a process of “continuous enactment” (Diamond 1996: 2).

The ontological instability of performance as a mode, practice, or act, from a sociological or anthropological perspective, can be described in terms of liminality—derived from Victor Turner as the “threshold” in ritual and elaborated upon by George as a certain “spatial in-between-ness in performing” (1989: 79). For George, this “clefing” characteristic of performance, is a process which creates “a here which is not ‘here,’ a now which is not ‘now,’ restlesslly slicing time and space into layers of ‘difference’” (74). It is precisely for this reason, notes George, that theatre and performance (harking back to Aristotle) have held a suspect status throughout Western aesthetic history. If much of the Western intellectual tradition is centered on arriving at a state beyond contradiction and paradox, then it is theatre or performance which subverts this itinerary by “endlessly creating new ‘doubles’ and thus new doubts, restlessly exposing the world as one which is dynamic and creative only in being clefted” (74).

George argues that performance is privileged as the key trope for postmodernism and deconstruction and that we are entering the “age of performance,” defined as a way of experiencing the world in which existential ambiguity is displacing subjective security:

The predominance in post-modern and deconstructionist discourse of terms such as play, game, contradiction, process, performances suggests that we may be entering an age in which there are only media (semiosis, assumptions, paradigms, models) and no ontology, only experiences . . . For such an age, performance is the ideal medium and model and ambiguity is its life (83).
If performance is a key trope for postmodern cultural production in the West, how can we assess its relevance to contemporary non-Western cultures? Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (2000) points out that Frederic Jameson (1991) characterized postmodernism in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in the West as defined by a temporal process in which postmodernism succeeds modernization. Lu continues to assert that postmodernity in China, as well as in other non-Western countries, is better defined in spatial terms. For example, China’s contemporary situation is constituted by the superimposition of a series of historical processes, such as premodern, modern, and postmodern, than cannot be clearly delineated. “Paradoxically,” says Lu, “postmodernism in China is even more spatial and more postmodern than its original Western model . . . Postmodernity on a global scale, then, is necessarily a hybrid postmodernity: a palimpsest of non-synchronous, emergent, and residual formations, a mixture of various space-times, and an overlap of different modes of production” (2000: 146).

Although the postmodernism and China debate continues to thrive in China and the US, the existence of postmodernism in China is certainly not the prerequisite for whether or not performance theory can productively engage contemporary Chinese production. Performance theory assists in the task of examining a cultural product’s multiple sites of production and consumption and its constitution by a plurality of discourses. Therefore, postmodernism in China is not the enabling factor for performance theory. Rather, performance theory assists in the task of articulating the predicament of the crisscrossing, interlacing post discourses and their relation to a global politics. Although “binaries are dissolving” (Wang Jing 2001: 70) in China at the end of the 1990s, it is better not to view postmodernism as a monolithic discourse, especially for a postsocialist state such as China.
Rather, performance theory can assist in the project of articulating the multiplicity and diversity of overlapping discourses and temporalities, with the performance of postmodernity just one among a dispersion of acts.

**Performance: Beyond Resistance**

Inserting China into the narrative and history of performance theory allows for the articulation of a Chinese version. However, it is also important to remain aware as to how such an articulation, in part due to its reliance upon Western-centered theory, may reify the marginality of Chinese studies. Performance theory continues to reopen epistemological and metaphysical questions within the humanities (Reinelt and Roach 1992: 4). At the same time, there may also be an ethical or moral responsibility to reflexively think through academic contributions and their potential uses.

We have seen how performance theory was adopted within the discipline of women’s studies as a tool to engage issues related to inscribed subjectivities, as a methodology to lay bare the social practices which shape and delimit subject positioning. Through the development of Judith Butler’s work in particular, we see how performance is initially taken up to offer a critical technique or oppositional practice—performance as a way to open up a space through discursive or bodily expressions within a matrix of hegemonic discourses and practices. In her later work, Butler pursues Derrida’s philosophical work in performativity, and she directs her attention more to critiquing performativity in terms of the very nature or ontology of the act itself.

Based on a similar set of theoretical objectives, post-colonial theorists have also adopted and developed performance theory. Homi Bhabha, for example, theorizes
“mimicry” as the (post-)colonial practice which creates the Other as a “partial subject”—recognized through the gaze of the colonizer as “almost the same but not white” (1984: 126).

The Other is located in a space of hybridity, awkwardly the subject and object at the same time. As Schneider notes: “Bhabha defines mimicry as a complex strategy of representation, repeating or doubling the image of the Other in a shroud of the authentic, continually producing the delimiting difference through a strategy which ‘appropriates the Other as it visualizes power’” (Schneider 2000: 266).

However, as in the case with women’s studies, identification of hegemonic discourses or practices is the starting point for developing counter-discourses and counter-practices. The practice of mimicry as the gaze that disciplines and doubles its subjects also carries with it the inherent potential to be returned or reflected. As Bhabha puts it: “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts it authority . . . the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (1984: 128). This “displacing gaze” lays bare the practice of mimicry in the disciplining of bodies, revealing the inherent ambivalence in the disciplining gaze.

If cultural performance in China in the 1990s is characterized by the trope of performance, it is this diffusion of the appropriating gaze or global hegemonic practices which is the defining feature of this era’s cultural performance. These acts of resistance as performed in different types of cultural performances can be theorized as counter-mimicry or doubling back. However, what is at stake is an internalization and critical awareness of the already “looked-at-ness” of the Chinese situation in a global context at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The keyhole scene in Zhang Yimou’s *Judou*, as pointed out by Rey
Chow (1995), is indeed an apt metaphor for Chinese cultural performance in the 1990s. It symbolizes the “displacing gaze” that characterizes cultural performance as “beyond resistance” in the 1990s.19

Besides Rey Chow, other scholars of contemporary Chinese culture have developed different strategies to circumvent the pitfall of relegating China to a position of resistance. For example, in her analysis of the state’s appropriation of the economic and symbolic capital of leisure, Wang Jing (2001) suggests reevaluating the “conceptual category of complicity so that we can . . . deliver ourselves from the conceptual deadlock of power versus subjugation versus resistance” (98-99). Lydia Liu (1999) also comments on the need in Chinese cultural studies to go beyond the practice of automatically proclaiming the West as the origins of global capital, and all other places as the periphery and subaltern, and hence in a position of resistance. Liu extols, for example, Aihwa Ong’s (1999) discussion of the flexible citizenship among Chinese in diaspora for discarding the “romantic construction of the (racial) other as an automatic site of resistance” (774) by showing how overseas Chinese capitalists rank among a globally dominant class. Xiaomei Chen’s (1995) discussion of “Occidentalism” also offers a strategy to avoid the relegation of China to an essentialized position of resistance by Western-centered concepts or theories such as Edward Said’s (1978) “Orientalism.” As located within the local contexts, Occidentalist discourse in contemporary China, Chen states, “is neither merely the product of an ideologically colonizing importation from the West, nor an expression of a masochistic wish on the part of the Chinese people that the more unfortunate aspects of a capitalist system be established in their country” (13). Rather, Chen explores the ways in which the “semi-colonized Self” in contemporary China
used the Occidentalist discourse for its own political agenda and as “discourses of liberation.”

Performance theory, indebted in many ways to the development of cultural anthropology during the last century, is largely a product of Western scholarship, and as such, it is important to remain reflexive of its application in Chinese studies. Therefore, in terms of locating a critical route for intervention for this study, there is a real need not simply to flip the terms, so to speak, but rather to introduce a third term à la Derrida’s “citation.” A “citation,” for Derrida, is a performative that accumulates its authoritative power through its repetition, hence “citation,” of former practices (1988: 18).

We can therefore consider two sides to the application of the terminology and theory of performance to contemporary Chinese cultural performance and production: the epistemological and the operational or political. The epistemological refers to the term’s use in describing, not in an essential way, the practices that engage and constitute difference or otherness. The political or operational confronts how the term’s political use is foregrounded in order to intervene with the constraints inherent in the application of theoretical models. The adoption of this two-fold approach in my discussion aims to avoid turning Chinese performance into a theoretical trope that validates the academy’s cultural studies and performance studies by placing ethnic examples on display. Rather, through this dissertation I examine how Chinese performance in the 1990s is a trope for a cultural, political, and theoretical intervention—the trope itself performs beyond resistance.
Introduction to Chapters

The following chapters examine a selection of cultural performances in China from 1998-2002. Their intersection with a hybrid of discourses and practices locates the cultural performances in a space that is irreducible to a position of resistance. The inter-generic approach aims to locate the sites of hybridity through and across genres and media. Each of the chapters, although in slightly different ways, engages the positioning and theoretical treatment of local and global cultures. In fact, this dissertation’s notion of “getting beyond” resistance maintains certain spatial and temporal implications that are intricately bound and interwoven with such positionings of local and global cultures.

My theoretical treatment of local and global cultures can largely be attributed to ideas developed within a volume of essays on the subject edited and compiled by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (1996). They turn away from an interrogation of discourses and rather examine the imagined transnational space engendered by the constant interplay between the local/global assemblage: “This global/local synergy within what we will track as the transnational imaginary enlivens and molests the textures of everyday life and spaces of subjectivity and reshapes those contemporary structures of feeling some culture critics all too commonly banalize as ‘postmodern’ or hypertextually consecrate as ‘postcolonial’ resistance” (1996: 2). Wilson and Dissanayake clearly articulate the theoretical need to articulate the complexity of contemporary spaces and subjectivities rather than reducing them to ideologies of resistance. Based on Wilson and Dissanayake’s ideas, I adopt in this dissertation the following features of the local/global nexus:
a) The Local and Global are not fixed, monolithic discourses; rather, they achieve their real value through their “synergy”—or, their mutual interaction, setting off, proximity, and or differences;
b) Thus, focus is placed on the confluence or ruptures in their appropriation and use, especially:
c) In terms of their imaginary construction in shaping daily practices and cultural subjectivities,

The construction of a local/global nexus assists in avoiding the pitfall of reifying or routinely classifying through the process of reductionist identification. For example, the task of articulating the multiple sites of local(s) replaces the task of identifying a local. By treating synergies and ruptures—rather than monolithically inclined discourses or metanarratives—identification of a local becomes the recognition of an awareness of a plurality of local(s) relative to various other forms of local and global cultures. Overlapping and intersecting layers of local(s) and global(s) comprise the local/global nexus.

The practice of ethnography is another key issue informing the discussion in each of the chapters. Since the gathering of materials and my interaction with and treatment of the materials for all of the chapters was done in China, the development and production of the dissertation is inscribed within a certain ethnographic practice. To varying extents, different chapters express a certain degree of recognition of the self – or self-reflexivity – within this process of ethnography. As I am not an anthropologist in training, through my trans-disciplinary application of the term, I do not intend to degrade or mis-use the term; rather, I aim to apply the practice of ethnography to literary or cultural studies in order to explore certain boundaries between practices of dramatic or textual analysis and anthropology.21
My understanding of ethnography and its application within this dissertation is developed from Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1995). They broadly define the term as involving the “ethnographer” participating, usually entailing some form of collection of data and documentation, in people’s lives for a period of time (1). Proclaiming “we are part of the social world we study,” (21) Hammersley and Atkinson also adopt a reflexive model of ethnography, as opposed to models of naturalism and positivism. They promote the notion that a critical component of ethnography is observing how the ethnographer’s position or subjectivity shapes ethnography.

The second chapter, entitled “Staged Ethnography in Guo Shixing’s Birdman and Bad Talk Street,” discusses how the acclaimed dramatist Guo Shixing showcases a dialogue between the local and global in his drama Bad Talk Street. At the same time, the drama enacts the global practice of cross-cultural ethnography as a site of intervention. The chapter provides an interesting example of the interpolation of different participants of ethnography—as enacted between the stage, the audience, and the critic (myself) and the array of ethnographic frames of reference, including the dramatic text, dramatic production, and inter-cultural flows and exchanges. An important issue in the process of ethnography is ethnicity: how ethnicity is constructed on the various levels and in accordance with the various frames of reference. In the chapter I also show how, as inscribed within and by a local/global nexus, ethnicity is always implicated within the circulation of cultural products.

The chapter also suggests that Guo Shixing’s dramas serve as an intervention that steers clear of a critique informed by dualism. His dramas embody a complex pluralism that unravels the bipolarity of positioning/counter-positioning. To contextualize Guo Shixing’s dramas within the theoretical framework of drama as resistance, I would like to provide a
brief discussion of theater in terms of its ability to construct narratives, discourses, or practices of resistance.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) played a major role in the development of the function of theatre as a means of intervention or resistance in the Western theatre tradition. Brecht’s notion of theatre can be seen as a rather direct response to the Aristotelian concept of drama that has functioned as the dominant mode of drama in the West. Rather than the concept of drama as illusion articulated in Aristotle’s *Poetics,* Brecht’s epic theatre was a theatre of calm contemplation and detachment that produced active participation by the audience with immediate social and political effect. However, where it failed, as pointed out by Broadhurst (1999: 2-3), was that it could only be understood as intended by the theoretically informed. Brecht sought to replace the theatre of illusion, which tricks the audience into believing the events of the play take place during their performance, with an epic theatre which through historical presentation distances the audience and thereby promotes their critical positioning (21). His widely known technique called *Verfremdungseffekt,* or “defamiliarization”—the making strange or unfamiliar—is at least indebted to Russian formalism but can also be traced back to certain ideas on aesthetics presented by Francis Bacon and Aristotle (Carlson 1984: 385-86). Brecht’s largest contributions include his advocacy of laying bare the devices of theatre production in addition to challenging the tradition in which the spectator is targeted for catharsis during the performance. These ideas are still instrumental today in terms of developing an aesthetics of the theater of resistance.

The notion of drama as resistance has also been carried into the existential and absurd schools of drama. Absurd theatre in some ways more successfully implements what Brecht was seeking—a rupture between the audiences’ identification with the characters on
stage and the adoption of a critical point of view. According to Martin Esslin, Ionesco, for example, presented a more radical version of an alienation effect, about which Ionesco has argued that “the theatre must work with veritable shock tactics; reality itself, the consciousness of the spectator, his habitual apparatus of thought – language – must be Overthrown, dislocated, turned inside out, so that he suddenly comes face to face with a new perception of reality” (Esslin 1961: 142). More recently, with the development of political theater, that is, theater as offering and constructing new possibilities of resistance has become a central issue. For example, the displacing gaze, akin also to Clifford’s “doubling-back,” (1988: 255-56) is enacted in the Spiderwomen Theatre—an experimental and political Native American drama troupe. As explained by Schneider in her discussion of Spiderwomen Theatre:

Doubling-back, myriad “appropriates” are recognized as they are disrupted . . . Their doubling back in fact bears a double meaning. On the one hand, it is a repetition of the technique of mimesis upon the dominant culture that has mimicked them (as if to say, you’ve doubled me now I’ll double you back). But, on the other hand, it is a significant historical counter-analysis, a doubling back as in a retracing of steps to expose something secreted, erased, silenced along the way. (Schneider 2000: 266-67)

Further to the point, based on Victor Turner’s notion of liminality, Broadhurst applies the term to the domain of postmodern theatre, aiming to theorize the aesthetics of “liminal performance.”

By viewing Guo Shixing’s dramas as a cultural performance, I show how the plays reveal the hybridity at play in a certain post-colonial itinerary. The (im)possibility of agency for subjects in China confronting globalism introduces certain strategies that cannot entirely be characterized as either colonized mimicry or resistant to the hegemonic discourses; rather, through self-reflexive enunciation between spaces and locations, Guo goes beyond resistance,
and perhaps enters what Homi Bhabha calls a *third space*, that “space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the constructions of a political subject that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics” (Bhabha 1994: 25).

Whereas the second chapter examines a formally staged cultural performance, the third chapter, entitled “The Recycling of *yang'ge* by Senior Citizen Street Performers,” discusses the dynamics of the Beijing street performances of *yang'ge* by senior citizens as a different but interrelated cultural performance. These performances can be seen as interrelated, first, in that they both (re)present a remembrance, re-creation, or recycling of local, traditional, and/or past cultures. While Guo Shixing’s dramas (re)stage local cultural practices, such as bird connoisseurship and alley banter, the *yang'ge* street dancing recycle certain traditional, regional, and temporal aspects and versions of a popular Chinese dance form.

The plays and *yang'ge* dance, of course, differ in numerous formal aspects. The former has a physically constructed stage, for example, whereas the latter adopts public areas as a performance arena. Primarily professional actors put on the plays, whereas the *yang'ge* dancers consist of amateur recreationists not viewed by the public as performers. The plays have a paying audience who recognized themselves as such; the viewers of the *yang'ge* dancing do not pay admission and most happen upon the performance rather than intending to view it as an audience member. The play begins at a published time and progress according to a scheduled itinerary; the *yang'ge* dancing times are much more fluid and flexible with the start and end times negotiated by circumstances. Despite these differences, issues
concerning the local/global nexus and complexity of discourses (re)presented in the cultural performances are equally salient in both the plays and yang'ge.

In addition, similar to the discussion of Guo Shixing’s dramas in terms of (re)presentation and reflexivity, yang’ge is also described as a complex cultural and social phenomenon not reducible to binary oppositional analysis. At stake in this chapter is how performance provides the opportunity for social sub-groups, in this case senior citizens, to assert their identities or subjectivities in a process involving imagined and real individual and social transformation. In this chapter, I draw in particular on Barbara Meyerhoff’s ethnographic study in which elderly Jews as a marginal group or community are described as creating and interpreting certain identities and values through their Graduation-Siyum—a ceremony marking the attainment of a certain degree of religious education. In a similar way, the senior citizen yang’ge allows the participants to (re)negotiate their social rules and the complex of social norms and values that govern their everyday lives. The performance functions very much like the rituals discussed by Victor Turner, in providing *liminal* and *ludic* roles:

It is the liminal role, in that it places participants ‘betwixt and between’ more permanent social roles and modes of awareness. Its chief characteristic is that it allows the spectator to accept that the events of the production are both real and not real. Hence it is a ludic role (or frame of mind) in the sense that it enables the spectator to participate in playing around with the norms, customs, regulations, laws, which govern her life in society. (Turner 1982a: 11)

In this third chapter, although also adopting a cultural studies approach, I give more consideration to my ethnographic participation in the cultural performance. I view the ethnographic aspects of the production of this chapter with a certain self-reflexivity as suggested by the staged dramas in the previous chapter. When viewing Guo’s plays, sitting in
the formally constructed audience section more clearly delineated my position from the staged action. I watched the characters on stage acting out what I viewed as ethnographic practices. For the yang'ge dances, the lack of a formal stage blurred the spatial and temporal frames of the performance. This blurring created multiple subjectivities, making me at different instances either/both audience and performer and participating in a more explicit ethnographic practice. This type of fluidity from stage to non-stage, from staged ethnography to ethnographic processes in practice, also motivates the juxtaposition of these chapters.

The fourth chapter, “Titanic in China: Transnational Capitalism as Official Ideology?” continues to discuss issues of transnationalism, global/local cultural subjectivities, and cultural performance. Through a detailed exploration of specific cultural practices and discourses constituting the commercial success dubbed the “Titanic miracle” in China, I reveal a key development within China’s cultural industry, namely the emerging collaborations between commercial and official cultural practices and discourses. Furthermore, based on a discussion of the commercial mechanisms of the film industry in China, I illustrate a certain complicity based on the logic of translation capitalism between overseas film studios and Chinese government officials. This chapter suggests that such a complicity between official discourse, global commodification of culture, and the traffic of transnational capitalism, as played out in the Titanic miracle of spring 1998, represents a critical role in China’s contemporary cultural production.

In addition, by adopting the perspective of performance, we can also see how the Hollywood blockbuster is made to perform different complex roles within China’s social and political infrastructure. It performs a certain ideological role, as mentioned by President and
former Chairman Jiang Zemin, and performs less explicitly a role of merging the Party with transnational capitalism. In another sense of the word, Titanic’s performance in the China market is a test of the depths and capitalization of the domestic film market: if the blockbuster performs well, then the China film market can still perform (i.e., turn a profit). The film’s ideological and financial performance merges, so that official ideology performs as transnational capitalism and vice versa in a new flow of exchange that has come to characterize cultural production in China since the late 1990s.

Chapter 5, entitled “Liu Heng’s Garrulous Zhang: Television Performance,” through an analysis of the popular television adaptation of Liu Heng’s The Happy Life of Garrulous Zhang Damin (Pinzui Zhang Damin de xingfu shenghuo 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活) explores a theory of performance for television drama production in Chinese culture during the late 1990s. Performance is evaluated on three different levels. The television series’ mixture of discourses and narratives are analyzed and viewed in terms of their construction of a popular appeal. By viewing the contemporary cultural discourses as performed by and through the television medium, we can better understand the cultural processes which inform and constitute the production and consumption of contemporary Chinese culture. In addition, adopting and applying a notion of performance to the television series highlights the centrality of local performance arts, such as cross-talk, adopted within different media such as television dramas. Another key idea within the chapter, as observed through the comparisons between the short story and television drama, is that the text is already performed by the visual medium, such as film or television. The viewing of these different levels of performance within the television drama production reveals performance as a major social aesthetic constitutive of cultural production in China in the late 1990s.
A theory of performance for contemporary Chinese cultural studies assists in contextualizing and understanding cultural production in relation to various discourses and ideologies. Of even greater importance is the potential for such a theory to navigate, describe, and capture the hybridity of divergent yet interfacing cultures in the late twentieth century. Henry M. Sayre, historian and scholar of the American avant-garde, suggests the term undecidability to better capture the qualities of pluralism including “contingency, multiplicity, and polyvocality which dominates the postmodern scene” (1970: vii). Performance theory assists in the project of describing the plurality and eclecticism of our postmodern condition.
In the recent context of contemporary Chinese performances, and in particular, Chinese drama, the creative agents involved, including the producers, directors, actors, critics, etc., are greatly concerned that their dramas adopt certain global standards of contemporary drama, including dramatic production and criticism. As the dramas become de-territorialized by adopting non-local (global) experimental techniques, theories, practices, etc., Chinese contemporary drama is “ethnicized” without even leaving home. By appropriating global discourses to varying degrees, the localization of the global and its reciprocal process, the globalization of the local, become the constitutive mainstays of Chinese contemporary drama’s local/global nexus.

The cultural criticism of ethnicized cultural performance involves the practices of ethnography. Moreover, the practice of ethnography, since its precondition is de-territorialization, is itself also a type of cultural performance that is always already ethnicized. Discussing ethnography as an ethnicized cultural performance reveals the interplay and the power relations between the ethnographer and the ethnographic subject/object, and as such, the local/global nexus necessarily constitutes the ethnographic process.
This chapter engages the dramas by playwright Guo Shixing 过士行 (1952- ) to examine the local/global nexus of cultural performances in China in the last decade of the twentieth century. I illustrate how his dramas (Birdman and Bad Talk Street in particular), as ethnicized cultural performances, inherently enact the global/local nexus. More importantly, I show that his dramas create a critical space lodged between the global and local by reflexively staging certain ethnographic practices and processes.

**Brief Introduction of the Playwright Guo Shixing and His Dramas**

Born in 1952, Guo Shixing began his career as a drama and performing arts reporter and critic for the *Beijing Evening Post* (*Beijing wanbao* 北京晚报) in 1979. He had just returned to Beijing from the rural northeast (Heilongjiang Province), where he had been sent down to during the Cultural Revolution. Guo, after achieving acclaim as a reporter, adopted the penname Shan Haike (山海客), which he affixed to his cultural critique and commentary. As critic, Guo Shixing had the opportunity to meet numerous influential figures in drama and the performing arts.

His relationship with Lin Zhaohua 林兆华, the celebrated director of the Beijing People’s Art Theater (Beijing renmin yishu juyuan 北京人民艺术剧院), developed first in critical discussions revolving around Gao Xingjian’s 高行健 *Absolute Signal* (*Juedui xinhao 绝对信号*) in 1982 (Lin 1999). Lin later played an important role as Guo’s confidante and mentor. In the late 1980s, after Guo had joined the Beijing People’s Art Theater, Lin assisted in the production of and directed Guo’s first three dramas. These dramas, called *The Trilogy of*
Dilettantes (Xianren san bu qu 闲人三部曲), included Fishman (Yu ren 鱼人) [1989], Birdman (Niao ren 鸟人) [1992], and Chessman (Qi ren 棋人) [1994]. After the performance of Birdman, Guo became resident playwright of Beijing’s Central Experimental Modern Drama Troupe (Zhongyang shiyan huaju yuan中央试验话剧院). His fourth drama, Bad Talk Street (Huai bua yi tiao jie 坏话一条街) [1998], was first performed in 1998 under the direction of Meng Jinghui 孟京辉, resident director at the time of the Central Experimental Modern Drama Troupe.

Although Chinese contemporary spoken drama is beginning to attract more scholarly and popular attention, in comparison to other genres, such as fiction, poetry, and cinema, it is still given less critical consideration. Gao Xingjian and Guo Shixing are crucial pioneers in the search for a unique and mature Chinese dramatic language. Lin Zhaohua, for example, recognizes them as the most important playwrights in contemporary (post-1949) China. “They [Gao Xingjian and Guo Shixing] are the saviors of [Chinese] drama,” states Lin. “The history of Chinese drama would have come to an end without them” (1999: 315). When Lin extolled Guo Shixing and Gao Xingjian together as a pair, Gao Xingjian had not yet been honored with the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature. Internationally acclaimed Chinese dramatist and drama scholar Zhang Lan’ge, likewise, critically acknowledges Guo as one of the most important playwrights of the 20th century in China. “Guo Shixing could not be neglected in any history of twentieth century Chinese drama,” pronounces Zhang. “Emerging in the last decade of the twentieth century, Guo Shixing radically transformed modern Chinese drama at this historical juncture” (1999: 263).
Guo Shixing’s first drama, *Fishman*, adopts the backdrop of fishing replete with local colors cast by local myths, tales, colloquialisms, witticisms, and nursery rhymes. *Fishman* is a multi-layered drama of mythic proportions—man versus nature—and Beckett-esque absurdist and existential overtones. His second drama, *Birdman*, portrays a group of bird fanciers and Peking Opera aficionados, who after becoming the subject of a foreigner’s psychotherapy, turn the table, so to speak. Through an enactment of a Peking Opera vignette, the bird and opera enthusiasts mock the psychotherapist for his moral hypocrisy and cultural ignorance. The drama fuses Western absurdism with the tradition of local Beijing “slice of life” dramas. Critics and audience members applauded Guo for the drama’s display of verbal pyrotechnics, in which the ornate speech of Peking Opera, psycho-babble of the psychotherapist, and Beijing lumpen colloquialisms are all mixed together.

Completing the trilogy, *Chess Players* further develops Guo’s exploration of fusing a local landscape, local language, and local activity together with an existential discourse or philosophy. After the trilogy, Guo concentrated even more on staging a dialogue between the local and the global, the cultural insider and outsider, and artistic versus sociological systems of referentiality. Central Experimental Modern Drama Troupe first staged Guo’s fourth play, *Bad Talk Street*, in September 1998. Directed by media darling Meng Jinghui, the performance enjoyed an active box office and relative critical success. *Bad Talk Street* continues in Guo’s tradition by adopting a local culture as the drama’s backdrop and setting—an alley representative of “old Beijing”—and staging a dialogue with global discourses and theoretical issues.
Display of “Local” Culture(s)

Guo Shixing’s dramas most obviously exhibit a fabric of “local” Chinese culture. This fabric weaves together a spectrum of local color, encompassing the behavioral, cultural, intellectual, and linguistic. The local culture exhibited in Guo’s dramas include local activities such as recreation, leisure, sports, games, and the arts, local politics, local stories (e.g., myths and tales) and local language (e.g., language games, puns, nursery rhymes, rhymes, etc.). All of Guo’s dramas present activities that are seen as unique aspects of Chinese culture, and even more so, of Beijing local culture.

The notion of “local,” of course, can be further dissected into degrees of “localness.” For example, in terms of spatial or temporal specificity, a particular manifestation of the local culture may be specific to different, and perhaps overlapping, geographic regions (e.g., Chinese diaspora, China proper, northeast China, Beijing, etc.), as well as to multiple historical eras. For this reason, a non-Chinese could view the dramas as a presentation of Chinese local culture while a Chinese person from Shanghai could at the same time view the drama as demonstrating Beijing local culture. Similarly, young Chinese from Beijing may identify with certain features of the local culture, but they would view other aspects of the local culture as belonging to a Beijing of the past.

Guo Shixing’s Trilogy of Dilettantes first and foremost features xianren (闲人). This term’s rich cultural tradition renders it challenging to translate. In general, the term carries connotations of leisure, pleasure, and recreation. It can also embody both positive and negative senses. For example, a xianren, as an amateur, may engage in calligraphy to pursue
the lofty goals of artistic and personal refinement. A *xianren*, however, may also be viewed disparagingly as a social burden, as an individual who has nothing better to do than fritter time away dabbling in socially unproductive recreation. For example, the fashionable expression “闲着没事” (*xian zhe mei shi*), which can be roughly rendered into English as “bored silly,” captures this disapproving connotation. In Guo Shixing’s dramas, we glimpse these various sides, often intertwined, of the *xianren*. Each of Guo’s dramas in the trilogy showcases various *xianren* activities or pastimes: bird connoisseurship in *Birdman*, fishing in *Fishman*, and playing chess in *Chessman*. These local activities display their own set of culturally specific conventions and knowledge, including, for example, the conventions guiding the activities, the knowledge necessary to partake in them, and the pleasures derived from such participation.

**Bird Connoisseurship**

*Birdman*, for example, stages the local conventions and knowledge that define the connoisseurship of birds. Importantly, bird connoisseurship, as presented on stage, is not just a simple pastime or hobby. Rather, it is a systematic order of knowledge that requires transmission by a master. For example, proper bird connoisseurship requires knowledge about different types of birds, orthodox bird tunes, proper methods to train the birds to sing, and an extensive code of how to interact with and derive pleasure from the birds.

In the drama’s community of bird connoisseurs, there are four different parties: the master (San Ye 三爷), the amateur enthusiast (Fatty 胖子), the novice transgressor (Manager Sun 孙经理), and the aficionados or San Ye’s cronies, including Lark Zhang (百灵张),
second in command after San Ye, the blue-collar worker Huang Dan (黄胆), Zhu Dian’er (朱点儿), the wheel-chaired Ma Liao’er (马料儿), and the cadre Lao Xi’er (老锡儿). A process of pedagogical transmission of bird connoisseurship from San Ye to his cronies (also from San Ye and his cronies to Fatty and from Fatty to Manager Sun) demonstrates the conventions and knowledge of bird connoisseurship. San Ye’s bird connoisseurship sermons and Fatty’s attempts at acquiring the erudition necessary to be part of the group, highlight the specificity of these conventions and knowledge.

Fatty is a devoted bird enthusiast who espouses the personal benefits of raising (yang niao 养鸟) and keeping (liu niao 遛鸟) birds. San Ye and his cronies treat Fatty, however, as an outsider because he is from Tianjin. This is not simply because he is new to the group of bird connoisseurs. Rather, the conventions of bird connoisseurship in Tianjin bear slight differences from those adhered to by this particular local community in Beijing.

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*Lark Zhang:* [To Fatty] Hey pal, babbling thrushes stay on the other side!  
*Fatty:* [Puzzled] What? I can’t come over here?  
*Lark Zhang:* Isn’t your bird from Tianjin? Beijing’s larks mustn’t sing babbling thrush songs.  
*Fatty:* How can your larks be true larks without singing babbling thrush songs!  
*Lark Zhang:* In Tianjin, larks must sing babbling thrush songs. But Beijing’s different. Here, the “thirteen-song sequence” doesn’t include babbling thrush songs. These men are all raising larks to sing the full song sequence. Now, please step away.  
*Fatty:* What is this thirteen-song sequence?  

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*张百灵:* 冲胖子! 玩儿画眉的人在那边儿。  
*胖子:* 不解地 怎么啦? 我也不能在这儿?  
*张百灵:* 您是天津卫的吧? 北京的百灵不许叫画眉。  
*胖子:* 不叫画眉, 口不全啊! 那叫嘛百灵!  

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"Thirteen-song sequence" refers to a sequence of bird songs that is traditionally associated with larks. In this context, it highlights the cultural and social differences between Tianjin and Beijing, as well as the specific conventions of bird connoisseurship in each place.
A grilling of Fatty’s knowledge proceeds to see if he has the necessary knowledge to become a qualified member of the local bird connoisseurs’ coterie.

Lao Xi’er: I’ll ask the first one. Why do you spread sand at the bottom of a lark’s cage?

Fatty: That’s an easy one! Larks originally lived in the desert. They were born in the desert and grew up in the desert. They are never away from the sand. This is simply a matter of not flying far from one’s roost. Life may be great abroad, but we still can’t bear to leave behind our dilapidated homes and broken roof tiles.

Ma Liao’er: Can’t you do better than that! Even a kindergarten could answer such a simple one. I’ll show you how it should be done. Get ready! Why do you put a small rostrum in a lark’s cage?

Fatty: It’s called the Phoenix Rostrum. The feet of the lark can’t grab onto bars. From birth it was this little critter running on the sand. Just think, are there any trees in the desert? They are not like us, always thinking about climbing to higher branches. Therefore, we have to give them a rostrum, a stage for them to strut on and show off their stuff.

Lark Zhang: Don’t treat him like such a...
knucklehead! Ask him more difficult questions. What is the lark’s greatest taboo behavior?

**Fatty:** The greatest taboo for a lark is to sing without first getting on the rostrum.

**Huang Dan:** Why? What’s the difference?

**Fatty:** Only amateurs sing off stage! Stars sing on stage!

**Fatty:** The greatest taboo for a lark is to sing without first getting on the rostrum.

得问点儿高难的。百灵最大的忌讳是什么？

最大忌讳是不上台，老在台下叫。

台下叫怎么不行呢？不一样吗？

台下唱，那是票友儿！台上唱，那才是角儿！(78)

Fatty is just the first among a series of uninvited intruders who threaten the coterie’s bird connoisseurship by introducing elements that can impart a corruptive influence on their birds. For example, Fatty scolds Xiao Xia (小霞) for wearing red, which will scare away the larks. When Dr. Chen, the ornithologist, approaches, Lark Zhang says: “Who knows what you’ve got stuffed away? You may even have a toad. Its croaks would spoil all of our larks” (77).

Similarly, when Ding Baolin, the psychotherapist who establishes a psychotherapeutic clinic and adopts the bird connoisseurs as his patients, approaches the coterie, he is also asked whether he has brought any forbidden items, such as toads or canaries. The bird connoisseurs are afraid that their birds’ singing will be corrupted. “They [the forbidden items] can all make noises,” says Lao Xi’er. “As soon as the larks here the noises, they will learn it and their singing will be sullied (脏了口). There’s no way to keep a sullied bird” (81). Fatty does prove he has the knowledge needed to be considered at least a novice bird connoisseur. However, since his bird was trained according to Tianjin conventions, Fatty’s bird is not considered orthodox. Fatty is still a bird enthusiast, and he seeks to learn the singing conventions adhered to by this Beijing coterie. The most important
singing skill for the birds is the “thirteen-song sequence” (shi san tao 十三套). Fatty implores the coterie to impart their knowledge by demonstrating the “thirteen songs.”

Zhu Dian’er: I’ll give it a go! [Clearing his voice] Sparrow chirping in the forest, magpie fleeing the forest, the marsh tit hopping across branches, the purple swallow returning to nest, kitten loving its mother, sparrow hawk spiraling, the bluethroat longing to roost . . . I’ve forgotten the rest.

Fatty: [Enthrallingly] What about “the water cart flattening a dog”———zhì zhì niú niú followed by wāng wāng.

Lark Zhang: That is only for the clear-chirp larks in the southern part of the city. The pure-chirp* larks in the northern part of the city aren’t permitted to sing that. It would be sullied singing. ** Much scholarship went into this. The thirteen songs must obey a certain sequence. The songs can’t be sung out of order. That would then be called “dead singing.” For example, even for mountain magpies, the “crossing the sky” and “descending into the forest” songs are different. The “crossing the sky” song goes gāi—gāi; The “descending into the forest” goes like this: gāi—jjjjjjjjj, gāi—jjjjjjjjjjjjjjj.

Lark Zhang continues to exhibit for Fatty his high level of erudition and his bird’s orthodox training. Then, San Ye, the coterie’s assumed ringleader arrives and is greeted with

* Refers to the performance of folk art without the use of obscene or risqué language. ** Here “dirty” also has the connotation of obscene, but the lingo essentially means “unorthodox,” referring to those chirps and songs not permitted by the traditions and conventions.

(82)
enthusiastic admiration. His position is made clear as his cronies nod to his immediate
critical evaluation of the bird’s singing: “That series of singing is not detailed enough. Your
hongzi doesn’t have a qiangqiang sound, so it is not complete” (84). San Ye immediately
assumes the role of mentor, displacing Lark Zhang, and begins sermonizing about the more
arcane points of bird connoisseurship by introducing his southern hongzi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Ye</th>
<th>What is a southern hongzi? First we must know about the eastern hongzi.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>That’s right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| San Ye | Those from Shandong Province are called eastern hongzi. They don’t
|        | have the right singing style.                                       |
| Dr. Chen | [Writing in a notebook] What’s this singing style? |
| San Ye | You really are a fledgling. The singing style includes many tunes
|        | such as zimu qiang, qigen qiang, qiang qiang gunr, qiang qiang hong... |
| Dr. Chen | Mss. what音儿? |
| San Ye | So what is the difference between the eastern hongzi and the southern
|        | hongzi? The singing of the eastern hongzi is fast and heavy. The singing
|        | of the southern hongzi is slow yet tender: Xixi——gunr, xixi——gunr,
|        | xi——xi. Those from Henan are called southern hongzi. Why are those from
|        | Henan so much better? The place makes all the difference. Why is it easier to
|        | get hooked on Henan opera than Shandong opera? The east just can’t compare
|        | with the south.                                                     |
| San Ye | The southern hongzi are south of Xingtai. Where’s my hongzi from?
|        | The place where the famous general Lin Xiangru turned his carriage
|        | around and headed back.                                             |

三爷: [白陈一眼] 什么叫南路红子？那先得说什么是东路红子。
是，是。
三爷: 山东产的叫东路红子，没腔腔音儿。
三爷: 再说东路红子和南路红子有什么不同。东路红子音儿快，沉；南路红
子音儿慢，娇。“西西——棍儿，西西——棍儿，西——西”。
河南产的都叫南路红子。这河南产的为什么好？一方水土养一方人，您听河南梆子就比
山东吕剧过瘾，为什么？东路不如南路。
三爷: 再说东路红子和南路红子有什么不同。东路红子音儿快，沉；南路红
子音儿慢，娇。“西西——棍儿，西西——棍儿，西——西”。
河南产的都叫南路红子。这河南产的为什么好？一方水土养一方人，您听河南梆子就比
山东吕剧过瘾，为什么？东路不如南路。
三爷: [用小本记录] 什么叫音儿？
这没办法记。
三爷: 这没办法记。
Swallow Zhang: Handan? It’s in Hebei Province.

百灵张：那不是邯郸吗？属河北省。

San Ye: The hongzi there don’t sing jiu jinr. The southern birds are not necessarily better the further south you go. Now there are already hongzi in Beijing from Anhui. You all have to be careful. If hongzi from Vietnam come to Beijing, everything is sure to be all wrong . . .

三爷：哎，这儿的红子不叫“啾啾儿”。南路可不是越往南越好，现在有安徽的红子进了北京，各位可得仔细，要是越南红子都进了北京，个位就别听了，肯定全是错儿。

San Ye: The hongzi have ten taboos. First are those related to language including: jiu, xi, bu, duo, dan. They are not permitted to sing jiu jinr, xixi, but xixi gunr or xixi hong are okay. Xixi alone is not allowed. They are not permitted to sing bubu, duo yinr, and dan pianr. What is duo yinr? It is putting too many sounds together. For example, if the correct sound is xixi gunr, xixi gunr and the sound becomes xixixi gunr with an extra xi, this is called duo yinr. It’s not allowed! Then what is dan pianr? If xixi gunr becomes xi gunr, with one xi cut out, this is called dan pianr. It is a mistake. . . .

那些是语言上的错误。现在我来说行为上的错误。它们叫做chou, shan, gun, duo, fan: acting silly, trembling, rolling, tail-biting, and flipping somersaults. The first two are illnesses.

San Ye: The latter three are problems with temperament. The bird is shackled to correct its bad temperament.

三爷：后三种是脾气。拴，就是要把它这点儿性子给拴过来。
Following Fatty’s suggestion, Manager Sun succeeds in buying a bird, but he selects a *yu niao* that is not one of the types of birds raised by the bird connoisseurs. Fatty advises that the bird be put away so as to avoid corrupting the other birds with its heterodox sounds. Despite the precautionary measures, the *yu niao* manages to squeak out a sound. This infuriates Lark Zhang, who thereupon steps on and crushes Manager Sun’s newly bought canary due to its “dirty mouth.” Then, Lark Zhang’s lark suddenly imitates the canary’s heterodox call. This causes Lark Zhang to kill the bird in a fit of irritation: “I’ve raised this bird for three years and it has not made a single ‘dirty sound’ until today. If I’m anyone at all, I’ll never raise another bird!” (96). Lark Zhang’s action displays how the value of the bird is intricately linked with its adherence to certain behavioral codes, which are determined by the coterie’s bird connoisseurship cultural values.

*The Chainlink Between Bird Connoisseurship and Peking Opera*

Another important type of “local” culture presented in *Birdman* is Peking Opera. The indigenous opera form serves different functions within the drama, one of which is to form an analogy with the practices of bird connoisseurship. San Ye is not only the ringleader of the coterie of bird connoisseurs, but he is also a former Peking Opera star who regularly entertains his pals by displaying his knowledge and skills of Peking Opera. The practices of bird connoisseurship and amateur Peking Opera enthusiasm are not at all strange companions; the two are common leisure activities for the *xianren*, especially in Beijing park culture. San Ye, as the master of the two arts, functions as the major link between the worlds of bird connoisseurship and Peking Opera. The coterie’s cronies not only beseech San Ye to
bestow knowledge about birds upon them, but they also request that he perform Peking Opera for them. San Ye, therefore, performs the roles as both the group’s ringleader and the group’s lead entertainer.

Ding Baoluo: [Standing up] Allow me to ask why you’ve selected this act? 丁保罗：站起 我提个问题，你为什么要搞这出戏？
San Ye: This act contains a section of xipi kuaiban* with a very melodious strain. It was learned from birds. 三爷：这算问着了。这里边有段西皮快板，里面有句腔儿，好听，味足，它是从鸟儿那儿来的。
Ding Baoluo: How can you say that? 丁保罗：这从何说起？
San Ye: Jin Shaosan learned this strain from birds. . . . 三爷：这句腔儿是金三爷跟鸟儿学的。
San Ye: [Eyes glistening, singing with great intensity] Upon seeing Luocheng, I bite my teeth in rage; 我为你花费多少财，
I scold the shameless lackey.
Do you recall stepping on broken tiles?
Do you recall your flight to Luoyang?
I built a magnificent palace for you.
How much wealth did I expend on you! . . .
小霞：我听不像鸟，倒像是个老虎，拴着呢，还想咬人！
San Ye: Wow! You really know your operas! 三爷：嘿！真有懂戏的！好汉单雄信就像一条猛虎，
The hero Shan Xiongxin is just like a tiger. When he sets his eyes upon an ungrateful disciple, he is filled with great anger. He can only think of taking a bite out of someone before he is executed. . .
“我为你花费多少财”，
San Ye: The line “how much wealth did I expend on you!” is copied from birds. 三爷：这句就是跟鸟儿学的。
Fatty: What type of bird? 跟什么鸟？

* Xipi kuaiban is one of the two main types of musical accompaniment in Chinese opera. The hu qin 胡琴 is used as the chief accompanying instrument.
San Ye:  Hongzi.
Fatty:  Hongzi?
San Ye:  The high pitches of the *hongzi* inspired Jin Shaoshan. He changed this line to a higher pitch . . . “For you . . .” (100)

The bird connoisseurs personify their birds in training them to sing by adopting techniques used in the training of Peking Opera singers. Here we see how Peking Opera is also dependent upon the birds. San Ye explains how the acclaimed Peking Opera star Jin Shaoshan adopted a certain singing style from a *hongzi*. The metal chain, as one of the key props that circulates throughout the drama, analogously links man and bird together in an existential bond. San Ye is shackled when he plays Shan Xiongxin in the Peking Opera *Locking Five Dragons* (*Suo wu long* 锁五龙). For Xiao Xia, San Ye more closely resembles a bird than the Peking Opera star Jin Shaoshan:

Xiao Xia:  You all say San Ye looks like some man named Jin something or other. I’ve never seen that man, but to me, San Ye looks more like a bird.
Fatty:  How can you say that!
Xiao Xia:  If you don’t believe me, just take a look at the way he is standing and the chain around his neck . . .
San Ye:  [Looks down at the chain and weighs it with his hand. A metal-sounding reverberation emanates out] My girl, you’ve hit the mark. We shackle up birds in order to have them sing. When I put the chain on, I have to sing as well!

小霞:  你们说三爷像金什么山，我没见过这个人，我看三爷倒有点儿像鸟儿。
胖子:  这是怎么说话！
小霞:  不信你看，这站着的架式，这脖子上的链子···
三爷:  [低头看了看身上的铁链，用手掂了掂，铁链发出金属的响声] 姑娘，你说得对，咱们拴住鸟儿，是为了让它叫，我戴上这个，也得唱啊！ (99)
Fatty, as pointed out, is the enthusiast who desires to learn about the local Beijing culture of bird connoisseurship as it differs from Tianjin’s. Moreover, as an amateur Peking Opera performer, he also wishes to learn from San Ye and even to be San Ye’s successor (“Give [pass] this act to me” (101)). In an effort to imitate San Ye, who had just shackled himself while performing the Peking Opera act, Fatty enthusiastically puts the chains on himself. By putting on the chain, Fatty is metaphorically linking himself to San Ye and the tradition of Peking Opera. The chain represents a pedagogical process. When Fatty chains himself, he not only expresses his intent to learn Peking Opera, but he also represents himself as a bird, waiting to be taught calls or songs.

The Cultural Outsiders, Global Discourses, and Psychoanalysis

The constant interplay between the different cultural positions of characters in the drama lends *Birdman* its dynamism. Fatty, as already discussed, is the outsider trying to gain admittance to the coterie, epitomized by his desire to be San Ye’s successor. The other “outsider” characters are dependent upon the group of bird connoisseurs in different ways. In this sense, their lives are already interconnected in a rather absurd web of interdependence. Dr. Chen, the ornithologist, seeks to preserve knowledge about birds. He documents what he learns from the bird connoisseurs, and he ultimately seeks to preserve for antiquity a rare bird species by stuffing it as a taxidermic specimen. His division from the bird connoisseurs is highlighted by the dichotomies between observing/participating, book knowledge/common knowledge, and theory/practice. As an observer, Dr. Chen believes that the bird connoisseurs treat the birds with cruelty, since the birds are trained to sing for
the trainers’ enjoyment (78). From the point of view of the bird connoisseurs, they mock Dr. Chen for knowing so little about birds in practice (“That’s new. An ornithologist doesn’t know what to feed birds”) (79). The dichotomy also appears at the written/oral level. Dr. Chen attempts to document the lectures given by San Ye, but he ultimately has to give up, exclaiming “There’s no way to jot this down” (85).

Whereas the coterie of bird connoisseurs is a bastion of “local” knowledge, Dr. Chen, in contrast, is a warehouse of “universal” scientific knowledge about birds. He also embraces “global” ecological concerns. For example, when Manager Sun picks out his bird because he wishes to engage in the bird connoisseur activities, the bird is selected based on its appearance. While Fatty criticizes the choice as improper, Dr. Chen supports it on ecological grounds:

Fatty: This is a canary! A bird connoisseur would never raise this kind of bird.

Manager Sun: It’s really pretty.

Dr. Chen: The Spaniards discovered this type of bird in the fourteenth century in the northern African archipelago Canary Islands. Therefore, the birds are named after the islands. The “canary” belongs to genus *Serinus* and the family *Fringillidae*. The aristocrats of Europe much admired this type of bird. Now many pure breeds are raised in Germany, Japan, and the United States. Several mixed breeds are raised in China’s Shandong and Yangzhou. I support raising this type of bird because they can be artificially bred and will therefore not impact
Charley, an inspector from the International Bird Protection Society, is in China with the special mission of observing the state of bird protection in China. When he first observes the activities of the coterie of bird connoisseurs, he is disturbed by their use of chains to shackle the birds (87). In the concluding scene, he confers an accolade upon Dr. Chen for his work in ornithological preservation in China. Both Dr. Chen and Charley represent certain discourses explicitly informed by “global” knowledge—ornithology as a “universal” science and animal preservation as a “global” effort.

Similarly, Ding Baoluo also enters the scene ostensibly representing a “globally” informed discourse and practice—namely, psychoanalysis. Whereas the main object of observation for Dr. Chen and Charley are the birds, Ding adopts the bird connoisseurs themselves as the subject of his psychoanalysis. All three “outsiders” are also clearly exploiting the coterie of bird connoisseurs to further their own careers and disciplinary pursuits (“As a researcher of psychoanalysis, or scholar of psychosis, the only way up is by returning to my native country” (91)). Ding enlists the services of the migrant Xiao Xia, who had been offering her housekeeping services, and prepares to establish a practice.
“Birdman psychology rehabilitation center” (Niaoren xinli kangfu zhongxin 鸟人心理康复中心) in the space formerly occupied by this coterie of bird connoisseurs.

**Ding Baoluo:** These are the people we want to take as our patients. I see them as “birdmen.” Other than their feelings for birds, these birdmen have only a frail consideration for other people. And when they do, it’s usually only a hostile one.

**Xiao Xia:** How could they become like this?

**Ding Baoluo:** It is very complicated. Have you heard of psychoanalysis?

**Xiao Xia:** Schizophrenia?

**Ding Baoluo:** No, that is something different. It refers to those who have gone mad. Many people who appear normal, although they may not be truly mad, are still inflicted with psychological problems. Psychoanalysis is a type of cure for such people. Psychoanalysis, by revealing the causes, can change them into people who can act with love towards others. . . .

These bird connoisseurs all definitely carry scars from their early childhood memories. The fact that so many people here live so intimately with birds precisely reflects the problems of our country on a deeper psychological level. If successful with the psychoanalysis, we would not only save a few bird connoisseurs, but also an entire race with a glorious past.
Ding Baoluo, playing the role of the savior, suggests the application of “scientific” methods learned from the West can save the Chinese people. The (self-)construction of the Oriental other as inflicted with a disease, whether physical or psychological, is a familiar trope, as is the construction of the foreign-educated cultural savior. Guo’s staging of such stereotyped constructions does not simply aim to mock them; rather, as we will see, through reflexive dramatic techniques, Guo puts on trial the ontological underpinnings of an essentialist view of transcultural hermeneutics.

The bird connoisseurs are initially reluctant to be co-opted as the patients of Ding’s psychoanalysis. However, in a comical twist, they agree when Ding promises to compensate them with free room and board, medical care, and most importantly, free care for their birds.

San Ye, however, expresses reluctance and skepticism:

Ding Baoluo: My dear friends, psychoanalysis has more than seventy years of history overseas. But here in China, there is nothing about psychoanalysis at all. What is psychoanalysis? We learn about your past through conversation. Then, by relieving you of any psychological burdens, you can return to a normal life.

San Ye: Chatting to help one unwind? This has been done outside China for only seventy years?! That is really behind the times!

San Ye is not impressed by what Ding is purveying as a “modern” practice. Rather, San Ye inverts the power relationship. He does this by claiming that the rest of the world—referring to the West—is “behind the times,” since China has been “chatting to unwind” for
ages. The bird connoisseurs are not the only people to be subjected to Ding’s psychoanalysis. Ding also diagnoses Dr. Chen as a voyeur. In one of the drama’s most farcical scenes, Ding, by promising to throw in certain perks, convinces the ornithologist to join the group as a patient:

Ding Baoluo: You are a voyeur.

Dr. Chen: [With a slight pause] How'd you know?

Ding Baoluo: Stay with us. I can use psychoanalysis to treat you and relieve you of your suffering. . . .

Dr. Chen: For free?

Ding Baoluo: Of course. Also, since you have a senior rank, you can enjoy the remuneration of a senior intellectual.

Dr. Chen: What does this remuneration include?

Ding Baoluo: Eating well . . . You’ll live in a nice place. You’ll have your own room with a modern bathroom. No one will disturb you.

Dr. Chen: This surpasses my current standard of living.

Ding Baoluo: You can enjoy certain special privileges for intellectuals. You are permitted to view the banned books Jin Ping Mei and Carnal Prayer Mat, and you can even watch porn films. . . .

Dr. Chen: There’s a porn film called Man and Beasts. It’s about the relationship between man and animals. Because I’m a zoologist, I want to learn about . . .

Ding Baoluo: All your needs will be satisfied.
Just consider it a part of your professional training. The care you provide intellectuals surpasses even the government’s! . . . It is even better than that provided by the Academy of Sciences. I suspect you may be a little crazy yourself.

Dr. Chen: The care you provide intellectuals surpasses even the government’s! . . . It is even better than that provided by the Academy of Sciences. I suspect you may be a little crazy yourself.

Dr. Chen: Why is Fatty shackled with the metal chain?

Ding Baoluo: This is called sympathetic transference. It is a subconscious process in which one imitates an idol. At the same time, one transfers the feelings one has for the idolized to things used by the idol. This metal chain is greatly admired by Fatty. As soon as Fatty puts on the prop used by San Ye, the one whom he idolizes, Fatty feels as if he actually turns into San Ye.

Ding Baoluo: 这个胖子为什么捆着铁链?

 outbreak. 你对知识分子的照顾超过了国家。

这里比科学院还理想，我真怀疑您本人是不是有病？(106-107)

This farcical exchange is pinned on a shared cultural knowledge or cultural memory in which intellectuals were reprimanded for or prevented from conducting research or academic pursuits in areas deemed impure by the State. In this scene, the intellectual is mocked for his prurient interest in pornography and bestiality, and the State is ridiculed for not providing intellectuals with sufficient material benefits. Dr. Chen is willing to be party to Ding’s psychotherapy only if compensated in a way that makes up for certain wants, which had been previously unfulfilled by the State to intellectual or research scientist in China.

For Ding Baoluo, Fatty’s self-shackling with the metal chain, in imitation of San Ye, is a symptom of Fatty’s psychological disorder.

Ding Baoluo: 这叫仿同情节，是一种潜意识过程，模仿他所崇拜的人，同时还具有移情仿同，从崇拜某个人，到崇拜某个人用过的东西。这副铁链就是这位胖子非常崇拜的，这个戴眼罩人用过的京剧道具，胖子戴上它，通过模仿，来抚慰自己，一下就觉得他自己就是他崇拜的那个人。 (108)
The absurdity of imposing a global discourse of psychotherapy upon the local culture’s bird connoisseurs is illustrated in Ding’s initial attempt to psychoanalyze the statements made by Fatty, when he is undergoing the therapy. A few moments after Fatty, reclining with blindfold affixed, enters a dream-like trance, Ding begins the psychoanalytical treatment:

**Ding Baoluo**: Where were you just now?  
**Fatty**: Gou bu li.  
**Ding Baoluo**: You curse people even in your sleep. This is resistance to the analysis.  
**Dr. Chen**: Gou bu li? That sounds very familiar. Yes, I’ve remembered it. It seems like that is a place that sells famous stuffed buns.

Ding lacks the local cultural knowledge of *Gou bu li* being the most famous type of “stuffed buns” (*baozi* 包子) in Tianjin. Therefore, he misconstrued Fatty’s statement as representing resistance to his treatment. This scene mocks a cultural insider-outsider who assumes his patients need treatment without even knowing the culture of his patients. By introducing a cultural signifier not easily interpreted and co-opted by the psychoanalytical treatment, Fatty’s comment mocks the imposed “global” scientific discourse. In so doing, the intonation of “stuffed buns” provides a form of resistance. The treatment continues in the same vein with Ding misunderstanding all of the cultural references.

**Ding Baoluo**: Who do you see?  
**Fatty**: “I know the names of those in higher positions. I also know the
names of those in lower positions.”

Ding Baoluo: Can you tell me who they are? 丁保罗：告诉我可以吗？
Xiao Xia: “Don’t even think I’d sell out my comrades!” 小霞：让我出卖同志，休想！

Ding Baoluo: How can you interrupt like that?! 丁保罗：你怎么随便插话？
Xiao Xia: Fatty was reciting the lines of Jiang Jie. 小霞：他说的是江姐的台词。

Ding Baoluo: Who is Jiang Jie? 丁保罗：什么江姐？
Dr. Chen: Jiang Jie was a heroine in a revolutionary novel that was popular in China before. She said this famous line while being interrogated by the enemy. This novel was later turned into a film with Yu Lan starring as Jiang Jie. 陈博士：这是在大陆风行一时的革命小说里面的一位英雄，她在被敌人审讯时说了这句很著名的话。这部小说后来被拍成电影，于蓝扮演江姐。 (109)

Ding Baoluo misses the fact that Fatty is mocking the psychoanalytical process by playing the role of the famous revolutionary heroine Jiang Jie and citing well known lines from an interrogation scene of the film version of her life. Interestingly, whereas most of the members of the audience across generations are familiar with the brand of stuffed buns, the younger generation in the audience, namely those born after the Cultural Revolution, may not necessarily be familiar with the reference to Jiang Jie. This also creates an interesting issue of identification for the audience, in which the audience members identify with different levels and specificities of local culture, knowledge, and experience. After listening to Fatty’s dribble during their “session,” Ding Baoluo diagnoses Fatty as suffering from a classic Oedipus complex (113) with homicidal tendencies.

By contrast, Ding diagnoses San Ye with compulsive disorders: “He [San Ye] has a compulsive teaching disorder. He really hopes to pass Peking Opera to a successor. If he can’t find the right person, then he won’t be able to have any peace of mind. Without
anyone to teach, he uses his knowledge to teach birds instead. The result is that he teaches birds as if they were his true disciples instead. . .” (114).

Ding Baoluo subjects San Ye to the same psychoanalytical techniques as those used with Fatty. When San Ye recounts dreaming about birds, Ding interprets San Ye’s absorption with birds as symptomatic of an obsession with didactic transmission and succession.

_Ding Baoluo:_ Birds again. This is your surrogate for didactic fanaticism and your search for disciples. All you need are these birds to be satisfied?

_San Ye:_ That depends on their language. A bird’s not worth much if it just croaks like a toad. But if its makes two _futian’er_* chirps like a cicada [imitates the sound of a cicada], then it’s a real prize.

_Ding Baoluo:_ What is so great about these two chirps?

_San Ye:_ In the deep winter, snowflakes blow outside, bleak with the withered trees and fading sunlight. The stove’s flame inside burns bright; I steep a pot of _biluochun_ tea. As soon as the bluethroat chirps _futian’er_, it is like being at a waterweed pond with willows on the bank...

_San Ye:_ The _futian’er_ call must not have the three _futian’er_ chirps. The bird should chirp the late autumn chirp, called the “autumn chill.” As the days get cooler and cooler, the cicada’s days are numbered. Therefore, the chirps are all waning sounds. (San Ye imitates the...

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* _Futian_ 伏天 refers to summer days. When birds chirp _futian_, the sound conjures up the warmer days of the year, and literally three _futian_ 三伏天 refers to the hottest part of the summer, or the “dog days.” This is why San Ye later says the birds cannot chirp _futian_ three times.
“autumn chill” call: fu₁tian’er⁵.

**Ding Baoluo:** That’s . . .

**San Ye:** The chirp carries this desolate feeling, just like Yang Baoseng’s wailing.

**Ding Baoluo:** What other birds are good?

**San Ye:** Hongzi. This bluethroat is a master at studying the language of others. There’s nothing it can’t do. But the hongzi is the most dignified, and it’s not willing to imitate other birds. Rather, it only wants to be imitated by all other birds. . .

**Ding Baoluo:** Let me analyze this. You are always living in the past. In the winter, you are nostalgic of the autumn, and you torment yourself with a feeling of desolation. It is obvious that no one wants to listen to Peking Opera. However, you are just as dignified as the hongzi and insist upon your own ways.

**Ding Baoluo:** 我来分析一下: 你这个人总是生活在过去, 冬天的时候留恋秋天, 用一种凄凉的感觉折磨自己。明明京剧已经没有人要听了, 可你就是像红子一样的有节气, 偏偏坚持自己的那一套。

(116)

Ding continues to “psychoanalyze” San Ye, explaining the parallels between San Ye and his birds and the transference thereof. According to Ding, San Ye started to train birds to perform out of fear for getting old and messing up his opera performance. Training the birds is a counter-measure for San Ye’s own weakening performance ability and what San Ye perceives as the decline of the art form in general. In addition, San Ye also trains the birds because he can find no true successor of his Peking Opera art. According to Ding, this psychological state and related practices all stem from the fact that Ding is impotent, literally, but also in terms of cultural authority: “The most important thing is that your vitality . . . as a man is no longer of any use” (117).
Based on his analysis, Ding predicts that San Ye will have one “last performance” to compensate for his “impotence”: “You will use a different method to prove yourself. The exact venue is not yet clear. You will sing for the last time. When you have finished singing, that will be just about the end for you” (117). The issue here is not whether Ding’s “psychoanalysis” of San Ye is accurate or truthful. Rather, it is clear that Guo is dramatizing a dialogue between worlds, cultures, minds, and discourses. What Guo stages, however, is not simply the somewhat absurd result produced when disparate cultures encounter each other. Rather, of greater importance are the issues of authority and power that accompany the discourse of “psychoanalysis,” whose authority derives from it being “scientific,” “modern,” “global,” and “Western” in origin.

The Inner Performance: Psychoanalysis on Trial
San Ye is accustomed to being the kingpin, as both the ringleader of the coterie of bird connoisseurs and as the admired Peking opera leading light. San Ye intervenes with Ding’s “colonizing” clinical discourse by adopting a persona in a Peking Opera play and putting Ding on trial. San Ye relies upon the conventions of a local performance culture to interrogate Ding’s psychoanalytical project and exhibit Ding’s illiteracy of the local culture. Where San Ye really gains an upper hand, however, is that in the performance he proves that he is a very quick learner. Within the impromptu performance of the Peking Opera act, San Ye shows how he had assimilated different aspects of the psychoanalytical practice.

Through the Peking Opera act, we again see how the chain links the human and bird worlds. Previously, the chain represented animal cruelty to Charley, while it symbolized the
psychosis of Fatty—emblematic of the Chinese people—to Ding. The chain is used to shackle Huang Mao (Xiao Xia's husband), when he is caught trying to pawn off the nationally protected rare bird that Dr. Chen had set out to preserve. However, San Ye adopts Huang Mao as his disciple and successor on account of his appearance (yellowish hair) and his strong, yet totally untrained, voice. The chain’s use as the tool to shackle a criminal is instantly transformed into an emblem of the performer. San Ye demands Huang Mao’s release, yet only so that he can train Huang Mao as his successor in Peking Opera: “How could I let a talent like this go? If he were let go, what would ever happen to Peking Opera? There is a real shortage of hualian!” (123). Huang Mao, an outlaw just the previous moment, is thus shackled to the rigorous training necessary to adhere to the local performance culture. His legs are tied in strenuous training positions—like man like bird. The psychoanalysis that San Ye ostensibly mocked appears self-prophetic.

According to his “psychoanalysis,” which reveals Fatty’s Oedipal complex and San Ye’s death wish, Ding predicts Fatty will murder San Ye. Ding founds this prediction in part on the “clinical” session. It is also based on the Peking Opera in which San Ye plays Shan Xiongxin, who is beheaded by Li Shimin (as played by Fatty). San Ye not only refutes the analysis for being based on “drama,” but he also turns to a drama himself as a rebuttal against Ding’s “science-based” forecasts.

_Ding Baoluo:_ This is science.
_San Ye:_ Science? This is simply a court trial. I can do the same thing.
_Ding Baoluo:_ How can you?
_San Ye:_ I have no use for your Western chatting techniques. Peking Opera

_丁保罗:_ 这是科学。
_三爷:_ 什么科学？不就是过堂吗？我也会。
_丁保罗:_ 你怎么会的？
_三爷:_ 我还不用你那套洋聊天儿，我就用咱们京剧，
In the Peking Opera act, San Ye adopts the conventions and language of a trial as a rebuttal and to interrogate Ding. Just as Ding misread the local cultural references in his “psychoanalysis” of Fatty, Ding is the outsider to the conventions of Peking Opera and the trial genre. Fatty provides Ding with cues, such as kneeling upon entrance and raising one’s head at the appropriate time to say “I dare not,” after San Ye asks Ding to raise his head for the first time (132). However, San Ye does not seek to reprimand Ding simply for being an un-informed outsider to the various cultural codes and conventions. San Ye adopts one of the traditional methods of reprimand and has Ding flogged forty times across the hands (administered by the bird connoisseurs). The reason for the flogging cited by San Ye is that Ding’s introduction of Freud’s Oedipal complex theory brought insinuations of wild and inhuman activities: “This type of bestial behavior, why did you bring it upon my court?” (133) A broader interpretation is that San Ye exacts a punishment upon Ding for hypocritically imposing a new discourse or thought system (and the power and authority structure that accompany them) upon his local community.

Under the threat of further punishment, Ding admits to San Ye’s accusations that he has voyeuristic tendencies—the accusation Ding had initially made for Dr.Chen. Ding even admits to having spied on his nurse assistant Xiao Xia when she took a bath (136). San Ye continues to interrogate Ding about his accusations that Fatty is homicidal and desires to take out a Peking Opera authority, namely San Ye himself: “Courageous voyeur! Why do you hide your cowardly heart in the belly of a refined man? You have also said that the
birdman Fatty has the heart to commit homicide?” (136) In a great display of rhetoric, San Ye debunks Ding’s theory. He gets Ding to admit that if Fatty has the subconscious desire to kill off an authority, and Ding himself is an authority of higher status than a Peking Opera expert such as San Ye, then San Ye is not necessarily Fatty’s target: “If you are higher than a Peking Opera authority, then why should killing me be first on the list?” (136)

Dr. Chen and Charley are also put on trial. Charley arrives to present Dr. Chen with an award on behalf of the international ornithology preservation society for preserving the rare species of bird. Although Dr. Chen claims to have turned the rare bird into a taxidermic specimen for patriotic purposes [“Key here is not to allow this brown long-tailed pheasant’ to be smuggled out of the country. It must forever stay on our nation’s soil. I want to tell our descendants that there was once such beautiful life in our country” (123)], he willingly accepts the accolades that extol his contribution to the global ecological effort. After Charley awards Dr. Chen with the distinction, he is also praised as a “birdman.” This renews the bird connoisseurs’ interest in the term, which was originally coined by Ding but rejected by them: “Who is a birdman? He is a murderer of birds! We raise birds so we are the true birdmen!” (139) In the trial, San Ye declares the verdict for the indiscretions of the outsiders, Ding Baoluo, Dr. Chen, and Charley:

San Ye: Lock them together. These two—one an Oedipus and the other a bird killer. Your crimes will be reported to the Emperor, and you are ordered to be beheaded. . . .

三爷: 锁在一处,这二人一个杀父娶母,一个活马治成了死马,秦明圣上,定斩不赦。 . . 待洋人

* The brown long-tailed pheasant (褐马鸡, fu tian xi) is a rare bird species indigenous to China. Its scientific name is *Crossoptilon mantchuricum* and is in the *Phasianidae* family. It can only be found in the mountainous regions of northern Shanxi and northern and north-western Hebei.
The Verdict: “Local” Versus “Global”?

Especially in light of such a powerfully symbolic denouement, in which two of the “outsiders” are ostensibly mocked and led off the Peking Opera stage for “execution,” Birdman begs the question: does the local get the better of the global (or vice versa)? San Ye’s threat aimed at the three outsiders, representative of different aspects of global culture (global humanitarian ethics, global ecology, science, modernization, etc.), resounds with great force. In addition, San Ye clearly mocks Ding Baolu’s imposition of his version of psychoanalysis upon the local bird connoisseur coterie. For these reasons, we may be led to think that the “local” gained a certain unencumbered victory. San Ye’s appropriation of Ding’s psychoanalytical discourse and language within the Peking Opera-stylized act seems to turn the tables on the “global.” It seems to critique the malice of a “colonizing” discourse and the hypocrisy associated with such discourses (i.e., searching for our own symptoms in the “other”).

However, this approach to Birdman is not as constructive as examining certain disjunctures and fluidities between the local and global. If we say Ding is representative of the global, it would be more accurate to assert that he is a globalized version of the local, as Ding is ethnic Chinese and speaks Mandarin, although he lacks the capacity for recognizing
certain cultural references. As such, Guo seems to be saying that the global is always already local. Moreover, it is clear that adopting the trial genre in the Peking Opera act is as absurd as Ding Baoluo applying the psychoanalytical approach to the bird connoisseurs. The Peking Opera (local art form) does not replace the discourse of psychoanalysis but displaces it. Rather than simply dethroning the authority of psychoanalysis, this shift displays the rifts caused by intersecting monolithic (or culturally specific) discourses and practices.

If the global discourses are placed within a local context, they are so enacted on three levels: the inner play, the outer play, and the drama as a performative social act. As the inner play interrogates and appropriates the “global,” the global in the outer play—scenes in which Ding Baoluo applies his psychoanalysis—is simultaneously put on trial. *Birdman*, likewise, is transformed by this inner play into a self-reflexive performative act, in which certain global discourses adopted in the drama’s construction, such as absurdism and existentialism, are also put on trial. Yet this tug between the local and global (or, between the localized global and the globalized local) cannot be simply resolved because establishing the temporal and spatial hierarchy between the two seems a fallacious exercise. The flaunting of a cultural superiority of a local cultural logic is checked by the existential element and the absurdist imitation between art and life, animals and humans. However, the absurdist and existential themes are checked by the mockery of the inner play.

The difficulty of pinning down a winner in the Manichean confrontation between the “local” and “global” is in part owed to Guo’s profuse use of imitation on a number of different levels. In fact, Guo presents a continual chain, feeding back on itself much like a Mobius strip: a singing style in a Peking Opera aria imitates birds chirping, the chained bird
imitates the shackled Peking opera, Fatty imitates San Ye, Huang Mao imitates Fatty, San Ye imitates Ding Baolu. The symbol left on the stage at the very end of *Birdman* is an imitation—a taxidermic specimen of the rare bird. The inner performance is an imitation of a trial in a Peking Opera performance. The entire drama itself is an imitation of social activities and forces. San Ye’s enthronement, and thus the ostensible enthronement of local culture, in the end can only be equivocal and unstable. This is because the valorization of “local” culture is based on the imitation in a performance—a performance that is itself an imitation.

This logic of imitation, inclusive of the framed performance (inner performance), establishes a self-reflexive position for the drama and its participants. The audience is most explicitly brought into the drama through the drama’s construction of the theater as a cage. Physically incorporated into the drama by the obtrusive set, the audience is encouraged to view themselves within the frame of the drama. The set is one way in which the participants are recruited and offered a way to adopt a position of self-reflexivity. The inner performance also bolsters the position of self-reflexivity, in which the members of the audience are offered critical space to evaluate their own ethnographic positioning. Through these techniques, in particular, *Birdman* enlists the audience into the ethnographic process. The audience members are encouraged to view themselves as outsiders looking into a “local” culture. As such, the drama clearly places the audience, ideally in a more self-conscious space, within the local/global nexus.
**Bad Talk Street: Form, Language, and Signification**

As we have seen, Guo’s staging of ethnography in *Birdman* raises interesting questions about the local/global nexus in contemporary Chinese drama and culture. The notion that the local is always already global and vice versa is equally pronounced in Guo’s most recent drama, *Bad Talk Street*. Importantly, it is clear that Guo’s earlier dramas can be classified as experimental, and they possess certain elements belonging to an existential and absurdist tradition. Hence, Guo can be seen as participating in a global dramatic language. In *Bad Talk Street*, this notion that the elements that make Western absurdism absurd can also (already) be found in Chinese local culture becomes even more pronounced. Such references to an indigenous absurdity are, in particular, a result of the language games that arise from the inherent ambiguity of the Chinese language. The display of verbal games, then, begs the question as to whether Guo employs them to participate in a global dramatic tradition and language, or whether he is making the point that certain elements of the Western absurdist tradition are already found in the Chinese verbal arts tradition. Beijing audiences also mentioned how Guo’s experimental dramatic techniques, seen in part as derived from the tradition of Western drama, obfuscated the localness of his dramas. Therefore, the localness of Guo’s dramas is always already punctuated by gaps between the local and the non-local.

The translation that I have proposed for the title of the drama does not convey the double entendre apparent to Chinese viewers; *huai hua* 坏话, meaning “bad talk,” can also mean “scholar tree” (*huai hua* 槐花) when the tones are altered. Therefore, the title of the drama could be better rendered as *Bad Talk (Scholar Tree) Lane* because both meanings coexist.
throughout the production. The local culture put on display in this drama is closely connected to language games, including folk sayings (minyao 民谣), playful witticisms (xiaopi hua俏 皮话), tongue-twisters (rao koouling 绕 口令), children’s songs (er ge 儿 歌), adages (liyu 俚 语), children’s verses (tong yao 童 谣), etc. The wealth of these verbal arts in Chinese is built upon a primary linguistic characteristic of Chinese—the fact that it is a tonal language with relatively few finals, making the language conducive to puns based on homophones and rhyming.40 The preponderance of verbal arts or language games, which emphasize the unique characteristics of the Chinese language, becomes subject to issues of cultural translation, hermeneutics, and ethnography through their presentation. Bad Talk Street is not simply a demonstration of “local” culture. Rather, Guo Shixing stages the processes of ethnography as a dramatization of cross-cultural hermeneutics.41

The dialogue between the local and global can first be seen in terms of the dramatic form of Bad Talk Street. Similar to Birdman, the drama is an experimental hybrid, in this case, between Illusionist Theater and theater of the absurd.42 In the illusionist theatrical aspects, the proscenium creates an illusion of direct referentiality. These “slice of life” aspects are performed as a dialogue with aspects of absurd drama, as represented by artistic play in the form of language games and existential meditation. Within Bad Talk Street, I propose thinking of the contest between these disparate contents/forms as a dialogue between ethnographic and aesthetic modes of hermeneutics. Cultural understanding, hence, is produced through the process of cultural translation based on a contest in systems of signification—between the signifier and the signified. These modes, of course, cannot be clearly delineated. It is their very overlapping which endows the drama with its social and aesthetic poignancy.

78
The Art and Practice of “Bad Talking”

Since the drama showcases virtuoso performances of the verbal arts and bad talking (or gossip)—and stages the processes of ethnography and cultural hermeneutics—the plot recedes into the background and is relatively simple. Two visitors, Bright Eyes and Clever Ears arrive at “Bad Talk Street.” Clever Ears has come to collect and record the alley’s verbal arts, while Bright Eyes arrives to admire the street’s scholar tree flowers. The “Mystery Man,” who has just escaped from a mental hospital also arrives, and he disguises himself as Wise Whiskers, the street’s master of the verbal arts. Clever Ears, fooled by the impersonation, becomes amorous of the madman because she desires that he pass on to her the street’s verbal arts. Madame Zheng, an old resident, tells stories that implicate Wise Whiskers in immoral acts, including incest with his daughter-in-law. In the end, the daughter-in-law flees with the help of the madman. Clever Ears and Bright Eyes both fail in their endeavors. Clever Ears’ recordings of the performances are destroyed, while Bright Eyes’ telescope is smashed and the scholar trees bloom with plastic bags rather than flowers.

The drama’s action takes place entirely in an alley (hutong 胡同) within Beijing. Such alleys are located in the older sections of Beijing, some of which date back to the Ming dynasty. The houses in these alleys are called pingfang (平房), or single-story houses, many of which are “courtyard houses” (sibe yuan 四合院). Guo chose the alley as the drama’s setting for several important reasons. First, as already noted, Guo has always been interested in local and “traditional” Beijing culture. The courtyard house is a symbol of traditional life in Beijing. This drama focuses on “bad talk” that is itself a byproduct of the alley culture. Guo
Shixing himself has commented that *Bad Talk Street* is about “human ecology,” since each person subsists within an environment in which everyone consumes and is consumed by “bad talk.”

By highlighting the local, traditional culture of Beijing, Guo is formulating spatial and temporal axes. The alley is old, traditional China, represented by the sloping, tiled roof of the “courtyard compound” that dominates the set; the high-rises in the imaginary distance are the modern, New China. In 1998, the year the play was produced, the media profusely covered the controversial issue of housing in Beijing. The Beijing municipal government had announced the further demolition of Beijing’s centrally located *pingfang*. The government and advocates of the demolition justified the housing policy on the basis that the *pingfang*—lacking modern conveniences, such as bathrooms and gas-burning stoves—inefficiently and inadequately house people. Moreover, advocates also argued that in terms of pollution (charcoal burning) and sanitation (lack of indoor plumbing) issues, the *pingfang* contribute to Beijing’s environmental problems. However, others bemoaned the destruction of these homes, which they felt are historically and culturally important to the city. Others, including many expatriates living in Beijing, decried the transformation of Beijing into another nameless metropolis with nondescript modern office and residential towers. The Beijing Municipal government, however, paired up with private enterprises to turn some of the alleys into tourist areas. Therefore, it appears as if the only way some alleys will survive is through their preservation by commerce and the tourist industry. As the vast majority of old housing is destroyed, or appropriated by the tourist industry, what will be the fate of the
local alley culture? Guo does not unambiguously express a solution. Rather, he harnesses this geo-cultural political issue as the spatial/temporal backdrop to his drama.

As stated by Guo, “bad talk” is an inherent condition for and product of life in the hutong. Throughout the drama, Guo presents the various forms of “bad talk,” which range from nasty gossip to children’s rhymes and tongue twisters. As a verbal art form, “bad talk” includes the various forms listed above. However, in terms of content, they may be vulgar, obscene, and abusive. We can view such language games, which convey wicked gossip filled with disrespect and belligerence, as promoting an environment of social decadence and decay. Yet, despite this, its artistic form also mediates the social meaning of “bad talk.” The “bad talk,” conveyed in language games, also embodies an internal system of aesthetics. Guo highlights the dynamics between these overlapping signification systems.

The two old-time residents of the hutong are Wise Whisker (Hua bai huzi 花白胡子) and Madame Zheng (Zheng Dama 郑大妈). They represent mastery of the different forms of “bad talk.” Importantly, their forms of “bad talk” are antiphonal, and such a formal opposition also manifests itself as an acrimonious relationship on a social level. Wise Whiskers is a champion of the verbal arts, while Madame Zheng is well versed in gossip. Wise Whiskers, whose officially sanctioned job is to man a public telephone booth, is the recognized authority of “bad talking.” However, at the same time, he is also a fool mocked and attacked by the local culture’s gossip. Madame Zheng perpetuates the accusatory gossip about people in the hutong and Wise Whiskers in particular. For example, she recounts a story that illustrates Wise Whisker’s naivety and foolishness: after being shortchanged by a popsicle vendor, Wise Whisker flees because he thinks he was given too much change (261-
This story, although told in a mocking light, is milder in nature than the “bad talk” rumor of Wise Whiskers’ illicit relationship with his bed-ridden daughter-in-law (264). Madame Zheng gossips about neighbors taking drugs, squandering money, and prostituting.45

Wise Whiskers’ virtuosity of the verbal arts invests him with a certain social status. This is despite a less than lofty social station in terms of family, education, and occupation. His job entails manning a public phone, and he refers to himself as “the bathroom,” since the kids often relieve themselves behind the telephone. Wise Whiskers, through contests with his neighbors, displays his invincible command of the verbal arts.

**Wise Whiskers:** You want a go at naughty words? You’re taking a bath in a vat of vinegar——no room to splash, my old man.

**Resident 4:** Hey, you’re taking a bath in a bathhouse——you can’t bathe without any money. Hey, my wife. I mean, my old man.

**Wise Whiskers:** You want a go at naughty words.

**Resident 4:** You’re a stinkbug knocking on the door——stinking all the way home, my old man.

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re a stinkbug sneezing——your mouth is covered with shit, rascal.

**Resident 4:** You’re a stinkbug . . . rascal.

**Wise Whiskers:** What?

**Resident 4:** I couldn’t think of anything.
**Wise Whiskers:** You’re a stinkbug that has fallen into a hot pot——numb claws, rascal.

**Resident 4:** You’re a stinkbug eating another stinkbug. You’re starved senseless, rascal.

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re Wu Dalang carrying a pole——you can’t reach up and down, rascal.

**Resident 4:** You’re Wu Dalang opening a restaurant——not letting anyone taller than you in the door, rascal.

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re Wu Dalang flying a kite——not much skill [height], rascal.

**Resident 4:** You’re Wu Dalang running into Ximen Qing——not daring to fight when you should, rascal.

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re way off the mark with Wu Dalang. There are more than a thousand on Wu Dalang alone.

**Resident 4:** I can recite them all.

**Wise Whiskers:** Listen to this. You’re Wu Dalang’s brain——not even a turtle’s head, rascal.

**Resident 4:** It . . .

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re Wu Dalang’s eyes——not even a turtle’s eyeball, rascal.

**Resident 4:** That . . .

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re Wu Dalang’s backbone——not even a turtle’s shell, rascal.

**Resident 4:** That . . .

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re Wu Dalang’s hand——not even a turtle’s claw, rascal.

**Resident 4:** You . . .

**Wise Whiskers:** You’re Wu Dalang’s bare foot——not even a turtle’s foot, rascal. It’s your turn!

**Resident 4:** There’s nothing left. Wu Dalang

* In Chinese, it is derogatory to compare a person to a turtle (wang ba 王八).
is all used up. Wait, I’ve got one. You’re Wu Dalang’s son (testicle)—a turtle’s testicle (fool).

Bright Eyes: Stop it, stop it. Don’t fight. 明目: 算啦算啦，别打啦。
Wise Whiskers: Who’s fighting? We’re just doing our thing. 花白胡子：谁打啦？我们这是溜活呐。(239-240)

As in Birdman, Guo is not simply showcasing the eccentric or exotic elements of a “local” culture. The examination of the practices of ethnography and cultural hermeneutics begins when the “outsiders” to the local culture arrive on scene. In Bad Talk Street, the outsiders include Bright Eyes (Mu Ming 目明) and Sharp Ears (Er Cong 耳聰). They arrive on the scene independently, each with his/her own agenda. Bright Eyes has come to the butong with his telescope looking to enjoy the beauty of the scholar tree flowers (the namesake of the butong). However, when he arrives, there are only plastic bags on the scholar tree branches, although bright flowers glisten on the balconies of the new high-rise apartments in the distance. Sharp Ears has come with her tape recorder to the alley to collect the folk sayings. She decides to live indefinitely within the alley because she is consumed by desire to collect and learn the folk sayings, verbal arts, and inadvertently, bad talk. Gradually captivated by the local culture, she comprises her ethnographic task by her worship and lust for the scion of the local culture—Wise Whiskers, or rather, the Mystery Man disguised as Wise Whiskers. She exhibits a dedication, albeit not impartial, to the task of collecting folk sayings in the butong (“Based on the wealth of these folk sayings, I’ll be able to get a doctorate in Chinese studies in any country in the world” (255)) in her lustful worship for the Mystery Man, insisting that he take her away to learn about bandit culture (252). Later, she displays a blind faith in him by imbibing pills he says will allow her to remember folk
sayings (253). Bright Eyes is disappointed that the scholar trees have not yet bloomed. Although the trees have plastic bags attached to the tips of their branches—and despite the fact that the locals have told him that the trees have not bloomed for many years—he remains unwavering in his belief in their imminent blooming. Bright Eyes proclaims that he will not leave the alley until he has the chance to admire the flowers (247).

Wise Whiskers and Madame Zheng represent the different ends of the bad talk spectrum, or rather, the different regimes of signification—figurative versus literal signification. A similar division also separates Bright Eyes and Sharp Ears. “Bad talk” for Wise Whiskers is battling the neighbors in contests in the verbal arts (as we see in the example above). Such a verbal art form is primarily focused on the figurations used, while the literal signification is less an issue. “Bad talk” for Madame Zheng, on the other hand, is gossip. Although the gossip contains figurative and tropic speech, it is pointed and directed, and its social reference and use are the main purposes of the utterance. Similarly, Sharp Ears is infatuated with the verbal arts, while Bright Eyes, who is always looking for signification in the verbal arts, remains in a constant state of confusion:

**Sharp Ears:** A scholar tree on mountain high, Branch in hand for her groom to come by, Mother asks: what are you waiting for? Girl is waiting for the scholar flower to bloom.

**Bright Eyes:** The scholar tree flowers have still not blossomed. Why haven’t they bloomed yet?

**Sharp Ears:** Actually this song’s verse isn’t really talking about scholar tree flowers.
Bright Eyes: It is talking about a girl. But what about the flowers?

小明: 说的是女人。可槐花呢？

Little Girl: That's not right. It's talking about a wolf (groom).

小女: 不对说的是狼。

Sharp Ears: Our little friend is really smart. This song's verse is so wonderful. Why doesn't the girl tell her mother what she is waiting for?

耳聪: 小朋友真聪明。这首歌谣多秒呀。女人为什么不把什么告诉母亲呢？

Little Boy: She's afraid her mother will be scared.

童男: 怕她妈害怕。

Little Girl: She could be eaten.

童女: 她会被吃掉的。

Sharp Ears: What? Grooms (wolves) eat people? What kind of groom (wolf) do you think he is?


This dialogue demonstrates the issue of cultural hermeneutics at stake in this drama. Sharp Ears displays her interest in folk songs and her aptitude at grasping their figurative language. After hearing the verse, Bright Eyes does not register the figurative language. Rather, he is immediately concerned with the literal signification of the verse, namely of the scholar trees, and how it relates to the social reality he is experiencing in the hutong. The children mistake the “groom” for “wolf” on the basis of their homophony. This misinterpretation is representative of how the alley consumes and transforms images of beauty into those of fear and violence—a verse of desire and romance is instantly adapted into one of suspense and fear.

童男, 童女: 对儿虾, 对儿虾, 一块两毛八。

目明: 这么便宜?

耳聪: 他们是在骂人。

(223)
Here we see Bright Eyes falling prey to the *hutong* children’s taunts; he is blind to the fact that he is being mocked and only processes the information as literally signified.

**Bright Eyes** misunderstands the bad talk—the figurative reference to him as shrimp—and is considered by Madame Zheng to be a fool because he is clueless about the figurative signification of the bad talk. The beauty of the scholar tree flower is smothered by the local culture’s bad talking as manifest in the gossip and verbal games. Bright Eyes asserts that those who don’t recognize and know how to nurture the beauty of the scholar tree flowers on the *hutong* are foolish. A trademark feature of Bright Eyes is that he has great
difficulty distinguishing tones, and as we see above, as a result he frequently confuses the scholar tree flowers and bad talk.

Bright Eyes can't understand the culture of the verbal arts and the bad talking of the verbal arts, while Sharp Ears is seduced by the local culture and verbal arts.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bright Eyes:} & \quad \text{Why this bad talking?} \\
\text{Sharp Ears:} & \quad \text{For nothing at all.}
\end{align*}
\]

目明: 为什么说坏话？
耳聪: 什么都不为。(228)

Not only does Bright Eyes chronically miss and misinterpret the hutong's bad talk in the form of the verbal arts, but as we have seen above, he also doesn't pick up on the figurative speech of the bad talk in the form of gossip because his mode of understanding is based on literal signification.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bright Eyes:} & \quad \text{He's got a kind heart to take care of his daughter-in-law.} \\
\text{Madame Zheng:} & \quad \text{Hmm, it also leads others to make remarks behind his back. They say he “crawls in ash.”}
\end{align*}
\]

目明: 那他养着儿媳妇儿还挺有人性的。
郑大妈: 哼, 也让人戳脊梁骨。说他扒灰。

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bright Eyes:} & \quad \text{You mean picking up charcoal?} \\
\text{Madame Zheng:} & \quad \text{And scrap paper too! Do you really not understand or are you just pretending?}
\end{align*}
\]

目明: 就是拾煤渣？
郑大妈: 还捡烂纸呢。是真不懂，还是假不懂？(264)

The term “crawling in ash” (pa hui 扒灰) is a metaphor for incest, but Bright Eyes takes the term literally and thinks Wise Whiskers is “picking up charcoal” rather than partaking in an incestuous affair with his daughter-in-law.
Both Bright Eyes and Sharp Ears seek lodging at the residence of Madame Zheng. She is also a long-time resident but of higher social station than Wise Whiskers. This is indicated by the fact that she lives in a “courtyard compound.” Although Madame Zheng is very gracious, she is reluctant to provide lodging for Bright Eyes and Sharp Ears because she fears the “gossip” that may ensue as a result (221).

The third “outsider” is the “Mystery Man.” He has just escaped from a mental hospital, where he was institutionalized for plotting to dynamite the Great Wall to prevent it from being resurrected. There, he was clinically diagnosed with the “Sherlock Holmes Syndrome,” a symptom of which is his incessant desire to “crack cases” (241). He arrives in the alley, trying to figure out the true identities and true mission of Sharp Ears and Bright Eyes. In his mission, Mystery Man conceals his identity through impersonation and mimicry.

**Madame Zheng:** Have you eaten?  
**Mystery Man:** [Inattentively] After eating deer antler, eat deer penis.  
**Madame Zheng:** You’ve got money, so just eat whatever you like.  
**Mystery Man:** Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty-one.  
**Madame Zheng:** Have you eaten?  
**Mystery Man:** [Inattentively] After eating deer antler, eat deer penis.  
**Mystery Man:** Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty-one.  

In this scene, the Mystery Man is posing as a water meter inspector so he can take cover from the mental institutions’ nurses and also keep tabs on Bright Eyes and Sharp Ears. Perhaps to help keep his cover, Mystery Man spouts out phrases he has just learned or
absorbed from others in the *hutong*. As such, his responses are based on the verbal arts and figurative language rather than literal signification, thus producing mixed messages in an absurd conversational exchange. Wise Whiskers suspects the Mystery Man of being a policeman because of his mysterious behavior. Mystery Man denies this by invoking a popular mockery of justice officials: “long-tipped cap, two brims, first finishing off the plaintiff and then the defendant” \[ chi kan mao, liang tou jian, chi wan yuangao chi beigao 大壳帽，两头尖，吃完原告吃被告 \] (218). Since the phrases don’t rhyme, Wise Whiskers suggests changing it to “two brims, you first eat deer antler and then deer penis” \[ liang tou jian, ni chi wan lu rong chi lu bian 两头尖，你吃完鹿茸吃鹿鞭 \]. Here, although the phrases now rhyme (jian and bian), the literal signification is sacrificed in the process. Mystery Man later conjures up this phrase in response to Madame Zheng’s question asking if he has eaten (230). However, rather than considering the literal signification of “eat” \( chi \), the Mystery Man repeats the phrase above that Wise Whiskers had created. Upon hearing the word “eat” in Madame Zheng’s question, Mystery Man automatically responds with the phrase without considering the literal meaning of what he is saying. While the Mystery Man is reading Madame Zheng’s water level, he again mimics figurative language he had previously heard in the children’s rhymes (230).

One of the most humorous scenes in the play is when Mystery Man knocks Wise Whiskers unconscious and tries to impersonate him in a contest of verbal virtuosity with the street’s vinegar peddler. Mystery Man lacks the cultural knowledge and linguistic skill to defeat his adversary. As Wise Whiskers regains consciousness, we see Mystery Man lip-syncing (with Wise Whiskers really speaking) answering to the challenge initiated by the
vinegar peddler. This is a comical rendition of the popular entertainment form shuang huang.

**双簧:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resident 4</th>
<th>Mystery Man</th>
<th>居民丁</th>
<th>神秘人</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buy some vinegar! Eating noodles without vinegar, attacking the Xishi reservoir; eating noodles without vinegar, attacking the British government.</td>
<td>Eating noodles without vinegar, destroying the Jiaomin alleys.</td>
<td>老爷子，来点儿醋吧。吃面不搁醋，炮打西什库；吃面不搁卤，炮打英国府。</td>
<td>吃面不搁酱，炮打交民巷。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right on. That happened in 1900. My grandfather said the feudal officials wantonly burned and pillaged the Imperial Summer Villa Yihehuan. But, why is it that people eat noodles everywhere? At that time, it was quite good if poor people had noodles to eat. How about a few bottles of vinegar? It's cheap. What? You're not listening to me? You are a leather wad boiled in a wonton pot—when I call you a scumbag, you are still alive, rascal. [Mystery Man lowers the newspaper.]</td>
<td>你吃面不搁酱，炮打义和团。[sic], 随便烧，随便抢，可干吗到哪儿都吃面呢？也别说，那年头儿，穷人有面条儿吃就不错了。您来几瓶儿醋？便宜。不答理我？你是混沌锅里煮皮球——说你混沌你还有口气，我说小子。 [神秘人放下报纸。]</td>
<td>没错儿，庚子年的事啦。我爷爷说，官府向着义和团 [sic], 随便烧，随便抢，可干吗到哪儿都吃面呢？也别说，那年头儿，穷人有面条儿吃就不错了。您来几瓶儿醋？便宜。不答理我？你是混沌锅里煮皮球——说你混沌你还有口气，我说小子。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah, you’ve gotten younger. You are an oven-roasted cake with claws—not even a crab, rascal.</td>
<td>你是海螃蟹拔了爪子——算不了吊炉烧饼，小子。</td>
<td>呵，年轻了，太爷。你是吊炉烧饼安爪子——算不了海螃蟹，小子。</td>
<td>呵，年轻了，太爷。你是吊炉烧饼安爪子——算不了海螃蟹，小子。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are a mountain green bean with claws—not even a spider, rascal.</td>
<td>你是山绿豆安爪儿——算不了土蜘蛛，小子。</td>
<td>你是山绿豆安爪儿——算不了土蜘蛛，小子。</td>
<td>你是山绿豆安爪儿——算不了土蜘蛛，小子。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are a spider without claws—not even a mountain green bean, rascal.</td>
<td>你是土蜘蛛拔了爪儿——算不了山绿豆，小子。</td>
<td>你是土蜘蛛拔了爪儿——算不了山绿豆，小子。</td>
<td>你是土蜘蛛拔了爪儿——算不了山绿豆，小子。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are the husk of buckwheat with claws—not even a dead stink bug, rascal.</td>
<td>你是荞麦皮安爪儿——算不了死臭虫，小子。</td>
<td>你是荞麦皮安爪儿——算不了死臭虫，小子。</td>
<td>你是荞麦皮安爪儿——算不了死臭虫，小子。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are a dead stink bug without claws—not even the husk of buckwheat, rascal.</td>
<td>你是死臭虫拔了爪儿——算不了荞麦皮，小子。</td>
<td>你是死臭虫拔了爪儿——算不了荞麦皮，小子。</td>
<td>你是死臭虫拔了爪儿——算不了荞麦皮，小子。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resident 4: You are a sesame seed with claws—not even a large louse, rascal.

Mystery Man: You are a large louse without claws—not even a sesame seed, rascal

Resident 4: You are hopeless. Just perfunctorily repeating whatever I say. Listen to this. [Sharp Ears thrusts out a recorder and places it on the tricycle.]

Resident 4: In the first month on the first day, two girls decided to stroll about the festivities. The older girl is named pink girl, and the younger is named girl pink. Pink girl wears a pink coat, while girl pink wears a coat pink. Pink girl carries a bottle of pink wine, while girl pink carries a bottle of wine pink. The two girls find a private place; the two girls toast each other and drink merrily. Girl pink drank pink girl's pink wine, and pink girl drank girl pink's wine pink. Pink girl drank and became tipsy-topsy, and girl pink drank and became topsy-tipsy. Pink girl chased girl pink and punched her, and when girl pink saw pink girl, she wrenched her. Girl pink ripped pink girl's pink coat, and pink girl ripped girl pink's coat pink. The two girls stopped fighting, and they each bought thread for mending. Pink girl bought pink thread, and girl pink bought thread pink. Pink girl over and over stitched her pink coat, and girl pink stitched over and over her coat pink. Rascal, your turn.

Mystery Man: After eating deer ear, eat deer penis. After eating a steel ball, eat a steel shovel. After eating a foreign devil, eat a traitor. [Wise Whiskers comes to his senses and]
Whiskers comes to his senses and tries to stand up, but Mystery Man pushes him back down.

Resident 4: You like to eat? Listen to this: pigs eat my poop, my pig eats poop.

Mystery Man: Pigs eat my poop, I eat pig’s poop.

Resident 4: [Laughing] Try again! [Wise Whiskers rises up behind Mystery Man, imitating a “shuang huang” performance.]

Wise Whiskers: I’m back. Listen to this. A chilly wind blows during the coldest part of winter. . . . On the fifteenth of the first month there is a dragon and lantern festival, a pair of lions rolling an embroidered ball. On the third day of the third month, Goddess of Heaven holds a Peach festival, and the Monkey-King Sun steals away the celestial peach. The fifth day of the fifth month is the Dragon Boat festival, and the White Snake and Xuxian must one day part. The seventh day of the seventh month is the matching of the heavens and the rivers, in which the Cowherd and Weaving Maid both weep. On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the clouds cover the moon, and Chang E in the moon palace is overcome by worry. You want to talk about worry, then only talk about worry. Sing a tongue-twister of eighteen worries: a wolf worries, a tiger worries, an elephant worries, a deer worries, a mule worries, a horse worries, a cow worries, a goat worries, a pig worries, a dog worries, a duck worries, a swan worries, a toad worries, a crab worries, a clam worries, a turtle worries, fish worry, and shrimp worry. A tiger worries of not being able to come
down from high mountains; a wolf worries of running out of crafty schemes; an elephant worries that its facial skin will become even thicker; a deer worries that its horns will grow into a bizarre shape; a horse worries that it will be saddled and forced to gallop a thousand miles; a mule can’t but worry its whole life; a goat worries of growing a goatee; a cow worries of being struck with a whip; a dog worries that it can’t stop eating poop; a pig worries that it will never leave the stinking trough; the toad worries that it will grow into just one big wart; a crab worries of being stuck in a crevice; a duck worries that it is just one big bill; a swan worries that it will grow a protruding head; a clam worries so much that it is always shut; a turtle worries so that it dares not to come out of its shell; a fish worries that it can not move outside of water; a shrimp worries that its empty gun antennae will miss their mark. If you want me to make things up, I will make things up, when there is nothing to do, I just let my tongue glide.

This “folk doggerel” (shun kou liu 顺口溜) performs the irresolvable rift between local and global discourses and practices. It also displays the multiple layers of variable degrees of local and global discourses. For example, the references to spatial locations, such as Xishi Reservoir and the Imperial Summer Villa, are “local” landmarks for Beijing residents. The latter is a well-known symbol for many Chinese across generations of China’s “national humiliation” as inflicted by Western imperialist powers. Therefore, the global is not just
represented by modern day practices (such as the urban backdrop of modern residential towers) but also inclusive of a local memory of an imperial (global) history. The ostensible discourse of nationalism is checked by an absurdism highlighted by the ambiguous relationship between a “nationalist” content and artistic form. The formalistic (e.g., rhyming) requirements of the verbal art form, in addition to the art’s practical goal of selling noodles, mediate the articulation of local sites and their social referentiality. The passage above may be interpreted as promoting a nationalist discourse. As such, it may be seen as offering a form of resistance to global (Western) discourses and practices. My argument, however, is that Guo’s representation of discourses is never complete and uncomplicated; rather, his plays attempt to put hermeneutic practices which neglect the hybridity and multiple sites of discursive practices on trial.

“Mystery Man,” as guided by his alleged syndrome, is convinced that Bright Eyes and Sharp Ears are behind a plot—working for a developer—to tear down the neighborhood and erect new high-rises (270). When he is impersonating Wise Whiskers, Sharp Ears becomes enamored of his ability, and she passionately begs Mystery Man to permit her to be his disciple. Mystery Man resists and persuades her to take a medication (sedatives, which were prescribed as part of his therapy at the mental institution) by saying that the medication will enhance her ability to memorize the folk verbal arts. After the medication causes her collapse, Mystery Man flees. She awakens to see the real Wise Whiskers, and rejects him, since he is not as handsome as his impersonator, Mystery Man.

Wise Whisker’s son had eloped with a French woman in France, thus abandoning his wife. She had since become despondent, resulting in paralysis that left her bed-ridden for
three years. Her father-in-law, Wise Whiskers, takes care of her, giving rise to many rumors and gossip about their relationship. Mystery Man takes it upon himself to rescue her. Wise Whiskers reproaches Mystery Man for assuming the mission of preventing the demolition of the alley neighborhood. (Here we see the issue of “rescuing a victim of oppressed humanity” from a local culture, or preserving the “architecture” of local culture.) After Mystery Man teaches the bedridden daughter-in-law an innocent children’s nursery rhyme, she miraculously recovers. After taking her first steps, “Mystery Man” asks her how she wants to punish those around her. She declares: “I want to tear their mouths to pieces!” (295)

Mystery Man had previously destroyed Bright Eyes’ telescope because Mystery Man had suspected Bright Eyes of colluding with the building company. Blaming Sharp Ears on inciting the accusatory “bad talk,” he erases her tapes out of moral compunction. Bright Eyes says:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bright Eyes:</th>
<th>These folk sayings spread about evil feelings. There is just too much bad talk on this street.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharp Ears:</td>
<td>But these are all real folk sayings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright Eyes:</td>
<td>You have already become numb to it because it has already seeped into your blood and bones. Your moral integrity is also beginning to crumble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharp Ears:</td>
<td>It’s none of your business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright Eyes:</td>
<td>These evil feelings are the reason the flowers on the trees are not blooming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

目明: 这些民谣散发着毒气。这条街上的坏话太多了。
耳聪: 这些都是真正的民谣。
目明: 你已经麻木了。因为它已经渗入了你的血液和骨髓，你的人格也在开始败坏。
耳聪: 你管不着。
目明: 它的毒气使树木都不开花。(297)
Bright Eyes feels that he can resuscitate the neighborhood by putting an end to the transmission of the “bad talk.” He exclaims that although the tapes have been erased, Sharp Ears has already internalized the folk sayings. Sharp Ears begins to recite a rhyme:

**Sharp Ears:** On the third day of the third month, Mother Wang goes to the peach festival. Monkey-King Sun Wukong steals the celestial peach.

**Bright Eyes:** See we have pilfering already. This is the beginning of degeneration.

**Sharp Ears:** It’s the Monkey-King.

**Bright Eyes:** No one, though, is allowed to steal... 

**Bright Eyes:** This is seeking happiness from disaster... 

**Sharp Ears:** Pink girl drank and became tipsy-topsy, and girl pink drank and became topsy-tipsy. Pink girl chased girl pink and punched her, and when girl pink saw pink girl, she wrenched her... 

**Bright Eyes:** That’s enough. First over-imbibing alcohol and then violence... 

**Sharp Ears:** Although these tongue twisters lack intellectuality, they make up for it in their artistry.

**Bright Eyes:** Then the harm they exert is even greater.

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**Ethnography and (Self-) Referentiality**

Throughout the play, Bright Eyes and Sharp Ears interact with the local environment in different ways. They have both come for a particular purpose; Sharp Ears hopes to collect folk songs ostensibly for educational purposes, while Bright Eyes visits to appreciate the
local environment, particularly the scholar tree flowers. Ironically, Sharp Eyes suffers from not being able to distinguish homophonic sounds, which leads to a type of cultural disorientation within the local culture. But more importantly, he assumes that all words uttered within this local culture are circumscribed entirely by their referential social import. He understands the words in reference to an external reality that bears on his existence. Sharp Ears, on the other hand, suffers from dull eyesight. For example, when Mystery Man impersonates Wise Whiskers, she is completely duped. Moreover, she is entirely taken in by what she hears—thoroughly recruited into the local culture. She is the trusting and blind disciple of the local culture’s folk verbal arts and “bad talk.” She is initiated into their culture, seduced by the art form, but also driven by a desire to collect the exotic, without considering the social referentiality of the verbal arts.

First, these two characters perform the ambivalence between art and anthropology, which I am crudely defining in terms of referentiality (art as self-referential and anthropology as that which seeks symbolic and cultural referentiality for making sense of other cultures and translating other cultures). Guo also highlights this ambivalence, asserting “the entire play is an oral tale. The objects of the speech are taken apart and dispersed within the tale. Folk sayings and tongue twisters are not just symbolic but also representative of themselves. It displays the exquisiteness and meaninglessness of the spoken words, so that the words become a kind of art.” Therefore the first relationship between anthropology and art is represented at the level of characterization.

Secondly, in terms of the relationship between content and form, the issue of ethnography and the solemn problem of ecology (or, local environment) are commingled
with solipsistic word games tinted by an absurdist flavor. Considering the centrality of word games to western absurdist and existential theater, Guo’s drama is an important intervention for contemporary Chinese drama. The drama shows that the aesthetics of Western absurdism and the existential crisis find resonance within Beijing alley culture’s verbal arts. Of course, Guo’s interest in theater of the absurd and existentialism informed his task of exploring absurdist expression through an excavation of the uniquely Chinese verbal arts. Still, the fusion of “local flavored” Beijing drama, made famous by Lao She, with absurdism, shows a dialectical nexus of local and global culture, in which neither term is necessarily the overriding one.

Thirdly, outside the staged performance, the audience participates in the self-referentiality of the play—that is, they are taken into the play, consuming and being consumed by the “bad talk.” But at the same time, they are viewers observing and even studying the customs of a local culture. The fact that the drama features three “outsiders,” in a Brechtian manner, awakens the audience to their own “alterity” and position of “looking in.” This heightens the audience’s self-reflexivity of their own position of participation in and viewing of an “other,” “localized” culture.

This drama encourages a critical evaluation of performing ethnography within a local/global nexus and thus exploring the viewer’s (ethnographer’s) own performance of self-reflexivity. We may realize that engaging with another culture involves a dialogue between the self-referential and the socially referential. We may perform as Sharp Ears, striving to and quickly learning to perform as a “native,” to consume and be consumed by the “local culture.” The “emic” perspective, here, composed of self-referential cultural and
linguistic signs highlights the problematics of cross-cultural translation. Alternatively, we may take the role of Bright Eyes, who in consuming the “local” culture is predisposed towards social referentiality and translation into cultural and social meaning. Guo Shixing provides us with a critique of ethnography in dramatic form; in the geo-political drama where knowledge is closely connected to power, he embeds a crucial social and ecological problem within a meditation upon the existential crisis of meaning and performance of seductive and pleasurable oral arts.

**Conclusion**

The formation of power relationships within the global/local nexus as constructed by the practices of display and spectatorship is an important issue in the critical discussions engaging ethnicized performance culture. A local cultural performance becomes “ethnicized” once it enters a global arena and is placed outside its original context of production and consumption. A particular intrinsic and extrinsic local/global axes constitutes an “ethnicized” cultural performance on account of its spatial/temporal and geopolitical de-contextualization. The intrinsic axis manifests through the engagement of the performance content with its new context; whereas the extrinsic axis is formed as a byproduct of the indirect interactions between the extra-performative elements such as the performance arena and the socio-cultural conditions of the performance contexts. These axes in my discussion of ethnicized cultural performance constitute the “global/local nexus”.

We are familiar with performance techniques that may be adopted to induce a type of critical awareness in the form of reflexivity. Although the intentionality of the adoption
of such techniques may not always be so clear—and the importance and relevance of such intentionality may be even less clear—their application, even as subjects are recruited, introduces critical space open to inscription. A reflexivity is set into motion by a process of association based on imitation. A simple example is a play inserted within a play, and as the outer play’s audience watches the inner play, the audience of the outer play by associating itself with the inner play’s audience, may become more reflective upon their audience/subject position vis-à-vis the outer play. The induction of self-reflexivity can be used as a rhetoric of empowerment or contestation with impinging social forces generated by the very exhibition of the cultural performance.

An ethnicized cultural performance can be, from one perspective, exotic candy, both seductive and pleasurable. Reflexivity that is set in motion by an abundance or excess of referentiality (imitation, satire, exaggeration) exaggerates the “ethnicity” of the cultural performance, transmogrifying the exotic candy not into a bitter pill, but rather, into a candy with a name, wrapper and list of ingredients that prompt questions regarding the candy’s origins, production, and the various complex dynamics involved with its consumption.54

The reflexivity of Guo’s dramas can be viewed as both a symptom of globalization as well as its panacea. It is a symptom if we see that the techniques of reflexivity are attributable to Brechtian modernism and post-modern dramatic theory, conventions, and techniques. It is a panacea as these techniques of reflexivity lay bare, contradict or contest their rhetoric, discourse, and power structure. However, immediately we are implicated within a contradiction of transcultural hermeneutic practice, as we must also acknowledge the indebtedness of Brechtian inspired modernism in drama to the Western understanding of
Chinese drama: what we originally classified as global, or non-local (non-Chinese), suddenly becomes much more contradictory and problematic.55

We must also view how the self-colonizing is not necessarily a position of subordination to a hegemonic discourse. Rather, such positioning can contain contradictory rhetoric in the form of hybridization and lay bare the complicities of overlapping discourses, flows, and ruptures between discourses of different genders, races, localities, and temporalities.56 The reflexive techniques showcase the issues constituted by the local/global nexus intrinsic to the drama, and more specifically, Guo’s staging of ethnography is a cultural strategy to resist the uncritical ethnographic appropriation of his cultural performances.

In my discussion of Guo Shixing, I have highlighted the bi-directional dialogue between the “local” and “global” that inform all of his works. More importantly, I have contended that Guo Shixing’s plays are not simply constitutive of the local/global nexus that underlie and underpin cultural production in contemporary China in the 1990s. Rather, through a cultural technique or strategy of reflexivity, Guo succeeds in leveraging a certain critical space that oscillates between the local and global by critically showcasing the overlapping interplay of varying degrees of the local and global.
Rice-sprout dancing (yang’ge 秧歌) by groups of senior citizens (hereafter referred to as SCYG for “senior citizen yang’ge”) is a pervasive and prominent public “cultural performance.” It is newly emergent in the early 1990s yet with traditional and historical roots and possesses social, political, and psychological dimensions and potentialities. SCYG’s ubiquitous clamorous festivity pervades numerous public spaces in Beijing (in addition to other cities in Northern China), including major intersections and shopping center entranceways. Although visually and aurally conspicuous, with their bright costumes and reverberating instrumental accompaniment, the senior citizen dance groups have attracted few insightful and exploratory academic inquiries in China or abroad. If brought up in conversation with non-participating local Beijingers, comments about SCYG range from dismissive to derisive.

Whereas the previous chapter discusses formally staged dramas as types of cultural performance, this chapter examines a type that is less constrained by formal stage requirements. Through this juxtaposition, I wish to show the fluidities between different types of cultural performances despite their generic distinctions. The issues discussed in the last chapter, particularly cultural (re)presentation at the intersection of the local/global nexus, is treated in this chapter in terms of the cultural “recycling” of a folk dance form. I argue
that the street-dancing represents a complex cultural performance intersected by numerous layers of cultural practices and histories.

SCYG’s performance space, for example, reveals the hybridity of local and global discourses, spaces, and practices. In 1998, one of Beijing’s most active SCYG troupes performed at the Huapu Shopping Center (Huapu shangchang 华普商场) in Chaoyangmen (朝阳门). Zoned to be developed into the cornerstone of Beijing’s central business district, Chaoyangmen is one of Beijing’s most flourishing and cosmopolitan areas. Major urban landmarks in the Chaoyangmen area that year included China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, two large shopping centers—Huapu and Full Link Plaza (Fenglian guangchang 丰联广场)—and numerous prime office buildings and luxury residential high-rises. A hotbed of advertising by multinational companies, lighted advertising placards line Chaoyangmen’s congested streets creating a transnational imaginary space. Numerous aspects of China’s “globalization” intersect the downtown location of the Huapu Troupe’s performance space.

From one perspective, the emblems of Beijing’s rush towards modernity provided the ironic backdrop and cityscape for the recycling and revival of rice-sprout dancing. Beijing’s urban planning and development policies played an important role in SCYG’s efflorescence. Such residential reconstruction initiatives by the government also provided the socio-historical backdrop to Guo Shixing’s Bad Talk Street. During the development of Beijing’s downtown office districts in the 1990s, many old housing districts were razed. The New high-rises surrounded others while waiting for their imminent demolition. Many of the participants in SCYG lived in the pingfang housing communities. A period of time marked by the impending deconstruction of communities created a historical juncture in which SCYG performances flourished in newly opened, incongruous spaces. Beijing’s urban renewal...
program, in part influenced by global “performance” standards (i.e., Is Beijing modern enough to host the Olympics?), destroyed local communities. However, at the same time, such (de)construction also created an opportunity (as in the case of SCYG) for the generation of new hybrid spaces marked by overlapping local and global discourses and practices. The SCYG, for example, strikingly introduced aspects of the past (anti-modern), the rural (anti-urban), and local (anti-global) into the modern, cosmopolitan, and commercial spaces in Beijing’s urban areas. Viewing SCYG as a cultural performance assists in exploring the hybridity of multi-layered cultural spaces and sites.

Covering a broad spectrum of social activities and events including ritual, festival, carnival, play, ceremony, sports, street theater, protests, “cultural performances” are central to any culture’s values and social structure. Although cultural critics, anthropologists, folklorists, and sociologists argue over the generic distinctions between the different types of cultural performances, performance has become an important inter-disciplinary theoretical framework. A major reason for this shift is the increasing inter-disciplinary interest in the pragmatics and politics of the use of cultural discourses, artifacts, and performances. Drama historian Marvin Carlson succinctly identifies the widespread adoption of performance-oriented theories and models in the humanities:

One [reason] is the major shift in many cultural fields from the “what” of culture to the “how,” from the accumulation of social, cultural, psychological, political, or linguistic data to a consideration of how this material is created, valorized, and changed, to how it lives and operates within the culture, by its actions, its real meaning is now sought in its praxis, its performance. (1996: 195)

In addition to a concern with the parameters of the various performance or theatrical genres, and in fact, interlaced and constitutive of these definitions, is a concern with the dynamic potential of “cultural performance.” John MacAloon enunciates this concern and defines
cultural performance as “occasion in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others” (1984: 1). With post-modernism’s focus on power relations (however diffuse), fragmentation of subjectivity, and political efficacy, a crucial issue of many who try to theorize “cultural performances” are their relationship and degree of intervention vis-à-vis the various ideologies circulated and perpetuated through and by tradition, gender, race, and post-colonialism.

Earlier studies, such as those conducted by Victor Turner (1982) on “ritual” and “social drama,” already stress the issue of how “cultural performance” related to the dominant ideology. Turner examined whether the “performance” affirmed and subverted the social norms, hierarchy, and structure. The delineated distinctions between and within performance categories and frames, such as the “liminal” versus the “liminoid,” “shallow play” versus “deep play,” “political direct theatre” versus “direct theater” on the basis of their subversive potential. Preoccupation with questions of the political transformative or reaffirming power of “cultural performance” vis-à-vis ideology and social structure, however, can also lead to generalizing the diversity of ideologies represented in a cultural performance.

I maintain the importance of discussing ideology in ethnographic projects; however, through this study, I would like to suggest the possibility of examining multi-layered ideologies aimed at achieving a more polyvocal ethnography. Towards this end, the following analysis examines the historical development of the performance genre, while also providing an interpretation based on volunteered reactions offered by the participants in the “cultural performance” and the members of the audience.
Yang’ge’s Historical Development and Its Heterogeneity

Heterogeneous in its historical development, yang’ge today is a broad category of Chinese performance referring to a form of dance or stylized movement, singing or chanting, and role-playing with wide-ranging regional variations. Yang’ge can be subdivided into three major historical forms: traditional yang’ge, Yan’an yang’ge, and contemporary yang’ge (Wang Jihua 1992: 36). Traditional yang’ge refers to the various forms of yang’ge that flourished throughout different regions in China prior to being suppressed by a revolutionary form produced in Yan’an in the early 1940s. The recent revival and re-interpretation of local styles of yang’ge in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily in China’s northeastern cities, recycle and (re)present aspects of the traditional and Yan’an yang’ge performance traditions. This chapter examines Beijing SCYG as a particular version of “contemporary yang’ge,” both highly localized in time and space as a unique form of cultural performance and also a product of its precursors. My engagement with its traditional referents, including yang’ge’s aesthetic and political history, reveals the performative features and social significance of SCYG.

Yang’ge consists of a wide spectrum of historical and regional variations, which makes it difficult to generalize its formal characteristics. The name yang’ge is believed to have originated more than one thousand years ago from the songs sung while planting rice seedlings and plowing the fields (yang 秧 = rice seedling and ge 歌 = song). Gongs and drums accompanied the songs to invigorate the laborers and to regulate their steps and singing (Chang 1983: 88). Scholars of traditional Chinese dance assert that rice-sprout songs were performed in connection with certain rituals, including sacrifices to folk deities in hopes of abundant crops and to ward off evil and maladies. Throughout its history, yang’ge
absorbed various forms of rural Chinese folk dance and folk rituals, and therefore, in its historical development, came to incorporate singing, dancing, and role-playing dramatic narratives (Xin 1992: 42).

Scholars estimate that *yang'ge* has a history of more than one thousand years, but these conjectures cannot be corroborated by any written documents that directly refer to *yang'ge* until the early Qing dynasty. However, records of songs performed while working in the fields date back to the Song dynasty. The Song dynasty poets Su Dongpo (1036-1101) and Lu You (1125-1210) wrote many poems about rural life that refer to peasant dance and song. These, however, are rather better classified more generally as “peasant songs” (*nong'ge* 农歌) rather than as *yang'ge*.

In addition, during the Qing dynasty, Wu Xilin 吴锡鳞 claims in “Miscellaneous Remarks on New Years” (*Xinnian za yongchao* 新年杂咏抄) that the “village entertainment” (*cun tian le* 村田乐) of the Song Dynasty was an earlier form of *yang'ge*.

*Yang'ge* was the *cun tian le* of the lantern festivals in the Southern Song. The activities of dressing up as monks and scholars, beating decorated drums, flaunting various decorations, and acting as peasants, fishermen’s wives, and peddlers of sundry goods, all entertained the audience.

As stated by Wu Xilin, *yang'ge* most likely existed in a related form by a different name prior to the Qing dynasty. However, the written use of the term *yang'ge* does not appear until the early Qing dynasty, as cited below in Yang Bing’s 杨兵 “Brief Records From Beside a
Willow” (Liobian jilue 柳边记略). This passage documents the performance art of yang’ge as folk drama during the beginning of the Qing dynasty at the frontier near Jilin (today’s Ning’an in Heilongjiang province 黑龙江宁安).

On the eve of the lunar New Year, the rural folk always perform yang’ge. Children dress as three or four women, and three or four others take the role of soldiers. They each hold two round sticks, beating the sticks while dancing lined in pairs. The one dressed up as the seller of medicine leads the group holding a decorated umbrella. When the dance, accompanied by cymbals and drums, comes to an end, the singing begins. When the singing ends the dancing begins again. It goes on like this until dawn.69

Many of the formal aspects of contemporary yang’ge, including the role-playing (although in this particular record all the characters are played by men), the troupe leader holding an umbrella, the props such as the wooden clubs, and dancing in paired symmetry, are documented as important characteristic features of yang’ge in the early Qing dynasty.

As we can observe from the historical records, yang’ge by early Qing already took various forms, including role-playing, acting, dancing, and singing and was performed in different regions of China.70 Several local gazetteers, for example, document yang’ge as a type of dramatic art in the southern part of China:

Several days before new years, the city and countryside were busy cutting paper to make lanterns, dragons, lions, and other creatures. Boys under the age of ten performed different stories in caicha and yang’ge.71

元宵前数日，城乡多剪纸为灯，或龙，或狮子及鸟兽，十岁以下童子扮采茶，秧歌诸故事。
Each spring among the rural folk, when several dozen women would go towards the fields to plant seedlings, an elder would be beating a large drum. The sound of the drum would resound everywhere, and the singing of the group would be equally powerful, filling the heavens. This is called yang’ge.72

The examples above also show that traditionally yang’ge was often performed during holidays. In connection to the holidays and the temples, yang’ge was part of the community festivities that ushered in the New Year, repaid the gods, expunged misfortune, and provided entertainment. In the northern region of China’s Shaanxi Province, for example, the yang’ge performances during the Lantern Festival were traditionally referred to as nao shehuo 闹社火 and nao yang’ge 闹秧歌. In the cities of Suide 绥德, Mizhi 米脂, and Wubao 吴堡, during the Spring Festival, the yang’ge troupes would first go to the temple to pay obeisance to the gods, and then proceed along the streets to the homes, bringing blessings to the families in a form of yang’ge referred to as pai menzi 排门子—a continuation of the harvest rituals of the past. During the Lantern Festival, the yang’ge troupes “encircle a burning pagoda” rao huota 绕火塔: the burning pagoda’s base is constructed out of stones and bricks and supports a pagoda shaped with charcoal, leaving an opening in which kindling and tinder are inserted. According to Luo (1994: 193), this form of yang’ge was a descendant of the ancient rituals si tai yi 祀太乙 and jixin er ran 积薪而燃, in which fire was used to dispel disasters and ward off evil spirits.73

These historical records suggest the multiple forms and diverse regional variations of yang’ge throughout its historical development. Contemporary yang’ge is also characterized by
great regional diversity and formal variations. Representative of this fact, for example, is the many names for yang'ge today used in different parts of China.74

Contemporary yang'ge is also shaped by the history of yang'ge during China’s revolutionary and Maoist eras. Yang'ge was a popular cultural form instrumental for the CCP’s implementation of the worker, peasant, and soldier artistic and cultural policy, as espoused by Mao Zedong in his “Yan’an Talks” in 1942.75 In Yan’an, yang'ge was given a new revolutionary content. It was taught at the Lu Xun Academy of Art and Literature, as well as at party headquarters, factories, and schools, and it was a central performance genre in mass assemblies. It represented the crystallization of the mass-line policy, offered a convenient vehicle for acting out political ideology, and combined with the “waist-drum dance” (yangu 腰鼓), it incited revolutionary fervor and patriotic pride. The new revolutionary form of yang'ge, generated in the “new yang'ge movement” (xin yangge yundong 新秧歌运动) in the Shaanbei, Gansu, and Ningxia border regions, is referred to by a number of different names, including “overthrow yang'ge” (fanshen yang'ge 翻身秧歌), “struggle yang'ge” (douzheng yang'ge 斗争秧歌), or “revolutionary yang'ge” (geming yang'ge 革命秧歌). As Wang (37) points out, the Shaanbei yang'ge, in addition to adding revolutionary content, was also simplified and purified: “The old characters with bean curd white faces and hot peppers dangling from their ears were replaced by the liberating masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers, led by one wielding a reaper and axe.” Several yang'ge operas were generated in Yan’an, including Brother and Sister Reclaim the Wasteland (Xiongmei kai huang 兄妹开荒), which was intended to inspire the movement for increasing production in the Liberated Areas and
Husband and Life Learn to Read (Fuqi shizi 夫妻识字), which was promoted in conjunction with the anti-illiteracy campaign.

Some of those who were involved in the creation of “revolutionary yang’ge” have retrospectively reflected upon their actions. Wu Xiaobang, who taught dance at the Lu Xun Academy of Art and Literature in Yan’an, clearly narrates the process in which yang’ge was appropriated by the CCP. In “I Admire Shaanbei Dance,” Wu writes:

My colleagues and I who studied yang’ge [in Yan’an] did not study it deeply. Or, rather, because we had too many other concerns, we couldn’t make a clear distinction between the exquisite and the crude. We were afraid of being accused of getting tainted by things that were deemed unhealthy; therefore, we were meek and overcautious. We only learned a little about yang’ge’s steps and dance troupe formations. We never really learned the essence of the old yang’ge. I heard then that in the old yang’ge, there are small performances featuring the characters from Outlaws of the Marsh. If we really accepted the masses as our teacher, rather than following the tastes of the urban intellectuals, and we really put forth the effort to study from the people, carrying out a serious research of the development of the folk dance, then the yang’ge we created would have been much more outstanding. (Ai 1992: 336)

After 1949, this new revolutionary form of yang’ge spread throughout China, and it became central to political and cultural celebrations and assemblies. In 1949, when the Literature and Art College at North China University wrote and put on a large song and dance performance called “Long Live the People’s Victory” to celebrate the founding of the PRC, a “large-scale yang’ge” performance was featured.

After liberation, vignettes came to include narratives about government policies, initiatives, and campaigns, such as sanitation, birth control, flood relief efforts, legal and security issues, and introduced new characters with performers dressing-up as workers, peasants, and soldiers. During China’s post-1949 Maoist era, yang’ge became part and parcel of most government-backed cultural and political mass events, such as the numerous cultural
festivals sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and National Day celebrations. Furthermore, most work units also organized yang'ge troupes.

A productive analysis of a performance of yang'ge today needs to consider the form’s diverse regional and historical traditions. Contemporary yang'ge is a product of a range of traditions, which are manifested within particular instances of the performances to varying degrees. The meanings of a particular performance today are closely tied to both the traditional and revolutionary histories of yang'ge outlined above. It also should be mentioned that during the Maoist era, revolutionary yang'ge did not entirely supplant traditional forms but rather emerged as the primary, orthodox form of yang'ge during the period. Similarly, the performance of a revolutionary form of yang'ge today in China does not necessarily carry with it the ideology that had been associated with it during the Maoist era. Therefore, the context of the contemporary performance in terms of participants, audience, and time and place, are crucial in determining the meanings (and uses) of the particular performance.

The Formal Features and Aesthetics of Yang’ge

In accordance with yang'ge’s historical and regional diversity, yang'ge also exhibits a large range of formal features. It is important to point out that yang'ge can refer to either a broad performance category or a more narrowly defined one. In its broadest usage, yang’ge today can even refer to the various regional and ethnic dance forms and performance acts involving singing, dancing, and role-playing dramatic narratives. Terms including chuhui 出会, zou bai 走会, nao shehui 闹社会, nao honghui 闹红会 refer to the performance of yang’ge as a whole, while other terms refer to specific acts or subgenres of yang’ge, such as gaoqiao 高跷,
zhuma 竹马, or ban chuan 歹船 are primarily found in the northern part of China. Different regions in the northern part of China have their own unique styles and artistic features.  

The cultural performances of SCYG by groups in Beijing, in terms of their historical and formalistic construction, are a recent variation of northeastern yang’ge (dongbei diyang’ge 东北地秧歌). SCYG’s linkages with other regional, formal, and historic versions of yang’ge, however, make SCYG a multi-regional and trans-historic hybridization. The main forms of northeast yang’ge were traditionally classified as di yang’ge 地秧歌, erren zhuan 二人转 (two-person acts), and gao qiao 高跷 (stilt performances) (Du 1992: 53). Contemporary northeastern yang’ge itself is a syncretic form combining elements from Shandong yang’ge, Hebei yang’ge, and Shanxi yang’ge. Northeastern yang’ge as a major regional form, is further sub-divided into sub-regional forms, including Liaonan yang’ge 辽南秧歌, Liaodong yang’ge 辽东秧歌, Liaozhong yang’ge 辽中秧歌, Jilin yang’ge 吉林秧歌, Heilongjiang yang’ge 黑龙江秧歌, and Dabeihuang yang’ge 大北荒秧歌. In addition to being classified according to sub-region, contemporary northeastern yang’ge can be further subdivided into performance subgenres, including short-stilts yang’ge (duanqiao yangge 短跷秧歌), donkey riding yang’ge (pao liu yangge 跑驴秧歌), stick and drum yang’ge (banggu yangge 棒鼓秧歌), and SCYG (54).  

Yang’ge is performed in two main performance arenas. As mentioned, traditionally yang’ge involved a procession, in which offerings were first made at local temples and respects paid to patrons. This procession to the main performance arena was referred to as guo jie 过街 or cai jie 踩街. Guo jie, also called today xing jin 行进 or chuan hua 串花, in which the yang’ge troupe performs while parading along main streets, is one of the major performance
arenas for *yang'ge*. *Liao chang* 撂场 or *da chang* 打场 refers to the performance of *yang'ge* in an enclosed performance arena. *Liao chang* will usually begin and end with a “large performance” *da chang* 大场, in which the dance troupe is led by the most skilled to dance various patterns, such as a dragon (*yi tiao long* 一条龙), dragon tail (*long bai wei* 龙摆尾), weaving braids of garlic (*bian suan ban'er* 编蒜辫), two hanging dippers (*shuang gua dou* 双挂斗), two dragon beards (*er long tu xu* 二龙吐须), heart of a cabbage (*juan bai caixin* 卷白菜心), and pearls unveiled in curtains (*zhen zhu dao juan lian* 珍珠倒卷帘) (Du 1992: 53). The large performance’s most important features are the swinging hip dance movements, called *niu* 扭, and the fluid, quickly changing patterns formed by the troupe. A small-arena performance, called *xiao chang* 小场, may be inserted between the large performances as individual acts or performed independently from the larger performance. The small performances may also be referred to as “small drama” (*xiao xi* 小戏) or “two-person vaudeville interlude” (*erren zhuan xiao mao* 二人转小帽). The small performance usually involves two or three people, who act out dramatic narratives or comic routines, and, in some areas, may also involve singing (Yang 1992: 56).77

Northeastern *yang'ge* is a syncretic performance art form combining skills from various popular performance genres, including singing (*chang* 唱), dance (*yan* 演), role playing (*ban* 扮), amusing (*dou* 逗), and playful acrobatics (*shua* 耍) (Cui 1992: 59). Different styles, forms, and performances of *yang'ge*, however, may emphasize all or a certain number of these skills and characteristics to varying degrees. Northeastern *yang'ge* also features a regional or local flavor within the bounds of its traditional aesthetic parameters. A common saying
which reflects the localism goes: “Rustic but not ugly, rustic but not vulgar” (土而不丑，土而不俗) (Xin 1992: 43). The musical instruments, such as the “suona” or reed-trumpet (喇叭), characters including lao kuai 老□ (the man cross-dressed as a woman holding the long pipe) and the foolish scholar (shazi 傻子), in addition to props (such as red cloths, fans, and handkerchiefs) represent the local customs and traditions of northeast China. The entertainment function of the yang’ge is very prominent, as reflected by common sayings: “As soon as the drums and gongs sound, our bodies want to groove” (锣鼓一响，浑身发痒), and “as soon as the drums and gongs sound, our hearts begin to pound” (鼓一敲，心里蹦高).

Dance is one of northeastern yang’ge’s main performance skills, and the body movement particular to yang’ge referred to as niu contains a distinct performance connotation of swift, sharp yet fluid twisting and turning. The movements should be crisp (哏) with a certain stylized pizzazz, or qiao 俏, which connotes charming and flirtatious feelings, as well as delight, wit, and sarcasm. The aesthetics of these stylized movements are, according to Yang Jianying (1992: 55), a scholar of Chinese dance in northeast China, to be achieved by “dynamic wrists, agile legs, and balanced backside and hips” (腕活，腿灵，臀肩腰配合) and aim towards achieving “motion in stability, stability in motion” (稳中有浪，浪中有稳). Therefore, yang’ge aesthetically seeks to unite a sense of beauty and charm with strength and dynamism.

Another important characteristic of the dancing movement is described as “wavelike but not floating” (浪而不浮) (Xin 1992: 42). According to Xin Ru, another dance scholar in northeast China, “The dancer takes a leisurely but nimble posture from which
both shoulders flutter, like a flying bird in the spring wind whirling around, at times standing on tip toes, at times the soles brushing the ground, forward three steps, back three steps, issuing forth great vivacity.” The movements should, while achieving “dynamism in stability, stability in dynamism,” also aim for a “pizzazz” (gen jin’er 哄劲儿), “beauty” (mei jin’er 美劲儿), and “liveliness” (pola jin’er 泼辣劲儿) (Du 1992: 54).

Acting, which includes role-playing, farcical vignettes, and acrobatic movements, is another important performance aspect of northeastern yang’ge. In general, the performers will dress up as characters from historical stories and mythical legends with roles that may be similarly divided as those in Peking Opera, such as male roles chou 丑 and sheng 生 and the female roles hua 花 or niu 娘; other common roles include the monk, scholar, and merchant. There are also humorous characters such as lao kuai 老鹞 (who carries a pipe or sometimes rice husk in his hand, a red pepper dangling from his ear), sha zhuzi 傻柱子 (wearing his hat crooked and leather coat backwards), and er xiaozhi 二小子 (with a hemp rope tied about his waist and pigtail extending vertically to the heavens) (Duan 1992: 46).

Typical vignettes familiar to audiences in the northeast include those that emphasize acrobatic agility and humor, such as the chasing a butterfly vignette, in which clowns chase after a butterfly with comical actions and acrobatics. The different yang’ge acts or performances are flexible, and may include singing and other folk performances such as quyi 曲艺 (“art of melodies”). Popular stories and fables, many of which are excerpts from popular fictional narratives, are also the subject of yang’ge vignettes, including “[Lin] Daiyu buries flowers” (Daiyu zang hua 黛玉葬花), “Transcendent Xu borrows the umbrella” (Xuxian jie san 许仙借伞), “Liang [Shanbo] and Zhu [Yingtai] turn into butterflies” (Liang
Zhu hua die (梁祝化蝶), “Student Zhang Sheng flirts with Yingying” (Zhangsheng xi Yingying 张生戏莺莺), “Monkey Sun thrice beats the White Bone Demon” (Sun Wukong san da bai gujing 孙悟空三打白骨精), “Piggy finds a spouse” (Zhu Bajie zhao qin 猪八戒招亲). Other vignettes include more realistic portrayals of everyday life such as “picking flowers and chasing butterflies” (cai hua cai die 采花采蝶), “stealing the fan” (dua shanzi 夺扇子), “grabbing for fish” (mo yu 摸鱼) (Du 1992: 54).

The role-playing for many characters should be *dou*逗, amusing and entertaining, as reflected by the commonly referred aesthetics of “amusing but not tasteless” (*dou er bu su*逗而不俗), “dynamically amusing” (*dou de huo*逗得活), “amusing with bite and beauty” (*dou de gen*逗得哏), (*dou de mei*逗得美), “rustic but not tasteless” (*tu er bu su*土而不俗). The importance of *dou* as an aesthetic is reflected by the popular saying: If a yang'ge lacks a “clown” (*chou*) you might as well go home and sleep on the hot *kang* (kan yang'ge que le chou, bu ru hui jia shui kangtou 看秧歌缺了丑，不如回家睡热炕头). Many of the performers, in addition to being in costume, will carry certain props typical of or specific to the character or role being portrayed. The performers who are not portraying characters will also usually carry props, including fans, scarves, drums, umbrellas, wooden clubs, etc. Northeastern yang'ge is also accompanied by a musical ensemble, including drums, gongs, cymbals, and sometimes *suonas* and clappers.

**SCYG in Beijing**

According to popular legend, Li Xiuying formed the first SCYG GROUP in Beijing in 1990. Despite the popularity of Tai Chi and dancing disco in the parks in the 1980s, yang'ge
provided a different social and recreation option for senior citizens. In the 1990s, *yang’ge* has become quite pervasive amongst senior citizens, as by one estimate there are 1,000 troupes in Beijing with 50-100 members each. In one of the few published discussions of SCYG, Lu (50) asks why China’s urban northeast has experienced such an explosion in popularity of *yang’ge*. Lu identifies three reasons: 1) emotional and psychological liberation [Lu quotes one senior citizen performer explaining: “We do *yang’ge* not just because we like it but because we are addicted, it is a pleasure that we couldn’t do without in our retirement life” (49)]; 2) health and fitness; 3) self-expression and a feeling of active participation. Another important factor we might to Lu’s is how the performances allow the performers to recycle the movements from the past, inducing a memory or nostalgia for the past, and integrating such memories into their identities within the unfolding contemporary arena.

In the Huapu troupe, there were about 60 members, 80% of whom were women, ranging from 55 to over 70 years old. All participants were volunteers, although nominal dues were required to pay for costumes and props. Most of the SCYG groups in Beijing perform in highly visible public places. Such performance arenas include, for example, lots outside large shopping centers, spaces alongside major intersections, and areas major freeway flyovers. The Huapu SCYG group selected its performance space on account of the bright lights that illuminated the area in front of the shopping center and its provision of a large, flat spatial area. Some troupes perform each morning (7-8 a.m.) and/or each evening (7-9 p.m.); some, also, in the case of the Huapu troupe, hold the “festival” (*hua hui* 花会) performance weekly (on Sundays) or during holidays, which involved more costumes, props, and more complete live musical accompaniment. In addition to their regular daily performances, some troupes were invited for special events by the local government,
business merchants, or even privately hosted celebrations or gatherings. In 1998, the majority of SCYG groups received funding from the local government with annual stipends and stipends for special performances at government-sponsored events. The groups also received small honoraria on occasion for performing at special events hosted by businesses or individuals—such as the opening of a new restaurant, a department store’s anniversary, or a wedding. The majority of SCYG groups in Beijing performed in public areas, but in the case of the Huapu troupe, a cooperative arrangement was made with the Huapu shopping center in which the SCYG group was permitted to perform there if they also performed for special events sponsored by the shopping center.82

**Description of SCYG Performance**83

The performance I discuss below occurred on the last day of September, the evening before October 1st, China’s National Day. The troupe leader had invited me to this particular performance nearly a month before. She was certain that I would be more interested in it because of its inclusion of costumes and props. However, the final date could not be confirmed until only several days before the performance. Apparently the performance was originally scheduled for October 1st but had to be changed to a day earlier in accordance with regulations.

Although, according to the group’s troupe leader, the group had about sixty dues-paying members, on average, about 30-40 members would show up to the evening dance performances. For *hua hui*, the performance of which is usually restricted to holidays and special occasions, about 40 dancers participated, in addition to a musical ensemble of four. The *hua hui* was to start at 7 pm—the standard time for the beginning of evening *yangge*
performances. More than half of the members arrive at least ten minutes early and the musical ensemble also starts to set up about ten minutes prior to 7 pm. During this preparation time, a few members walk around the parking lot to identify and block off the dance area. Cars are not moved out of the way but after the dance area is defined, members will prevent other cars from parking in the area. During the performance, sometimes a car needs to drive through the dance area, in which case the dance continues uninterrupted while several dancers or audience members help to usher the car through the dance procession and audience. The dance area is about 30 meters long and fifteen meters wide.

During the preparation time, the dancers adjust clothing, inspect props, mingle and joke around with each other, and do some warm-up dance movements. The musicians in the musical ensemble, consisting of 1 drummer and 3 cymbalists, also warm up, preparing their movements and testing out their rhythm and synchronization. The audience during the preparation time largely consists of family members or friends of the dancers. The audience mainly stands around the perimeter although some audience members also sit on the stone ledge in front of the shopping center. Just before 7 pm, there are about 50 people in the audience.

At about 7:05 pm, the dancers, numbering about 30 at this point, casually form two lines and as the music starts, they file into the lines, dancing forward to the accompaniment of the music. They are not wearing costumes at this point but just loose fitting clothing. They hold the standard props of a handkerchief in the left hand and fan in the right hand. The dancers stay in the double line formation, dancing with the yang’ge movement forward about 20 meters, before doubling-back and returning once again. The group leader faces the two lines, about five meters in front, dances to the beat while directing the dancers. This
procession continues until 7:40 pm. During the dancing, additional dancers continue to join as they arrive, and by 7:40 pm there are a total of about 40 dance participants. The group leader signals to the music ensemble and troupe to start the last round. Upon completion, the dancers mingle with each other and members of the audience and prepare for the second part of the performance by putting the costumes over their leisurewear.

The costumes include an embroidered polyester top and pants in pink or green, black embroidered apron, and different types of headpieces. About half of the dancers change into these outfits. During this transition period, the music ensemble rests and some players carry on with the cymbal crashing although with less co-ordination and formality. As the dancers change into their costumes, some begin the dancing movements, partially in conjunction with the musical accompaniment. About ten dancers wear unique costumes. One lady, wearing the green embroidered polyester outfit, has a heavily made-up face and carries a candied-apple staff in her right hand and a wand in her left hand. She is one of the first to break into dance; she is paired with a man who carries two candied-apple staffs, one in each hand. He wears a yellow embroidered polyester top, white cowboy hat, large pink belt, and has a large, obviously fake moustache. His movements are less exaggerated and not as responsive to the lady’s movements, but she is apparently trying to encourage him to break into a more energetic dance.

At about 7:55 pm, the second part begins to involve more of the dancers, about twenty in total. The troupe leader is wearing the donkey outfit, designed to look like she is riding a donkey. A younger looking man, playing the character of her “groom,” wearing the yellow embroidered polyester outfit and grasping a stick between both hands, dances near her. Another female dancer is dressed to appear like she is riding in a palanquin. Several
women in purple outfits dance around the palanquin, which is carried in the back by a man with a long beard. One older man wearing a purple outfit wears a baby mask and dances casually by himself. One older woman leads a group of four women all wearing baby masks. These groups of dancers circle around the dance area, dancing to the musical accompaniment, until 8:20 pm. While they are dancing, they interact with each other, sometimes with more formal movements, but usually moving with much more fluidity and spontaneity. The audience number peaks at a little past 8 pm, when the second part of the performance just starts to come together, with about 150 people. About one third of the people in the audience are family and friends of the dancers, another third are made up of people who just happened to be strolling by the dance area—either just walking out of the shopping center or taking an evening stroll—and another third consist of migrant construction workers who were staying in dormitories in the construction sites near the dance area.

During the last few minutes of the dancing, as signaled by the group leader, the musical ensemble begins to pick up the pace of the accompaniment, the dancing slightly increases in its speed and the dancers put a little more energy into the movements. When the music stops, the dancing also stops, and most of the people in the audience leave the area very quickly. Most of the dancers take off their outfits and regroup with family and friends. About fifteen of the dancers remain in the dance area and continue mingling with each other, even continuing to carry out some dance movements. Some of the dancers in very high spirits continue to chat with each other, with a few exchanging flirting gestures or teasing comments with each other. By 8:40 pm, the dancers and audience have all left the dance area and normal traffic returns.
Responses to SCYG

Through informal discussions with the Huapu SCYG performers and other passers-by, I collected anecdotal information suggesting the motivations for performing yang'ge that are quite similar to Lu’s cited above. Performers often cited health, social benefit, and entertainment as the three main reasons for performing yang'ge.

**1. Health**

I feel really animated the whole day after a morning session. Now I still do yang'ge even when cooking in the kitchen. (SCYG performer, 65 year old woman)

How can sitting inside all day long be good for one’s physical and mental conditions? Yang'ge makes us all healthy and full of joy. (SCYG performer; man in mid-50s)

**2. Social benefit**

My troupe was quite popular. From time to time we were invited to perform at gatherings that advocated saving water, saving electricity and promoting family planning. I felt quite pleased even though all was done for free. I'm proud that at my age I still can do something for society. (Granny Yang, Huapu YG troupe leader)

**3. Entertainment**

It’s much better than staying home and playing mahjong. In fact, yang'ge is the highlight of the twilight life. To a certain extent, the charm of yang'ge lies in the courage to ignore the conventional dull and routine roles expected by the young. Senior citizens do not care to be forgotten, sidelined, or marginalized by society. At least they have the right to choose their lifestyle. (SCYG performer, woman in mid-60s)

Although many people, younger and older, support the senior citizens desire to entertain themselves and exercise, many have caustic criticisms of SCYG. The main basis for the criticisms included: visually unappealing, too noisy and rowdy, and obstructive of traffic.
1. Visually unappealing: the make-up and costumes are gaudy and distasteful

Many outsiders claim that our gaudy dresses are unbecoming and our heavy make-up farcical. They say that with the way we dance, we’re not only making fools of ourselves, but we also make a scene. (SCYG performer, woman in early 60s)

_Yang’ge_ is just a tasteless activity. The bright costumes are gaudy and the music is cacophonous. (70 year old woman from Shanghai)

Beijing youth cannot relate to this type of rural, folk activity. (20 year old pop singer)

2. Too noisy

Although a few years ago the municipal government restricted performances of SCYG to 7:30-8:30 each evening and forbid the use of live instrumentalists (only recordings allowed), many groups have not abided by these rules.

The boisterousness of _yang’ge_ is disruptive. However, these elderly men and women have experienced very arduous lives with few opportunities to enjoy themselves. (30 year old financial manger at American Fortune 500 Company)

3. Obstructive of traffic; the performances and audience can cause traffic flow problems

“These people have nothing better to do. They are just loafing around, bored silly.”
(male taxi driver, about 30 years old)

Zhang Geng (1977: 62) notes that one of the main characteristics of _yang’ge_ in the last decade is a generation gap:

The middle-aged and elderly, in terms of past remembrances and aspirations for their present lives, perceive _yang’ge_ as offering a certain sentimental attachment. For them, _yang’ge_ is filled with a type of yearning. Within their memories of childhood, _yang’ge_ is a type of sacred art and a symbol of the holidays. The festive atmosphere is enlivened with the tones of the _suona_ and the ringing of the drums. Tradition,
celebration, and inspiration all relieve their hearts of their burdens. They are at the point of departure for a new life. A new year would not be possible without \textit{yang\'ge}.

\textbf{Re-creating Self through Performance}

I have found Barbara Meyerhoff’s ethnographic study of the elderly Jewish communities in California to be helpful in analyzing the SCYG. She has been applauded for her case studies that highlight the cultural creativity of subordinated or marginal groups (Meyerhoff 1992: 3).

In “We Don’t Wrap Herring in a Printed Page,” Meyerhoff writes:

\begin{quote}
In the Graduation-Siyum [a ceremony which marks the old Jews attainment of a certain level of religious education] the old Jews can present themselves as people of significance and dignity while they are shaming those who deserted them, and at the same time bolster and define their own sense of worth. In this ritual they exercise that basic human prerogative, the right to indicate who they are to the world, interpret themselves to themselves instead of allowing the world, accident, history and reality, if you will, to provide an interpretation for them. (Moore 1977: 218)
\end{quote}

What I would like to build on, in the context of the \textit{yang\'ge} troupe in Beijing, is this notion of a difference between what is presented, defined, and asserted within the performance frame by the performers and dominant social norms, value systems, structures, or ideologies. In light of Meyerhoff’s study, we can compare the social norm to the performed ideal in an analysis of SCYG.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Social Norm} & \textbf{Performed Ideal} \\
\hline
Marginality & Centrality \\
Burden on society & Asset to society \\
Disavowal of sensuality and sex & Suggestion of sensuality and sex \\
Deprived of tradition & Revitalizers of tradition \\
Life of hardship & Retirement as pleasure \\
Neglected & Respected \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Comparison of Social Norm and Performed Ideal}
\end{table}
Counting down the days    Eternal health
Wasting Time    Healthy pastime

If the social norm for senior citizens is social exclusion and marginality, the performers of SCYG literally move into the spotlight, performing in highly visible public spaces. By performing amidst new shopping centers, new technology, and new commodities, the senior citizens would perform against a feeling of exclusion from the trends of commercialization and rapid commodification in the 1990s. If senior citizens are commonly viewed by younger working people as not contributing to society, through performing, the senior citizen members gained the belief they are entertaining their family members and others in the audience—largely composed of members of the floating population and passersby—and in this way directly affecting and contributing to the lives of others. In addition, their performances at government events or other functions also contributed to their sense of self as contributing members of society. If the social norm is for senior citizens to disavow sex, sexiness, and sensuality, through their performance of yang'ge, with their caked make-up, showy costumes, and the flirtation in the dramatic narratives, they transform themselves through the performance into the subjects of sensual pleasure for each other.

Most SCYG performers were born prior to 1949. As such, they endured the destructive political campaigns that sought to erase their traditional heritage, but through their performance of yang'ge, and in particular with recycling of certain characters and narratives of folk tales, legends, and traditional stories, they resuscitate a, albeit largely imagined, cultural heritage through the performance. Enduring the momentous trials and tribulations of China’s history of revolution and reform, the senior citizens have lived
through much unrest and turmoil; however, through the performance they liberate themselves from the struggles of the past and achieve a retirement of leisure and pleasure. If the social norm for senior citizens is a life with fewer and fewer friends, through the performance they feel as if they are adored by many, as they are surrounded by an audience of family members, friends, and strangers. If the social norm for senior citizens is pessimism about personal health, by performing SCYG they strive to become physically fit.

The performance of SCYG, as discussed above, conforms to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the carnival and carnivalization, as originally introduced in his *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin notes that during carnival “the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended,” so that carnival is “the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life” (1965: 122-23). The troupe’s *bua bui* (“festival”) performance displays many of these key elements of “carnival.” These include, for example, free and familiar contact among different types of people (senior citizens are usually thought of as sitting at home rather than actively creating a cultural spectacle), free expression of latent sides of human nature through eccentric conduct (as illustrated in the acting out of flirtatious expressions and movements), and misalliances (senior citizens in a central location performing sensuously).

**Social Transformation?**

Above, I have tried to show how the *yang’ge* cultural performances intersect with and engage, even challenging, certain social norms, external to or internalized, about the elderly. Based
on the personal narratives by the performers, *yang'ge* has an impact on their personal lives and sense of self that can be considered *transformative*. However, the question remains as to whether the “cultural performance” of SCYG asserts or enacts a transformative impact on society. I will approach this question by discussing the donkey dance (*pao lü* 跑驴), which was a key performance act in the Huapu group’s *hua hui* (“festival”) performance. In pre-1940s *yang'ge*, the *pao lü* dance acts out the story of “the fool retrieving his wife” (*Sha zhuzi jie xifu* 傻柱子接媳妇). This story behind the act is that the fool, on account of his greed, had his wife hired as a maid at a wealthy man’s house. At the approach of the New Year, the fool wants his wife to return home to spend the New Year celebration with him. However, the wealthy man cunningly prevents the fool from retrieving his wife. The act is filled with flirtation between the wealthy man and the fool’s wife, and the fool is comically portrayed as unsuccessfully pursuing his wife.

In the 1940s, this traditional narrative was criticized on two accounts: for valorizing the landlord class and for depicting licentious and vulgar themes. Therefore, Zhou Guobao created a new story in which a wife, child in arm, rides a donkey to return to her parents’ home after the New Year, as tradition prescribed. Her husband chases after her as he can’t bear to be parted from her. After crossing a stream, the donkey gets stuck in mud, and a peasant comes to help get the donkey out. After the donkey has been rescued from the mud, with the peasant’s assistance, the happy couple continues on their journey. The revision of the narrative was applauded for its preservation of traditional elements, such as the traditional custom and narrative motif of “seeing one’s wife off to her family” (*Song xifu hui niangjia* 送媳妇回娘家), and its original comic nature, while purging the “negative” or “non-revolutionary” elements, such as the depiction of illicit desire, flirtation, and lascivious
actions. More importantly, the traditional narrative was abandoned because of its heroic
depiction of the wealthy man as the one who obtains the woman, while the peasant is
portrayed mockingly as a fool who deserves to have his wife stolen from him, and the wife
expresses illicit desire for the wealthy man.

The revolutionary revision of the narrative reveals the assumption that the traditional
version affirmed a social hierarchy antagonistic to the new communist program. The
narrative may not have been revised had it been viewed as potentially subversive to the
established social order—as latently harboring a challenge to the social hierarchy, namely the
oppressive dominance of the land-lord class. However, if the traditional narrative is viewed
in terms of its carnivalesque character, its mocking display of class relations, an acting out
and exposure of class inequality made farcical by its exaggerated and comical sensuous
content, it becomes cathartic at the very least as entertainment for the underclass and may
very well contain the seeds for instigating a spontaneous social change, or precisely what

The question of whether the imitation, exaggeration, or comical farce results in
bolstering the ideological domination of the oppressed underclass or in subverting it is not
as important as the act’s incorporation within mainstream ideological culture. This
ambivalence and the possibilities of interpretation—“play” outside of strict ideology—was
not tolerated or permitted by the mainstream official ideology of the communist regime.
The official re-interpretation of the narrative, although not entirely devoid of all comical
elements, replaces farce and lascivious flirtation with the worker, peasant, soldier artistic
orientation and policy as outlined in Mao’s 1942 “Yan’an Talks”; the united, happy family—
representing the unity of the Party and masses—replaces the comical love triangle. “Play”
must be totally circumscribed by the political ideology to prevent the potential for spontaneous rupture outside of the dominant ideology. This re-creation by the official ideology illustrates the process in which, to borrow Turner’s terms, a “liminoid,” or potentially transgressive/transformative cultural performance is transformed into a “liminal,” or ideologically affirming one (1982b: 20-60).

In light of the traditional narrative’s appropriation by official ideology, what is the meaning of the revival or the re-enactment of the pao lü act in the SCYG performance of hua hui? We clearly witness the revival of the pre-revolutionary version’s mode of desire as in the flirtation between the characters. This flirtatious behavior between the performers in a fluid state between “in character” and “out of character,” is even carried over after the end of the performance, bridging into the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. The performance is transformative of personal identity; the performers are displaying a self counter to a social norm of marginality or obsolescence. As the leader of the Huapu troupe repeated countless times, “We missed out on fun in our lives. What’s wrong with a few old people getting together to have a good time.”

In regards to the flourishing of the popular entertainment industry in the 1990s following market reforms, the SCYG groups appear to be right in sync. However, as Schechner (1996) mentions, in modern societies, the state apparatuses take over festivity, as the “state fears unregulated traffic.” There is no doubt that the troupes are causing a real and practical obstruction of traffic and asserting a significant license on public space and peace.

Why do local governments endorse these cultural performances? Is the performance reaffirming the official ideology in some way, or are the performances being used by the
official ideology? Is the “cultural performance” license on public space and peace permitted in as much as it is merely a conspicuous display that the government cares about retirees on the margin? Could this cultural performance of yang’ge be transforming the personal perceptions of self of the elderly, perhaps transforming the social norms about the elderly, but simultaneously being harnessed by the official ideology for nationalistic purposes? The official use of yang’ge are expressed by Deng Jian and Zhang Jian (1992: 40), scholars of Chinese dance in northeast China:

The formation and development of northeastern yang’ge’s artistic vitality showcases outstanding ethnic (national) culture and stimulates ethnic (nationalistic) spiritual needs. It is a requirement of the people’s for self-entertainment, self-appreciation, fitness, and beauty. It is a requirement for the expansion of certain ethnic activities, in addition to integrating with economic trade and commercial trade. We deeply believe that northeastern yang’ge will build a new dynamism and vitality, quickening development, within the culture of Chinese socialism with special characteristics.

The passage above suggests that an official or national dimension of yang’ge performance still needs to be considered. I do not believe that SCYG is a utopian site free of national and state appropriation, as suggested by Jing Wang (2001). From one perspective, the senior citizen performers are citing past histories (pre-revolutionary and revolutionary) through their performances that help them to forge their identities in the postsocialist China. From another perspective, through the restoration of certain aesthetics of pre-revolutionary forms of yang’ge, they may also be reclaiming the “local” from its state and national ideological appropriation and inscription. However, the district-level governments in Beijing had provided financial and legal support for SCYG. Therefore, at a certain level, the state was involved in the recycling of yang’ge in Beijing. One reason for this may be that many of the participants were members of the population waiting to be displaced to Beijing’s outer suburbs. While their homes were waiting to be demolished, the government granted them a
certain license over public space. However, the municipal government limited the extent of this license. For example, the government did not permit SCYG to be performed on the streets (although it was permitted in the parks) during the International Olympic Committee’s visit to Beijing in 2000.

Conclusion

The SCYG performances illustrate the complexity of contemporary Chinese cultural production in the late 1990s, and as such, suggest the irrelevance of adopting methods of questioning and analysis based on oppositional politics. I concur with Jing Wang’s assertion that the examination of contemporary Chinese culture requires an elucidation of the multiple layers of discourse articulated within “a constellation of different social, cultural, legal, and economic practices and discourses” (Wang Jing 2001: 98) that form a complex network of alliances. The recycling of a folk cultural practice illustrates the simultaneous complicities and divisions between different layers of practice and discourse. From one perspective, I disagree with Jing Wang’s interpretation that SCYG exemplifies one of the few types of leisure activities not appropriated by the state in postsocialist China. The street dancing embodies a community spirit and recreational pleasure that remains ostensibly out of the state’s reach. Moreover, the dance’s recycling of pre-revolutionary narratives can also be interpreted as a re-appropriation by mass culture of popular practices that had previously been “revolutionized” and exploited by the Chinese Communist Party by mass culture. However, the state’s (Beijing government) sanctioning of SCYG, at least from 1998-2002—as indicated by financial support and integration of SCYG in government-related events—suggests qualifying the utopian interpretation Jing Wang offers. Rather, the performances
propose an examination of multiple layers of discourses (such as local/global, state/non-state) that compose the hybridity of cultural performance in China in the 1990s.
Introduction

This chapter analyzes the discourses and practices that contributed to the performance of the “Titanic miracle” in China in the late nineties. Whereas the previous chapter examines a type of cultural performance that although not formally staged occurs within a recognized performance space, with performers, and an audience, this chapter engages the notion of performance on a more macro-social and political scale. The local/global nexus also plays a critical role in shaping and informing the features and social dynamics of the type of cultural performance under discussion.

As mentioned in the introduction, we can view Titanic as performing a variety of complexly intertwined roles within China’s social and political infrastructure. As such, this analysis suggests critical implications in terms of the forms and practices of cultural production in China in the late 1990s. One of the key issues in the discourses informing the “miracle” is whether the film can turn a profit and invigorate the China film market to attain greater financial productivity. In this way, Titanic’s performance, in terms of profitability, was key to both official and commercial discourses and practices involved with the film’s institutional reception, distribution, and marketing within China. In particular, this chapter discusses how the blockbuster plays a key role in the emerging collaboration between official
ideology and transnational capitalism in China’s cultural production market in the late
nineties. In the end, such complicities serve to inform China’s contemporary culture industry
with official ideology performing as transnational capitalism and the other way around in a
mutually enforcing cycle of exchange.

Hollywood Films and Globalization

In the fall of 1997 and the spring of 1998, James Cameron’s Titanic armada zigzagged across
the Pacific in what appeared to be a random pattern. After igniting a frenzy of Leonardo
idolatry in Japan and upon receiving awards at the Tokyo International Film Festival, Titanic
opened in America on December 19, destroying all box office records. Propelled by the
film’s acquisition of trophies, including eleven Academy Awards, and formidable global
revenues—$1.5 billion by April 1998—Titanic stormed China, according to schedule, in the
beginning of April. Despite initial anxiety over its commercial performance, the film
procured box office records in cities throughout China, and theaters grossed 200 million
yuan (about $24.4 million) in revenues during its first month (Weng Li 1998: 4). The Chinese
media referred to the unprecedented box office revenues as the Titanic “miracle” (奇迹).
The film seemed to spread like wildfire throughout China, including the remotest parts of
the country.

Although Hollywood films were introduced to China at the beginning of the century,
and continued to be a major influence on China’s filmmaking through the Republican period
(1911–1949), they were denounced and banned by the Maoist government after 1949 for
epitomizing the decadent bourgeois ideology of the West. Hollywood films were not
screened publicly in the PRC until the advent of Deng Xiaoping’s “open-door policy” and
implementation of market reform in the late 1970s. However, because of the Chinese government’s erratic cultural policies and ambivalent official position toward Western cultural products, the number of Hollywood films released was very limited, and those that were released, tended to be older because of the huge expense involved in purchasing more current Hollywood films. The position of Hollywood films in China, however, changed radically in 1994 when the Ministry of Broadcast, Film, and Television issued a measure that endorsed the importation and regulated the distribution of select foreign films each year. This measure facilitated the institutionalization of Hollywood films in China and propelled the Chinese film industry toward greater commercialization.

Hollywood is a cultural and commercial force with a long history of crossing national boundaries. The proliferation of its cultural artifacts throughout the world during the last century implicates the American-based film industry in the “globalization of culture.” Moreover, because the global distribution of Hollywood’s cultural artifacts is in part motivated by the accumulation of capital, the traffic of transnational capital is necessarily tied up with an interpretation of Hollywood’s cultural artifacts. An inquiry into the production and consumption of Hollywood’s cultural products in a cross-cultural setting, thus, is an investigation into the practices of transnational commodification implicit in the globalizing industry of culture. In this chapter, through the copious materials provided by the Titanic miracle, I explore numerous issues in China’s contemporary culture industry, such as the globalization of culture (how is China participating in and reinventing a globalized culture?), the commercialization of culture (how are China’s market reforms affecting the culture industry?), and transnational capitalism (how are alliances being constructed along the axis of capital across national borders?). In addition, based on a detailed investigation into the commercial practices and discursive rhetoric that shaped the Titanic miracle, I discuss how
the *Titanic* miracle highlights the complex relationship between the fields of commerce (e.g., market mechanisms) and governance (e.g., state regulation) in contemporary China.

Theories of the globalization of culture can be divided into those that emphasize cultural homogenization and those that stress cultural heterogeneity. In general, proponents of the former warn and lament that the globalization of culture, as propelled by transnational flows of capital, is resulting in the erasure of cultural difference, and thus the vitiation of local cultures and the of heterogeneous cultural subjects. This version of globalization is commonly dubbed the “homogenization,” “hemogenization,” “Americanization,” or even “McDonaldization” of culture. Proponents of the latter, sometimes labeled “heterogenizers,” express reluctance at adopting a model in which local difference is completely erased or written over by a monolithic, isomorphic global culture. They tend to emphasize local (mis)readings and (mis)interpretations. Central to these theories is the role of subjectivity and the imagination in negotiating the global/local nexus. The imaginary, in conjunction with various flows of metropolises, such as technology, finance, images, and consumption, is, according to Arjun Appadurai, “neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (1996: 6).

In the ongoing discussion about orientalism, the possibility of employing an indigenized version of an orientalist discourse, as argued by Xiaomei Chen (1995), also emphasizes local resistance to monolithic systems of oppression and exploitation. For Chen, discourses that are constituted by globalism and/or orientalism can always be appropriated for expedient, local concerns, their articulation identifying the interlocutors as the agents of an indigenized discourse. The “heterogenizers” also frequently reject the local/global binary, expressing the notion that the global cultural economy is better described by the circulation
(or “flows,” to use Appadurai’s term) of metropolises that render simple dualistic opposites obsolete. For them, the “global” is always already “local,” and the “local” is always already “global.” However, the resistance to metanarratives by those who focus on local subversions and the flexibility of spatial and temporal positioning, according to Arif Dirlik, is symptomatic of postmodernism’s inability to critically engage with the process of globalization, which for Dirlik is first and foremost an issue of global capitalism. By neglecting a totality of structures, postmodernism has a tendency to “slide into political irrelevance upon the slippery slopes of a fluid narcissism” (1996: 36).

The argument that Hollywood films are constructing identical cultural consumers and erasing indigenous and local difference throughout the world is rejected by Semati and Sotirin (1999), whose study is based on the theoretical discussions on cultural hegemony proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). They point to inherent paradoxes in the circulation of Hollywood films: first, Hollywood films purvey a local “American” culture, but they are designed to appeal to a global audience; second, they promote democratic values while at the same time limiting free choice. Summarizing their analysis of Hollywood’s unstable and ambiguous global position, they write: “Hollywood’s hegemony participates in the proliferation of social conflicts and political identities that resist the increasing commodification, bureaucratization, and mass-mediated consumerism of the late twentieth century. At the same time, Hollywood is increasingly equated with these forces” (Semati/Sotirin 1999: 183). In this sense, images from Hollywood movies are seen to operate within the indigenous imagination, constructing identities and desires, which, when related to social practice, result in agential expression and action. Yet, the paradox of consumption is invoked, because the desire for and act of consuming images and consumption by these images are simultaneously articulated.
The paradox Semati and Sotiri n have observed cannot be more apparent than in the case of Titanic—a film that ostensibly promotes moral values of egalitarianism yet pursues an avaricious course of global box office conquest. Yet although their approach entertains the possibility of agency in a local appropriation of global cultural products, it fails to address the issue of how consumer practices contribute to capital accumulation, the maintenance of international divisions of labor, and the forging of a transnational capitalist class. While trying to evade the pitfall of denying local cultures agency, “heterogenizers” like Semati and Sotiri n focus more on semantic and hermeneutic ambiguity of discourses and subject positions and tend to shrink away from discussions of transnational commercial practices.

The theoretical trends that stress local agency, local appropriation, and local points of resistance or subversion are further reinforced by two academic practices particular to scholars of contemporary China in their discussions of globalization and postcolonialism. These practices marginalize academic interventions that take transnational capitalism as their primary category of analysis. First, in treating the local/global nexus, most scholars of contemporary China look at cultural products in relation to official Party/state culture, contextualizing the discussion of globalization within China’s immediate political landscape. Within this type of analysis, many scholars tacitly hold the notion that commercialization is the road to China’s political liberation. Second, scholars with a postmodern sensibility question this, setting official discourse/practice antagonistically against popular discourse and commercial practice. For example, arguing that the consumption process cannot be “policed” because it “opens market forces to ‘play’ and recoding,” Dutton argues that “while recognizing this power of consumption to supplement and promote Chinese government initiatives and dreams, one must simultaneously recognize that it is irreducible to such initiatives and dreams (1998: 280).
Many academics, especially within China, in addition to contending with the mainstream view that commercialization will promote political and personal emancipation, also confront the stigma that is attached to Marxist-oriented analyses of contemporary Chinese culture in China today. In her analysis of the media in China, Yuezhi Zhao (1998) seems to avoid the pitfalls associated with both the commercialism-as-political-emancipation discourse and Marxist-oriented views, though it should be noted that Zhao is writing outside of China. She concedes that the commercialization of the media may possess a challenge to the Party logic; however, she debunks the myth that commercialized media are necessarily democratic and warns of the possibility of the emergence of an alternative media system in China in which commercialism fuses with authoritarian propaganda. However, like scholars in China who adopt a Marxist line of cultural critique, she benefits from the circulation of resources (technological, financial, theoretical, etc.) facilitated by practices of transnational capitalism. Those scholars who seemingly break free from these practices still benefit from them—a relationship that is quite often overlooked.

In my discussion of *Titanic*, I do not pretend to unravel the complicated dynamics of the local/global and official/commercial relationships, or to solve the puzzle of how to construct a voice informed by a self-conscious critical positioning. However, by exploring the complicity between commercial practices and official rhetoric, I hope to illustrate how processes involving both the *commercialization of official discourse* and the *officialization of commercial practices* are informing the culture industry in China today. I also seek to highlight how the shared interests of profit maximizers at home and abroad are shaping China’s burgeoning culture industry. In the end, what we seem to have is a conjunction between Hollywood movie moguls and high-ranking officials, whose ideological differences and national loyalties are negotiated through a shared homage to the accumulation of capital.
Finally, I want to highlight how the *Titanic* miracle is an example of the transnational, transcultural phenomenon termed “production fetishism” by Appadurai, in which the transnational production of culture is obscured and hidden, fetishized at the local level.96

**Profit Maximization: Transnational Alliance**

An insulated Chinese film market was radically altered by the 1994 film importation measure, according to which, beginning in 1995, ten imported “excellent films” (*hao dianying* 好电影) would be released each year. The measure further stipulated that these “excellent films” should reflect the high achievements of global cinema and be representative of contemporary cinematic art and technological accomplishments. Dai Jinhua (1999) closely scrutinizes and questions the rhetoric of the 1994 film policy and its reinterpretation (*zhuanyi* 转译) by the China Film Company (Zhongguo dianying gongsi 中国电影公司, hereafter CFC), which is under the jurisdiction of the China Film Bureau within the Ministry of Television, Film, and Broadcasting. She points out that the “excellent films,” defined by the importation measure as possessing the highest standards of cinematic art, became the “ten great films” (*shi bu dapian* 十部大片) in the hands of the CFC.97 The “ten great films” selected in 1994 consisted of seven Hollywood and three Hong Kong films. Dai argues that although the measure emphasizes “cinematic art” and “technological achievement” as criteria, the selection was instead based on market expectation and profit potential.

Dai brings to our attention how the rhetoric of the 1994 measure lent itself to a reinterpretation by the profit-driven CFC. The discourse of global cultural achievement and artistic accomplishment legitimized the measure and masked its real agenda: the introduction of profit as the principal logic behind the distribution of film in China. The commercial
complicity between the CFC and Hollywood was further obfuscated, as Dai points out, by rhetoric that failed to offer resistance to Hollywood. Many supported the measure because they believed it allowed China’s film industry, and China by metonymic extension, to “march in unison with the world” (tongbu shijie 同步世界). The importation of dапiан 大片, it was felt, would make China a partner in the consumption of global culture. Others endorsed the measure for its ability to assist in the transformation of the Chinese economy; it was praised for “introducing the mechanism of competition” (yinjin jingzheng jizhi 引进竞争机制). The rhetoric of “by confronting a person with the danger of death, he will fight and live” (zhi sidi er housheng 置死地而后生) is representative of those who were more ambivalent about the endorsement of Hollywood films but believed that it was the only way to resuscitate the Chinese film industry (Zheng 1994).

The rhetoric of the 1994 film importation measure (“contemporary cinematic art” and “technological achievement”) resurfaces in the media coverage of Titanic. The film was typically described in the media both as a technological and an artistic tour de force. In terms of the economic effect of the film, the Titanic miracle confirmed the validity of the 1994 importation measure because it helped “rejuvenate” (fusu 复苏) the domestic film industry. As with the media response to the 1994 measure, issues of commercial complicity between Hollywood and China’s commercial film apparatuses were obscured by accolades of the film’s artistic “achievements” and its contribution to the vitality of China’s film market.

The 1994 film importation measure and its interpretation by the CFC resulted in the appropriation of the Chinese film industry by transnational capitalism (Dai 1999). In addition to stipulating the importation of “excellent films,” the 1994 measure also introduced a new system to manage film and revenue distribution. This new system, referred
to as the split-income system (分帐体制), divided revenues among the Hollywood studio, the CFC, movie theaters, and the provincial and municipal film companies. This system clearly promotes the advancement of transnational capitalism, because the foreign capitalists and domestic capitalists share the goals of profit maximization. Moreover, because the CFC was provided with monopoly power over the importation and distribution of foreign films, the split-profit system does not just represent a collusion of interests between capitalists within and outside of China; it also engenders complicity between a centralized, market-driven culture industry in China with foreign culture capitalists, such as those who run Hollywood studios. Based on profit incentives established by the split-profit system, the CFC, provincial and municipal film companies, and local movie theaters all stood to gain financially by cooperating and by coordinating marketing strategies. The split-profit system dictates that the CFC will receive a certain percentage of the total national revenues earned by a particular film. It is clearly in the CFC’s financial interest to select foreign films that will be box office hits in China. Under the CFC’s jurisdiction, the provincial and municipal film companies work cooperatively with it in the distribution and promotion of foreign films. It is in these companies’ financial interest to cooperate with the CFC, because they are also allocated revenues in accordance with the “split-profit” system.

The CFC and the provincial and municipal film companies considered Titanic, first and foremost, a business opportunity (商机). The film companies sought to exact as much profit as possible from Titanic. However, the vulgarity of an enterprise solely concerned with profit was made more palatable by construing the distribution of the film as a market experiment, a means of testing how a centralized organ such as the CFC could stimulate and influence the market. The film companies sought to use Titanic to evaluate
their marketing strategies and to harness the rapidly expanding advertising and media apparatuses in their task of engineering demand and augmenting revenues. When Titanic closed in China, the film companies analyzed the effectiveness of their marketing strategies with the hope of improving them for future datian. In what follows, I review the national, provincial, and municipal marketing strategies in order to highlight the effort, coordinated by the CFC, to maximize revenues.

The Marketing Program: Official/Commercial Discourse and Practice

The process of marketing Titanic began at the national level with directives issued from the CFC to provincial and municipal film companies. In January 1997, the CFC convened a meeting that included experts on American film, film critics, media representatives, managers of theaters, and officers from the publicity departments of the CFC and the Beijing Film Company. The following month, the CFC invited publicists and distributors from various provincial and municipal film companies (from regions selected by the CFC for the initial screening of Titanic) to meet with representatives from Fox to discuss the promotional strategies that were employed in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and America when the film opened in those markets. The CFC then drew up and published its marketing plans and prepared the film’s first promotional materials, which included such items as photos, background information, and videos. Meetings then were convened between the business managers of municipal film companies and the commercial film industry in order to draw up and coordinate promotional plans (Shu 1998: 23).

The CFC selected the beginning of April for the release of Titanic. This date was thought to be financially auspicious because it followed the Academy Awards ceremony and coincided with the eighty-sixth anniversary of the sailing of the Titanic. The provincial or
municipal film companies set the exact opening dates for different areas. For example, in Jiangsu the opening date was set for April 10, the day the ship set sail (Shu 1998: 23). In Beijing, the official release of the film was set for April 9, and in cities such as Shanghai and Chongqing, the date of release was April 1.

The distribution system dictated by the CFC for Titanic was different from that used in the past. Titanic was initially released only in the 150 theaters—all located in large urban areas—that had earned more than one million yuan (about $121,950) from one of CFC’s previous split-profit films. These theaters were the pillars of the film market and would thus serve a primary role in “heating up the market” (chao re shichang 炒热市场). The idea was that the most profitable theaters would continue to be profitable, and their success at attracting moviegoers would produce headlines propelling more people to see the film. Further, Titanic was to be shown in cycles, which was an unprecedented market experiment. Some cities, such as Beijing, released the film ahead of schedule for a short duration (chaoqian dianying 超前电影) so as to increase media attention and audience anticipation. Relying on the criterion of projected profitability, the CFC selected certain areas and theaters to show Titanic during the “initial run” (shoulun 首轮). Less profitable areas and theaters released the film during the “secondary run” (er lun 二轮), which followed the “initial run” by two to three weeks (Weng Li 1998: 4–6). However, the most profitable theaters continued to show the film even as it passed on to the “second run” theaters. The exact duration of the run, as well as the ticket prices, was to be adjusted to the market (Shu 1998: 23). For example, in Beijing, eighteen theaters were assigned to show Titanic from April 9 until the end of April. The twelve theaters with the highest revenues were then selected to continue to show the film until May 17, of which the six with the highest revenues were permitted to show Titanic
until the end of May (Yu Shaowen 1998). Prices in Beijing theaters decreased significantly over time. Whereas during Titanic’s first week, tickets ranged from about fifty to eighty yuan (about $6 to $10), the highest price ever set for a film in Beijing, they decreased to as low as twenty yuan ($2.50) by the end of May. Needless to say, many people complained about the extremely high price of the tickets, because eighty yuan exceeds ten percent of the average Beijinger’s monthly income.

The marketing of Titanic was divided into three stages: launching, advertising, and promotion. The launching stage primarily involved drawing up the marketing plans, creating and distributing promotional materials to the media, and preliminary advertising. The film companies realized that the media played a key role in publicizing Titanic (chao yingpian 炒影片). Thus, a primary objective of the launching phase was recruiting the media to assist the film companies in creating a “cinematic event” (dianying shijian 电影事件), “cultural phenomenon” (wenhua xianxiang 文化现象), and a “crazy frenzy of fashionable consumerism” (shishang xiaofei kuangchao 时尚消费狂潮). Preparation of promotional materials for the media was one of the most important publicity activities. Publicity by the CFC was initiated with an introduction to Titanic published in Beijing Youth (Beijing qingnian bao 北京青年报) on February 9, 1998. Promotional materials were prepared and submitted to newspapers, magazines, and television stations, and test screenings were arranged for journalists and critics. The CFC requested that provincial and municipal film companies, such as the Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou film companies, kick off their promotion campaigns by the end of February.

In order to coordinate and facilitate the film’s promotion, the CFC issued marketing guidelines and advertising points to the provincial and municipal film companies. In addition
to well-known facts about Titanic’s unprecedented budget, global box office revenues, and acquisition of film awards, the marketing guidelines played up the fact that this was the first time in Chinese film history that Chinese could watch, along with the rest of the world, a film that had just been awarded an Oscar for Best Picture. Media interest was also stirred up by linking the film to political and social headlines. During the Ninth People’s Congress, film companies distributed to the media President Jiang Zemin’s discussion of Titanic, which I comment on later. In addition, film companies suggested that the media discuss the well-covered topic of intellectual property rights in conjunction with the film, because pirated VCDs of the film threatened Titanic’s revenues in China. The success in attracting media attention is corroborated by the enormous quantity of articles about Titanic published in newspapers and magazines, as well as the special editions of magazines and television programs devoted to coverage of the film.102

In the middle of March, the film companies in the provinces and cities screening the “first run” of Titanic began to implement various advertising strategies. The goal of the advertising campaign was to make “those who were not participating in the trend to feel like stragglers” (Weng Li 1998: 4–6). Ads were released for print, radio, and television. Some film companies even issued set promotional phrases to be adopted in advertisements (Shu 1998: 23). Advertisements dotted roads, in the form of “road signs” (lu pai 路牌), and were placed strategically and ubiquitously at subway stations and bus stops throughout many cities. In Shanghai, the video screen in People’s Square advertised the film. More experimental forms of advertising were also tested, particularly in Shanghai. Telephone hotlines awarded prizes to callers who correctly answered trivia questions about the film. The hotline was proclaimed a success in Shanghai because over 15,000 people were reported to have participated. For
the first time, computer photo images of the film appeared across the entire length of two buses in Shanghai, and a Titanic car cruised around Shanghai’s avenues handing out promotions of the film along with advertisements for various products (Weng Li 1998: 4–6).

During the second phase of the film’s promotion, television publicity increased. In addition to standard advertisements, the film companies invested in television programs about the film. For example, the CFC sponsored the production of a CCTV special and Shanghai’s Yongle Film Company cosponsored a competition on a cable music station for the best translations of the Titanic theme song. The film companies became more concerned with the advertising of the “first run” theaters, and they devised plans to encourage these theaters to make special promotional efforts. To encourage individual theaters to create attractive environments, for example, the Shanghai Film Company sponsored a competition between the thirty theaters selected to show the film. Prompted by the competition, theaters subsequently decorated their interiors according to Titanic themes. For example, a boat protruded out of Shanghai’s Yingcheng’s stage, and at Siping, portholes were installed, providing a vista of the Titanic adrift in the distance. Life-size cardboard replicas of Jack and Rose greeted moviegoers at the entrance of many theaters. Some theaters installed state-of-the-art sound systems. Because Titanic was hyped as the first “imported blockbuster” to use digital sound, four theaters in Beijing installed FRD digital equipment so that they could attract more moviegoers (Chen Bai 1998). Indeed, those theaters in Beijing with the best audiovisual systems procured the highest box office revenues.

In their advertising strategies, the film companies argued for a new concept of film as both a commercial medium (meijie 媒介) and a commercial/cultural product (chanpin 产品) (Ci 1998: 30). Titanic was bought and sold like any other product, but it could also serve as a
vehicle for the advertisement of other products. Using the film to advertise products is first and foremost evident in the fact that Titanic, already a long movie, was preceded by eight minutes of advertising (only one minute of advertising is typical) (Chen Bai 1998: 7). Indeed, linking film with various consumer items was one of the main goals and characteristics of the Titanic miracle. The film companies were well aware that Titanic accessories had earned more than $500 million globally, and they sought to boost revenues by selling memorabilia such as telephone cards, playing cards, and coasters, which they designed and had manufactured. Memorabilia not designed by the film companies, such as photo books, books, posters, shirts, tapes and CDs, balloons, watches, and cards were also peddled in stores, in stalls, and by street vendors from Beijing to Lijiang. The act of consumption in general was also intertwined with the film. For example, at Beijing’s exclusive Sci-Tech shopping center, a free ticket to Dahua theater worth fifty yuan (about $6) was given to shoppers who made purchases of more than 1000 yuan (about $120). From April 3 to April 9, 1000 tickets were given out (Chen Bai 1998: 7).

The film companies sought to join hands with business partners in their advertising campaigns, and numerous companies took advantage of Titanic’s market prestige to boost their own revenues. For example, the Shanghai Film Company cooperated with Lee (the jeans company) and Motorola in a mutual advertising campaign to associate the film with Lee and Motorola products. Lee published a special newspaper on Titanic, and in conjunction with Motorola funded the previously mentioned computer-generated advertisement that was displayed on public buses in Shanghai. Moreover, Motorola sponsored a special car in Shanghai that promoted Titanic along with Motorola’s latest pagers. Lee’s market association with Titanic was apparently successful, because the company’s profits reportedly increased six times since the film’s release. The fact that numerous joint-
venture companies took advantage of *Titanic* as a market opportunity, whereas few state enterprises did, prompted a series of newspaper articles that probed this phenomenon and asked: “State enterprises, will you get on the boat?” (Zhang Yan 1998: 3). The Beijing apparel company Baishi Jiye (百事基业) obtained the ultimate badge of association with the film: the company received notification on April 6 that it had been granted the English and Chinese rights to the *Titanic* trademark for use with beer, beverages, clothing, cosmetics, bath accessories, and purses/briefcases. According to the law, this company has the sole Chinese right to this trademark for eternity. The media warned that granting such a right might heighten the international debate over intellectual property rights (Zhao Yinghua 1998).

After *Titanic* was released, special activities were sponsored by the theaters to increase revenues. Many theaters, for example, capitalized on the celebration of the eighty-sixth anniversary of the sinking of Titanic, hyping in particular April 14, 11:40 p.m. as the exact moment of the sinking. Many theaters in Beijing hosted special activities in conjunction with the anniversary. For example, Da Hua in Beijing handed out 1500 flowers to moviegoers, one for each passenger who had died in the tragedy (Diao 1998: 16). After April 30, the original undubbed English version of *Titanic* began to play at selected theaters in Beijing, promoted for its superior picture and sound quality, as well as for being five minutes longer (Er Song 1998).

In Shanghai, in order to encourage moviegoers to see the movie more than once, the Shanghai Film Company sponsored a raffle for those who had watched *Titanic* at least three times. *Radio and Television Weekly* (Meizhou guangbo dianshi 每周广播电视), the most widely distributed newspaper in Shanghai, advertised the raffle twice. Theaters and the media hosted activities that encouraged audience participation. For example, four theaters in
Beijing sponsored audience discussions (guanzhong 观众电评活动) beginning on April 9 (Anon. 1998a). Various newspapers also fostered audience participation. For example, Beijing Radio and Television (Beijing guangbao dianshi bao 北京广播电视报) invited readers to submit reactions to the film.105 Another venue for participation was the Internet; the service East.net (Dongfang wangjing gongsi 东方网景公司) [www.east.cn.net], which hosted a web site on the film, used the opportunity to advertise for its services (Anon. 1998b).

The CFC emphasized the importance of regularly reporting box office statistics. It released global box office figures, as well as those for China, Chinese provinces and cities, and specific theaters. The media chimed in by enthusiastically reporting that Titanic’s revenues in China surpassed all previous box office records. Ticket sales were frequently cited in the Chinese media as indicative of Titanic’s popularity and cinematic accomplishments. Moreover, box office statistics represented for the film companies the success of the marketing strategies they developed to guarantee record-breaking revenues.

With this fixation on ticket sales figures by both the CFC and the media, there was a general blindness to the massive mobilization of cultural apparatuses within China, the synchronization of a global culture industry, and the traffic of transnational capital. When financial figures were detailed in the media, one of the primary concerns was with how the box office revenues in China compared to global standards. Underlying the comparison is the question of whether China was “marching in unison with the world.” The box office figures activated a frenzy of global participation but also global competition; national borders were simultaneously razed and constructed.106 Although this fact may point to geopolitical borders, it neglects an exploration or meditation on geocapital borders and
collaborations. The media clamor over box office records clearly obfuscated the issue of the traffic of transnational capital.

The preceding discussion makes it clear that the domains of commercial practice and official governance should not be facilely delineated in any discussion of culture in contemporary China. Cultural products inscribed by commercial practices are sanctioned and facilitated by the Chinese government, as evidenced in the CFC’s role in the promotion of Titanic. The promotional strategies of the CFC also reveal the degree to which the system of distributing and publicizing cultural products is centralized. Because the CFC’s monopoly control over imported films is officially sanctioned, the company’s commercial practices are also endorsed with official sponsorship.

**Titanic Leveraged by Official Ideology**

A fascinating speech by Jilin’s Party Secretary Zhang Dejiang reveals, I believe, the intimate relationship between official discourse and the commodification of the film industry instituted by the commercial practices of the film studios, the media, and theaters. In *China Film Market (Zhongguo dianying shichang 中国电影市场)*, Wang Zengfu recalls Zhang’s remarks made at the end of April in Changchun at a conference on reforms in Changchun’s film industry:

First of all, I want to make it clear that film is a product; it is a special kind of cultural product. In order for film to become a special kind of product, it must possess the common characteristics of products . . . Secondly, I want to make it clear that Changchun Film Studio is a commercial enterprise; it is an enterprise dealing with cultural products. Since it is a commercial enterprise, it must establish the mechanisms of modern enterprises and adhere to the fundamental rules and operational methods of the industry. It must find its proper position in the market. It must search to develop its niche in the market. Thirdly, it must be based on profit. In order for film to become a special product it must be economically and socially profitable. However, economic profit is primary, as without it, there can be no
benefit to society. Therefore, the film industry must be oriented toward the market, research the market, and seek market expansion. (Weng Zengfu 1998: 7)

Zhang represents the official endorsement of the commodification of cultural products. With such endorsements by high-ranking government officials, culture is harnessed in China’s quest for economic development. This official rhetoric asserts that the value of a cultural product is equivalent to its potential market profitability. Zhang’s unabashed endorsement of the commercialization of film lends his own rhetoric an aura of marketability.

During the month of April, a day did not go by in which Beijing’s major newspapers neglected to publish a Titanic-related article. Beijing Youth Weekly (Beijing qingnian bao zhoukan 北京青年报周刊) even devoted an entire weekly issue to the film, and the Guangzhou-based New Weekly (Xin zhoukan 新周刊) issued a supplement with more than ninety pages of glossy photographs and “informative” articles. Although primarily devoted to “informative” articles as well, the special edition of the Beijing Youth Weekly included five short critical essays written by graduate students, researchers, and university faculty. For instance, in his article entitled “Globalization of Culture,” Weng Naiqun of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences observes that the arrival and reception of Titanic signify that the Chinese people are “unconsciously experiencing the globalization of culture that necessarily accompanies the globalization of economics” (1998: 23). While noting China’s participation in a global economy and global culture industry, Weng also emphasizes the participation of the Chinese public in the Titanic miracle: “If a person is not able to participate in a discussion of the film, he would feel a straggler to this era. That is to say that for some of the public, discussing the film has already become a type of collective behavior” (1998: 23).
This astute observation, which seems to imply a historical continuity between present-day China and Maoist China in terms of collective behavior, is undermined by Weng’s voluntaristic faith in historical and ideological discontinuity:

Titanic, which received so much media and popular attention prior to its release, is definitely unprecedented in Chinese history. This attention is not just due to the fact that the film won 11 of the 14 Oscars for which it was nominated, nor is it due to its staggeringly high Hollywood blockbuster budget. More importantly, the factor that should not be neglected, is that people’s lives in the realm of politics and economics have undergone great changes in recent years. If a person conducted research on the history of imported film in China, the media, and audience response, then he or she would certainly be able to write a history of contemporary China from a unique perspective . . . The globalization of culture, along with the globalization of economy, both express a certain order . . . the old order will definitely be replaced by the new one. (Weng Naiqun 1998: 23)

I am sympathetic to Weng’s insistence that media and audience response analyses are critical components in a narrative of China’s contemporary history, as well as to the gravity he assigns to the globalization of economic and cultural systems. However, he too easily advocates an intellectual agenda that takes discontinuity (historical, political, economic, and ideological) as the telos of a narrative of contemporary Chinese history and culture. Although it is undeniable that economic reforms have made the Titanic miracle a historical possibility in China, Weng’s disregard for ideological, historical, and political continuity in contemporary China aligns him with the media and commercial apparatuses that peddle cultural products wrapped in the rhetoric of the “new,” the “global,” and the “modern.”

Liu Dong’s critique of the film attempts to avoid this pitfall. First, Liu recognizes the tendency for critiques of the film to inadvertently serve as endorsements or advertisements for it: “The shrewd and detestable part of this type of commercial calculation is that it endows all expressions of criticism and sharp denunciation inevitably with an advertising effect” (1998: 50). Liu’s critique is informed with an awareness of the predicament of the
vicious cycle of criticism within the encompassing money-fueled media. Second, Liu remains much more critical and skeptical than most of economic modernity. In his analysis of the film, he argues that its main failure is not providing a real critique of progress, modernity, and technology. Liu detects an even greater contradiction than that between the ideology of egalitarianism and the film’s global marketing, namely, that between the film’s ostensible admonishment of the limitations of technology and its reliance on special effects to become a box office sensation: “This is the scariest aspect of Titanic. The film brings everyone in the audience back to the deck of a ship in a sea of icebergs” (1998: 56).

Film, frequently thought of as imaginary and fictional or as innocuous entertainment, can also play a role in the serious world of international affairs and diplomacy. After the gymnast Sang Lan injured her spinal column in a gymnastic routine at the Fourth Friendship Games in August 1998, the China Daily reported that Leonardo DiCaprio visited her in her hospital room. (Off the screen, too, Leonardo excels in the art of international diplomacy.) During Madeleine Albright’s visit to China, in preparation for President Clinton’s visit, she is reported to have discussed Titanic with director Chen Kaige (Gellman 1998: C1).

China’s President Jiang Zemin also considered Titanic as deserving of his political attention. Because the film is not an indigenous creation, I view President Jiang’s engagement with Titanic as belonging to the realm of international affairs and diplomacy, although it is ultimately concerned with domestic politics. At the First Plenary Session of the Ninth People’s Congress (March 5–19), less than a month prior to the release of the film, President Jiang Zemin expounded prophetically about Titanic’s imminent arrival:

We must not take it for granted that capitalism is something that lacks ideological didacticism. A film by the name of Titanic is soon to be released . . . This film vividly depicts the relationship of money and love, the destitute and the prosperous, and the emotions of people confronted by disaster. This time I request that our
government leaders [Seven Members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo] should also see the film, not because I wish to promote capitalism, but because as the proverb goes, in order to be “victorious in all battles, we must know ourselves and our other [enemy].” Don’t ever take it for granted that only we do ideological work . . . You want to emphasize the strengths of both ideological value and artistic excellence. (Qiao 1998: 4–5)

Jiang reaffirms that ideological work remains a paramount goal of China’s culture industry. The ideological work he describes, which emphasizes the didactic function of art, finds its authoritative roots in Mao Zedong’s 1942 “Yan’an Talks on Art and Literature.” In his “Talks,” Mao elaborated upon the main challenge and goal of communist literature and art, which were to combine ideological content with artistic excellence. According to Mao, for the politically oriented literature and art to be received with favor, they must be rendered attractive and pleasing through aesthetic means. As seen in Jiang’s remarks, the Yan’an legacy remains alive in the cultural industry. Yet Jiang does not view a Hollywood blockbuster as challenging this legacy; rather, the film is an ideological tour de force that ironically confirms the Maoist ideological role for culture.

Although it is usually associated first with entertainment, Hollywood film is viewed by many scholars as possessing great ideological power. In identifying Titanic’s ideological function, Jiang ironically stands with many academics, especially neo-Marxist cultural theorists. Yet what Jiang lauds in the film is exactly what most scholars would identify as the ideological component of commercial culture that conceals the historicity of its own production. Here, it appears that Jiang is inviting China’s highest officials to adopt Titanic as a reference for combining ideological control with commercial success—one of the important agendas of China’s domestic film industry today. One of the major contradictions in the reception of Titanic is that between the film’s content and its performance as a cultural artifact of global capitalism.
Could President Jiang’s endorsement of the film have partially stemmed from the film’s ostensible promotion of an ideology of egalitarianism? In China, the preposterous claim that Titanic opposes materialism and cultivates support for egalitarianism was ridiculed by Yu Jie, a graduate student at Beijing University:

The story [of the film] tells us that money is worthless; money can neither buy love nor fight against disasters. However, this film’s director is earning ($8 million). The audience is “moved” by the film, but this can last only three hours while they are in the theater. After they leave the theater, they are confronted by cars shuttling back and forth, bright neon lights, and they cannot help but return to their real lives in which money brings infinite potential and true love is secondary. Everyone is like a screw, returning to his original position. (1998: 22)

Yu emphasizes the apparent contradiction between the film’s fictional ideological orientation and its real ideological impact. First, the audience is ironically seduced into investing in the film, thus augmenting its monetary value. However, the narrative of the film ostensibly disparages material wealth. Is the film ridiculing itself or mocking the audience? Second, Yu notes that the film is ineffective in altering the audience’s behavior. With a hint of condescension, he refers to the audience as “screws,” which after being transfixed by the fantasy of the film, return to their real lives, unaffected by the film.

The notion that Titanic was sensually seductive but intellectually impotent is reiterated by a number of critics in China, perhaps most succinctly by Xie Xizhang:

Titanic is a pitcher of pungently intoxicating wine that relaxes the body and massages the soul. We are probably completely controlled by the film, which causes us to lose our intellects. Our feelings, like a spring tide, overflow our hearts. We are totally immersed in pleasurable emotions, like idiots, happy idiots. The critical voice of reason emerges from the depths of our hearts when our feelings recede. At this point, we have already left the theater, but we suddenly discover that the eternal love the film constructs is in fact just an illusionary, utopian love. Due to this, we hurry to write an article that declares this discovery, but who will care about this “discovery?” (1998: 7).
Critics also noted that one of the main reasons for the film’s success was its combination of money (large budget, special effects, etc.) and ideology (egalitarianism, power of love, etc.)—one critic even referring to the latter as an ideology of “social realism” (Ye 1999: 114–118).

The particular irony of the issue of egalitarianism deserves special attention in the reception of the film in China. First, the radical division between urban rich and poor and between the city and rural areas is a reality that is difficult to ignore in present-day China. Also, ticket prices were so high when the film opened that it was feasible only for financially well-off individuals and families to see the film. (Of course, most individuals had already seen the film prior to its release in theaters on pirated VCDs.) In interviews with viewers of the film, I was surprised to learn that very few commented on the issue of egalitarianism. However, the film did move many female viewers to decry the recent social trend of women dating, accompanying, or marrying men solely for money. Most viewers in China, and I would include President Jiang in this group, were not primarily attracted to the movie for its espousal of egalitarian values.

What critics have not noted, however, is Jiang’s endorsement for the appropriation of Titanic for China’s own cultural and ideological program. Appropriation of the West for Chinese purposes has at least a century-long history. As a way of attenuating the threat of cultural imperialism, the West has often been delineated from some essential Chineseness, a notion that is captured in two well-used clichés: “Chinese learning for the essence, Western learning for practical use” (zhongti xiyong 中体西用) and “use the West for China” (yangwei zhongyong 洋为中用). Although Jiang seems to fall into this tradition, is Titanic really being
used for Chinese cultural and ideological purposes? Is the Chinese government appropriating the film for the purpose of bolstering its own cultural policies?

Jiang’s nationalistic and traditionalistic rhetoric that borrows Titanic for political purposes resonates with the rhetoric in 1994 that surrounded the government’s new policy on importing and distributing foreign films. The obfuscation of market motives with a rhetoric that stresses artistic achievement is also evident in Jiang’s endorsement of Titanic. He chooses to neglect the issue of profits; in fact, he denies that his promotion of Titanic is related to capitalistic modes of production at all. His interest in Titanic ostensibly stems from what he sees as the film’s crystallization of Chinese cultural objectives—the harmonious blending of the ideologically poignant with artistic excellence.

What is absent in both the rhetoric of the 1994 film importation measure and Jiang’s promotion of the film—market fetishism, profit maximization, and transnational capitalism—however, is blatantly present in the actual practices of the film industry and culture industry apparatuses. In reference to the promotion of transnational capitalism, I would like to point out another example of misleading rhetoric, one that further reveals the parallel between Jiang’s promotion of the film and the 1994 film importation measure. Although key words such as “profit maximization” were absent from the 1994 film measure’s criteria, the proponents of the policy frequently pointed to the power of the dapian to resuscitate the domestic film industry. In this way, the Chinese invitation of Hollywood’s cultural invasion and their nurturing of transnational capitalism were avoided in rhetoric about the dapian reinvigorating (jihuo 激活) the Chinese domestic film market. Likewise, Jiang dismisses Titanic’s invasion, and the question of who is profiting from the invasion,
Even ultranationalistic discourses allow for the official sanctioning of Hollywood film. In “Incinerate Hollywood,” an essay contained in the controversial best-seller *China Can Say No*, for example, Zhang Cangcang argues that Hollywood’s invasion will destroy China’s traditional culture and modern civilization. According to Zhang, Hollywood films irresponsibly dominate the global film market with sex and violence, and he applauds the French attempt to defend the integrity of art, culture, and humanity against the onslaught of American culture. In reference to the 1994 film importation policy, Zhang’s battle cry for the expulsion of Hollywood is attenuated by an awkward opposition to the government-endorsed policy of importing films. His nationalistic orientation encounters a dilemma—either abandon his extreme outrage at Hollywood or defy his country’s cultural policy. Zhang resigns himself to a compromise, proclaiming that ten films can only stimulate the perceptions and senses of the Chinese but cannot defeat their minds. In a rueful invocation, he says, “The excellence of Chinese culture, of which people are now in dire need, can still blossom before it is too late. We want the intellectual thought of China today to reach the people, to let them compare and contemplate. The most important responsibility of the filmmakers is to promote Chinese culture and resist the strangulation of our culture” (Song 1996: 133). Zhang’s anti-imperialist cry is thus muted by an appeasement to the Film bureau’s directive.

Because the 1994 film measure declares that Hollywood films are being used “temporarily” to establish a marketized film industry and to “temporarily” rejuvenate the domestic film industry, Zhang optimistically professes that the negative elements of Hollywood will only “temporarily” infest the superficial, sensorial level of Chinese society.
and culture. Ultimately, he believes that Chinese film will have time to grow strong, after which Hollywood will be banished or rendered obsolete. Zhang is blinded by his vision of discrete nationhood; his mistake is in believing that Hollywood’s presence in China can be likened to one nation affecting or infecting another. The emergence of transnational capitalism complicates his quaint nation-state paradigm. As Dai Jinhua (1999: 403) astutely points out, “In 1995, some would say that film won the market; but it is more accurate to say that the market and transnational capitalism were the victors.” Whereas Zhang would see Hollywood as a metonym for a foreign invasion of China, Dai notes the conjunction between the domestic-foreign market systems and domestic-foreign capitalists.

As previously mentioned, in his response to Titanic, Jiang Zemin omits any mention of the relationship between the film and capital. The film’s contribution to China’s task of forging a program of ideological work is Jiang’s justification for Titanic’s presence in China. This official discourse, traced back to the Yan’an era, is ideologically rather than economically motivated. However, the 1994 film importation policy reveals another facet of official discourse, namely, the notion that foreign films, primarily of Hollywood pedigree, will be used to jump-start the domestic film industry. When considered in conjunction with the split-profit system, also officially sanctioned, we must conclude that economic issues are implicated in the official discourse. We may say that the Four Modernizations political-economic program permeates official discourse, which is to say, rather simply, that to support economic reform is to support China’s government. Official discourse appropriates and envelops discourse about economic and commercial development.
Conclusion

In reference to the culture industry in general, then, the commodification of culture, or the use of culture to expand economic development, is sanctioned and promoted by officials. Culture thus remains an ideological tool for the Party’s economic discourse on commercial enterprise and growth. Thus, an important aspect of official discourse in reference to the film industry is how film relates to the government’s agenda of economic growth. Despite a growing plurality of commercial apparatuses, cultural policies appear strongly wedded to a centralized authority. It is the challenge of the central authority to harness the commercial sector to bolster its own legitimacy. Because a central authority tightly regulates commercial practices, and in turn culture is transformed into a sector of commerce, cultural products in contemporary China are circumscribed by complicity between commercial practices and official governance. A discussion of the discourse of liberation surrounding Hollywood’s presence in China, although not completely without merit, is not as urgent as questioning the complicity between official discourse, global commodification of culture, and the traffic in transnational capitalism, as played out in the Titanic miracle of spring 1998.
CHAPTER 5
LIU HENG’S GARRULOUS ZHANG: TELEVISION PERFORMANCE

Introduction

This chapter explores the performative dimensions for television drama production in Chinese culture during the late 1990s. This theory of performance functions to elucidate different aspects or levels of television drama production while also revealing performance as a major social aesthetic of cultural production in China during this period. On a discursive level, this chapter discusses how different cultural discourses are performed within a specific television drama, *The Happy Life of Garrulous Zhang Damin* (*Pinzui Zhang Damin de xingfu shenghuo* 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活). This theory of performance also seeks in its analysis of Garrulous Zhang to illustrate how the adaptation of fiction into film can profitably be viewed as fiction “performing” as a film. In the Chinese contemporary cultural context, fiction in many instances is mediated by film. Lastly, the analysis of Garrulous Zhang and the analysis’ contribution in developing a theory of performance for contemporary Chinese cultural production assist in my project of showing how performance is a key aesthetic and cultural trope in the 1990s in China.

The cultural artifact that I take up in this chapter to support the discussion is a story written by one of China’s widely acclaimed and popular authors Liu Heng 刘恒. His *The Happy Life of Garrulous Zhang Damin*, first serialized and published in *Beijing Literature* (Beijing
became one of the most popular and widely talked about stories among the general reading public and academics in 1997. It was quickly turned into a feature film and a 20-part television drama. Liu Heng participated in both productions, writing the screenplay for the television series. The story basically tells of an impoverished family who despite bad luck and tough living conditions, manage to derive a sense of happiness by virtue of their being together, especially as steered by the eldest son Zhang Damin. As the main subject and character in the story, Zhang Damin’s garrulity or loquacity, in addition to his family devotion, provides just enough faith blended with humor to engender in his family an *esprit de corps* and belief in a brighter future.

**Adaptation of Written Text into Visual Media: The Commercial Logic**

The adaptation of literary forms and genres entails many important literary and cultural phenomenons raising such issues as the dynamics of genre distinctions, textual authenticity, in addition to social distinctions and cultural proprietorship. As such, adaptation is often a contested site. It is exactly at such points of contestation where cultural production is the most generative in terms of both reproducing and subverting cultural narratives, generic qualifications and assumptions, while revealing the process of cultural production itself, and the social status and distinctions of the cultural producers and consumers.

Of course, genre adaptation, in which texts are adapted from one literary media to another, is as old as literature itself. However, the process underwent a major transformation with the invention of mechanical reproduction, and especially that of film and television. According to Walter Benjamin, the invention of techniques of mechanical reproduction
displaced the authority of the original by detaching the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. Bemoaning the withering of art’s aura, Benjamin asserts regarding filming techniques that the “equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice” (1968: 233). The audience’s alienated reception of film—that is, alienated from the product’s historical and mechanical production, according to Benjamin—changed the masses entire reaction to art. We can also add that as a result of a change in the masses reaction to art, the producers also changed, re-defining the interaction between cultural and literary genres. The possibility of the adaptation of fiction into a mechanical, visual rendering, re-defined the literary and social possibilities of literary and cultural producers.

The adaptation of fiction into film and television is one of the major features of cultural production in the 20th century. Especially in regards to the American film economy, one of the most efficient ways for an author to accumulate monetary and/or symbolic capital is to sell the film rights to his/her book. For popular authors, such as Stephen King, whose books are often more than not “cinematized,” it would be hard to imagine, regardless of the authors’ conscious intention, that he has not in any way adopted a screenwriter’s approach to the writing of his fiction. I would like to suggest that in such instances the fiction is already cinematized. A question then is how the visual mediums shape to a greater or lesser degree the writer’s imagination and practice and the “reading” of the already cinematized fiction.

Throughout much of the latter half of 20th century China, visual electronic media (e.g., film and television in the post-Mao period) have played a central role in the Party’s program of education and ideological didacticism. In the wake of the liberalization of China’s market economy along with the proverbial opening of its doors to the outside
capitalist world, a new set of visual practices also emerged. Commercialization is one of the major developments of film and especially of television dramas in the last two decades of the 20th century. Importantly, this course of commercialization simultaneously affected the products and the creators of these cultural products. As the writers of television screenplays and adaptations were identified as profit-making cultural pursuits, writers of fiction faced choices in which greater commercialization of their production invariably meant turning to visual media. To say that as a major cultural practice of fiction production in the last two decades in China, a type of fiction is *a priori* mediatized or cinematized is not as accurate as saying that the fiction was informed by a certain commercial discourse constituted by a visual orientation.

In the 1980s, in particular, we see the development of a relatively awkward brand of commercialism in film and television products, the prime example of which are the works associated with Wang Shuo 王朔. With the opening of China’s floodgate to an array of foreign discourses and practices, the commercial logic that increasingly informed the period’s cultural products also carried with it a new type of commercialized global discourse. An analysis of the performative dimensions of this particular television series assists in examining the interconnectivities between commercialism, visualization (cinematization), and the global/local nexus. Before we enter a more detailed analysis of the television series, a certain discussion of the nexus between visualization and commercialism highlights certain (dis)continuities between the two decades.

Wang Shuo (1958- ), one of the most influential cultural figures in China in the eighties and nineties, played a major role in the commercialization of literature during this period. Most of the critical attention afforded him in China as well as in the West has been
focused on the “hooliganism” of his fiction. However, Wang Shuo played a major role in China’s television and film culture, especially in terms of the adaptation of his fiction. His work exemplifies the process described above of how visual adaptations became an important part of the commercialization process of both cultural product and producer. From one perspective, Wang Shuo’s written literature could not have been commercialized without his forays into film and television. Likewise, the vast majority of his written literature was produced under this visual influence, tendency, or bias.

Wang Shuo actually entered film and television production at about the same time his written works started gaining popular and critical attention. Although Wang Shuo’s first story—“Waiting” (Dengdai 等待)—was published in 1978 in Liberation Army Literature and Art (Jiefang jun wenyi 解放军文艺), his first story to gain notoriety was “The Flight Attendant” (Kongzhong xiaojie 空中小姐) in 1984. This short story was adapted into a television drama, albeit virtually unheard of, by the Beijing Television Art Production Center (Beijing dianshi yishu zhipian zhongxin 北京电视艺术制作中心) the same year. Most of Wang Shuo’s commercial success came from his involvement with film and television miniseries in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1988, dubbed in film history as the “Wang Shuo film year,” four film adaptations of Wang Shuo’s stories and novels were produced, in part a result of a call by Chen Wusu (an official in charge of film) for the production of “entertainment films” (yule pian 娱乐片). The success of Wang Shuo’s involvement with the smash television miniseries Yearnings (Kewang 渴望) propelled Wang Shuo to establish the Seahorse Visual Production Workshop (Haima yingshi chuangzao gongsi 海马影视创造
The company, which also had a sideline in the karaoke restaurant business, poignantly represents Wang Shuo’s commercial pursuits. Importantly, the company was formed with a group of friends, including three other acclaimed authors—Shi Tiesheng, Mo Yan, and Liu Heng, the author of *Garrulous Zhang*. Before the company disbanded, it participated in another one of China’s smash television series *The Editorial Office* (*Bianji bu de gushi*) in 1991. Wang Shuo played a major role in the designing and writing of the script, in conjunction with Feng Xiaogang, the director who would go on to direct many of China’s popular blockbuster films in the nineties. Wang Shuo, in association with Seahorse, also wrote the screenplay for the 1992 television series *Just Mad About You* (*Ai ni mei shangliang* 爱你没商量) and the hit television miniseries *Give It A Shot* (*Guo ba yin* 过把瘾) as adapted in 1993 from three of his novellas.

Throughout his involvement in the production of television miniseries, Wang Shuo “unabashedly derives pleasure from flaunting, or even mocking, his market promiscuity” (Noble 2003: 600). In reference to *The Editorial Office*, Wang said that the purpose of his first miniseries was “giving the commoners a dream to play with” (Wang 1992:47). However, the publication of Wang’s novel *Seemingly Beautiful* (*Kan shang qu hen mei* 看上去很美) in 1999 represented Wang’s attempt to return to literature. Several years earlier, Wang Shuo had publicly announced his disavowal with novel writing during his foray into commercial television. However, shortly after the publication of *Seemingly Beautiful*, he expressed a high degree of ambivalence over his involvement in the production of popular television miniseries. In the confession-like essays in *The Ignorant Have Nothing to Fear*, Wang Shuo
explains his final disenchantment with the popular television industry, which occurred upon the dissolution of a media company (Shishi gongsi 时事公司) he had founded with Ye Daying 叶大鹰 in 1995.

At this moment, the many years spent flirting with mass culture (dazhong wenhua 大众文化) and being wrapped in mutual exploitation came to an official end. The commercial nature of mass culture and its inherent characteristic of ubiquitous trading is honestly not very attractive. My doubts of the significance of mass culture, and even belief that it lacks any meaning, led to my feeling dispirited and negating myself. To do this work, one has to be able to persevere or to be sufficiently avaricious. It’s no fun! This is my feeling after tumbling to the ground and groping about. (Wang 2000: 32)

Wang Shuo’s professed disenchantment with “mass culture,” of course, coincided with financial hardships within the industry. Importantly, he attributes his departure or renunciation to the inherent features of “mass culture.” Wang remarks: “These are the game rules and the professional ethics of mass culture! As soon as you decide to participate, you have to give up your own individuality, artistic ideals, and even your creative style. The greatest enemy of mass culture is the author’s individuality” (Wang 2000: 9). Wang Shuo is not necessarily opposed to the film and television media per se, but he expresses distrust towards the market logic according to which the film and television products must appeal to a broad audience. During this period (mid-1990s), as the commercialism of culture was gaining currency among artists and government officials alike, in order for television series to be financially solvent, the programs required broad popular support. Therefore, Wang Shuo’s turn to the visual necessitated that he incorporate within the television miniseries a popular and commercial logic, which he inherited in part from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Therefore, commercialism ushered in a type of globalism in terms of production style and
techniques, which were designed to lower production costs and maximize revenues. The commercial logic introduced the production line notion for television miniseries.

From one perspective, what Wang Shuo views as a concession to the “masses,” is also a type of compromise or price to pay for the commercialization of the industry. Although Wang Shuo ostensibly expresses belated regret over his involvement in those productions that sacrificed his creative individuality or even artistic integrity, still some of the visual adaptations of his fiction, even if they don’t entirely retain Wang Shuo’s creative trademark, at least bear the marks of the distinctive milieu and local flavor of Beijing, in particular from the late 1980s to late 1990s. Witty dialogue and voyeurism, in particular, made Wang Shuo’s fiction conducive to visual adaptations. Such features made his fiction popular among the public readership, while also inciting charges by critics that Wang Shuo’s writings cannot be considered fiction (小说). These are exactly the types of contestations over genre distinctions that are part and parcel of the issue of genre adaptation.

Voyeurism is closely linked to the lives of the liumang 流氓 featured in Wang Shuo’s fiction. The social and economic reforms in China since the 1980s produced the liumang: “Slipping through the cracks of the new market, however, were the liumang, a multifaceted cultural term referring to a spectrum of lowlifes, riffraff, vagrants, hooligans, and slackers, who negotiated the market terrain by designing cunning scams and running at least marginally criminal operations” (Noble 2003: 598). Wang Shuo candidly admits that he strives to appeal to a large audience by writing about what he euphemistically calls “popular lifestyles” but is really the liumang featured in his fiction: “What I am most interested in and pay the closest attention to is popular lifestyles. This includes violence, sex, mockery, and
shamelessness. I just reproduce these in my works” (Zhang 1993: 67). “As the dregs of society, [these characters] pursue unethical and illegal activities, such as racketeering and pimping, or more innocuous activities, such as slacking off, shooting the breeze (da kan’er 大侃儿), swindling, seducing women, and living aimlessly (hun’er 混儿)” (Noble 2003: 600).

The film adaptation of Masters of Mischief (Wan zhu 顽主, 1987) is one of Wang Shuo’s major popular successes in film. The fiction’s ubiquitous witty and farcical dialogue and voyeuristic description of sleazy characters lent the fiction a latent potential for adaptation into film. Masters of Mischief tells of the comical and satirical antics of a shady enterprise established by a cohort of liumang. The business, called “Three T Company” (San ti gongsi 三替公司), specializes in providing stand-in or surrogate services: “Troubleshooting, tedium relief, and taking the blame.” The narrative of the text skips between story lines—similar to film jump cuts—about the company’s clients. In the first ten pages of the text, the reader is introduced to Bao Kang’s case—the aspiring writer who hires Three T to arrange a mock literary award ceremony on his behalf, Liu Meiping who is the girlfriend of a client who has hired the company to stand-in for him on a date, a housewife who hires Three T to stand-in for her husband allowing her to vent her anger, and a chap who hires the company to relive him of his existential angst. Much of the slapstick rhythm and punchy dialogue that dominate the text’s mode of narration is preserved within the filmic adaptation.

One of the most memorable and symbolic scenes in contemporary Chinese film appears in this film. As noted above, the Three T Company is hired by the aspiring author Bao Kang to host a literary award ceremony to honor Bao Kang’s literary achievements. Although the scene in the film still maintains the sardonic mockery of official and intellectual
discourse as presented within the fiction, within the film, the award ceremony is preceded by a masquerade-esque fashion show and disco free-for-all. This fashion show visually presents a history of 20th century China. The show begins with Peking Opera acrobatics performed by the Monkey-King, immediately followed by a group of Chinese models dressed in European high fashion, other Peking Opera characters such as Cao Cao, and ballroom dancers. The pre-liberation period is represented next when a landlord enters accompanied by a petit bourgeois—escorted by his mistress—and a group of students tossing out “propaganda flyers” (xuanchuan dan 宣传单). Nationalist soldiers and soldiers from the Eighth Route Army and Liberation Army confront each other, and liberation is represented by the trinity of worker, peasant, and soldiers. Next enter a group of Red Guards, quickly succeeded by street police, female bodybuilders, and break-dancers. While the performers parade themselves on a catwalk for the audience, certain characters or groups of characters intermingle with each other. For example, the landlord gazes with confusion at the models, the Red Guards threaten the Peking Opera characters, the peasants intimidate the petite bourgeois, and the soldiers from the Nationalist and Liberation Armies confront each other.

The opposition and contests within this historical battleground are replaced by the disco beat, as all of the characters come together in an orgiastic dancing frenzy, with the petit bourgeois’ mistress dancing with the peasant and the soldiers from the Nationalist and Liberation Armies shaking hands and getting down to the groove. Upon the conciliation of these historical animosities, history is ahistoricized, as all of these historical characters and their symbolic representations concede themselves to the omnipotent now; the polarities between tradition and fashion (Peking Opera characters and break-dancers) and the political and class rivalries are dismantled and fused together. The film presents the
commercialization, commodification, or entertain-ification of history and politics. At the same time, it can be viewed as a satirical commentary on the collusion between political, intellectual, and commercial discourses. In this way, it is a scene out of a crystal ball, foreshadowing the collaborations and transactions between unlikely bedfellows that characterize the “Titanic miracle.” The scene apothesizes a cultural representation in which performative aspects usurp a linear dramatic narrative. The visualization of the interplay between various global and local discourses, just as the scene itself epitomizes, erupts into a performance itself. In a contemporary historical tracing of cultural performance, the scene foreshadows a raw yet emergent fabric of cultural performance and performance in culture more maturely represented in Garrulous Zhang.

Short Biography of Liu Heng

Liu Heng (penname for Liu Guanjun 刘冠军) belongs to the same generation as Wang Shuo, born in 1954, four years before Wang Shuo. Like Wang Shuo, he was also born in Beijing. He attended the primary and middle schools affiliated with the Beijing Foreign Language College. During the Cultural Revolution, his education was interrupted when he was sent down to Bei Lu in the Tai hang Mountains (Tai hang shan bei lu 太行山北麓), the village of his parents. Liu Heng entered the navy in 1969 as a wireless technician for the naval command center. After leaving the navy, he worked for four years on an assembly line for the Beijing Auto Factory before being transferred to become an editor for Beijing Literature under the Beijing Municipal Literature Association. He started to publish in 1977, and his works include three novels: Black Snow (Hei de xue 黑的雪), Untroubled Elegy (Xiaoyao song 逍遥 song),
遥颂), *Green River Daydreams* (*Canghe bairimeng* 苍河白日梦), more than ten novellas and several dozen short stories. Liu Heng’s fiction gained recognition both home and abroad, with some of his works being translated into a number of foreign languages, including English, French, Japanese, Italian, and Korean.

Although Liu Heng began writing at the same time as Wang Shuo, he didn’t begin to write screenplays until 1988, four years later than Wang Shuo and the year referred to as the “Wang Shuo Film Year.” However, films based on Liu Heng’s books or screenplays have received greater success in international film festivals. *Black Snow*, based on his novel of the same name, won the Silver Bear Award at the 40th Berlin Film Festival in 1990, while the Zhang Yimou directed *Ju Dou* (菊豆), based on his novella *Fuxi fuxi*, earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film in 1991. Liu Heng wrote the screenplay for another Zhang Yimou directed film, *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiuju da guansi* 秋菊打官司), which won the Golden Lion in the 49th Venice Film Festival in 1992.127

In the introduction to *Garrulous Zhang*, Liu Heng responds to a hypothetical “accusation” that the book panders to commercialism. Liu Heng’s style and tone is sufficiently ambivalent, playful, and even ironic, as he lightheartedly dismisses rather than flatly refutes the assumed allegation of him “selling out.”

有人说这篇小说里的人物是阿Q，我赞美了阿Q，所以我的小说是麻药，想把大伙儿都麻成阿Q，心说我就是阿Q，自己夸自己呢，管得着吗？高兴了还自己打自己嘴巴呢，碍着你什么事？物质胜利这么难，弯回来在精神上胜利一下都不许，安的什么心呐！玩笑。开个玩笑。我的小说不是麻药，这话是真的。大火都变成阿Q，世界未必好看，都变成了李逵，这世界就是扣在地上的饭锅了。（Liu 1998: 2)
I have heard people say the characters in this story are similar to Ah Q. Moreover, they say since I applaud Ah Q, my story is like anesthesia—wanting to numb everyone into Ah Qs. My heart tells me that I am like Ah Q. Is it any of your business if I praise myself? What’s it to you if I take pleasure in smacking myself? With material success so difficult to attain, what are you thinking if you don’t even permit me to turn back around and get some spiritual victory? You got to be kidding! My story is not anesthesia. That is the truth. If everyone were to be turned into Ah Qs, the world would not be a better place. Likewise, if everyone turned into Li Kui, the world would be unexpressive and dull.

Please read this story. You can tell for yourself if it is anesthesia. If you don’t regret having dished out the money to buy a book to numb yourself a bit, and you still continue to dish it out, then you are making me whole. That is my only happiness. There is nothing else for the time being.

While Wang Shuo would boast of his work’s commercialism, Liu Heng admits to wanting to sell his fiction but does so with a certain degree of ambivalence and even reserved sarcasm. Liu Heng, like Wang Shuo, is also woven into a web of cultural production and consumption in which commercialism is a dominant logic and criteria. Moreover, within this “playing field” of commercialism, film and television adaptations, for both Liu and Wang, became one of the major cultural strategies for gaining cultural, symbolic, and financial capital in the nineties.

Despite Liu Heng’s markedly high text production/adaptation ratio, the main emphasis of this chapter is not to prove that a certain visual logic pre-informed Liu Heng’s writing of Garrulous Zhang. There are indeed some justifications for developing such an argument, including the dialogue heavy text, strong visual imagery, cartoon-like sketches interspersed throughout the text, and Liu Heng’s history of film adaptations. Rather, I will emphasize the development of a performance theory, in which performance will first be
treated on a discursive level through an examination of a dialogue and hybridity engendered between the local and global. Such a dialogue appears to be much more vivid in the visual adaptation of the text, although both the text and the television miniseries will be discussed. Emblematic of such a dialogue is the musical prologue of each of the television series’ episodes, in which black and white images of traditional China are exhibited in syncopation with a musical accompaniment, a cross between traditional cross-talk and rap.

**Performance of the “Local”**

First, I shall examine the local that is pervasive in the three different versions (short story, television, and film). A sense of the local is articulated in terms of both time and place. One important manifestation of the local is in the form of nostalgia, manifested as a collective remembrance or shared history. Three objects of nostalgia are apparent throughout the versions: nostalgia for a past time; nostalgia for a past family; nostalgia for a past place. These three objects of nostalgia are not necessarily separate entities, but are interwoven. Nostalgia for a past time and for a past family is represented by the absence of Zhang Damin’s father. Damin’s father had worked as a “boiler worker” (guolu gong 锅炉工) at a Thermos Factory, where he was tragically burned to death. His absence introduced at the start of the narrative conjures nostalgia throughout the entire narrative for a past time when the family was whole. Importantly, the parents are retired workers, with Yunfang’s (Damin’s wife) father employed at a Towel Factory while Damin’s father had worked at the Thermos Factory. A nostalgia of a past time is evoked by an identification with proletariat order and class. The shared memory of the revolutionary past is portrayed both somberly, as represented by the death of Damin’s father, as well as with a certain degree of humor. For
example, Yunfang did not pass the “political” section of her high school entrance exam. For the question, what are the three components of Marxism, Yunfang had answered “serve the people,” “remember Bai qiu en” (Dr. Norman Bethune, the Canadian doctor honored as Chinese national hero), and the “Old Fool Moves a Mountain” (3, II: 15:53).128

The nostalgia of place is conjured by the major setting of the action throughout the narrative, a cramped, old ping fang. Since, the nineties, Beijing has been implementing an urban resettlement initiative in which the majority of the city’s old ping fang housing is subject to demolition and the residents resettled, usually within a new location in a suburban multi-storied building with more space for each family. In the narrative, after Damin’s family moves to a new house, he misses the persimmon tree that had passed through his crowded room in the old house (146). This represents nostalgia for an old space and time, for a city in which space was defined through integration with nature. The old space is linked to nostalgia for the entire family, as Damin’s father had planted the persimmon tree and Damin even names his son after the tree – Zhang Shu 张树 (“Zhang Tree”).

Associated with the tropes of nostalgia is the issue of local identification. In many ways, it can be argued that local identification is stronger in the television series than in the short story. The setting for both the story and television miniseries is Beijing, appealing to a large audience through a mode of local identification. As mentioned, this sense of the local is emphasized in the opening of each episode, through the flashing sequence of old images of Beijing. In the television series, there are other prominent local images featured which are not in the text. For example, in the television miniseries, Fragrant Hills—one of Beijing’s most recognized symbols—is featured as a significant place. While dating, Damin and Yunfang go to Fragrant Hills and Damin also takes his younger brother to Fragrant Hills to
have him yell at the top of his lungs that he will pass the college entrance exam. Another
local image featured prominently in the television series is the dancing of yang’ge. This also
adds a new line to the plot of the miniseries because Yunfang’s father is embarrassed by his
wife’s participation in the dance and exercise routine.

In the introduction, Liu Heng mentions Ah Q because his short story features a
character, who, like Ah Q, remains in very good spirits despite a life filled with tragedy.
Damin’s family suffers from numerous tragic events, the first of which is the death of
Damin’s father. This trauma brings about Damin’s loquacity, as well as causing his stunted
growth, in addition to instigating his mother’s neurotic ice-gnawing habit. After this incident,
Damin’s mother’s symptoms of Alzheimer’s worsens and she frequently forgets things,
including losing Zhang Shu and even getting lost herself. Damin’s younger sister, Xiaoxue,
is diagnosed with (132, XVI: 36:00) and dies of leukemia (142, XVII: 27:00). In the television
miniseries, Xiaoxue’s boyfriend tragically dies in a car accident on the way back to Urumqi
after participating in a relief task force (XV: 11:26). Yunfang also has her share of tragic
events, as she is sent into a state of depression when abandoned by a “model” boyfriend
who goes to United States. In the television miniseries, Yunfang also loses her first child (III:
45:22) and is demoted to being a towel inspector rather than an accountant because she lacks
a college degree (X: 23:50). In the story and TV series, after accepting the high health risk
position of spray-painting within the thermos factory, Damin is finally let go from the
factory (147, XVII: 44:00), forcing him to change his career to being a thermos salesman. In
the TV series, after his lay-off, Damin is first diverted into working odd jobs while he keeps
his dismissal secret from his family, even working intermittently at the Kunlun Hotel as a
bathroom attendant.
Poverty controls much of the narrative’s action. Financial hardship is represented spatially by the cramped living quarters. When Damin marries Yunfang, the newlyweds occupy one room while Damin’s four siblings and mother are all forced to squeeze into the only other room. Damin is compelled to add on a makeshift room due to the noise his brother and sister-in-law make in their nightly routines. The new room for his family of three is only 4 square meters. A persimmon tree, which grows inside and protrudes through the roof, obstructs the room’s already constrained space. The jobs held by Damin’s relatives, with the exception of his youngest brother Zhang Daguo, are low paying jobs: Damin’s sister Dayu works at a meat factory washing intestines; his mother is a street cleaner; younger sister Xiaoxue is a nursing aid in a hospital’s gynecology department. Damin’s salary is only 100 yuan per month, and the family budget is squeezed even tighter with the arrival of their child, as Yunfang requires a new stipend for transport to the hospital and the special nutrition supplement of chicken legs. Later, the financial burden motivates Damin to switch to working in the factory’s spray paint line, which although compromising his health, allows him to earn an extra 34 yuan per month (94-97).

Damin’s primary character traits are his stinginess and loquacity, both of which are connected to his poverty. As mentioned, the passing away of Damin’s father (as narrated by Liu Heng) triggered his uncontrollable garrulity. At the same time, his father’s death also exacerbated his family’s financial challenges. Hence, Damin’s poverty and loquacity share the same origin—his father’s death—and throughout the narratives they are closely interwoven. In many instances, Damin is most talkative when expressing his stinginess:
The pay for the night shift at your factory is 6 mao, while at our factory it is 8 mao. I earn two more mao than you for working the night shift. After one month, I earn 6 kuai more than you. That’s what it seems like, right? But actually that’s not the way it is at all. The problem arises with the evening meal. A bowl of won-tons at your factory is 2 mao, while it is 3 mao at my factory, so I actually only earn 1 more mao than you for working the night shift. If one bowl doesn’t fill me up, and I add an extra half bowl, then I earn 5 fen less than you for the night shift. But your factory only gives 10 wontons per bowl while at my factory it’s 12 and I’ve even had 14 before. Taking that into account, we earn about the same for the night shift. There’s really no real difference. But there is more filling in the wontons at your factory, so in the end when it’s all said and told we actually lose out. On the surface it may seem that your pay for the nightshift is a few mao less, but in reality it’s not a penny less! Yunfang, what do you think?

What follows is one of Damin’s most memorable soliloquies. It combines elements of his financial hardship, stinginess, gluttony, and verbal persuasion to form his rationale or logic for living.

Your father’s shorts are made from stitching together green towels, right? Your mother’s shorts are stitched together pink towels, right? Your two brothers’ shorts are white towels, and you and your sister have patterned towel shorts. Correct me if I’m
wrong. When your family takes a nightly stroll, I think it's a bit ridiculous. If you step back for a moment and take a look, the array of colors is a bit... Look you don't understand what I'm saying at all. I think such an array of colors is... quite cozy. For real! Don't laugh. As soon as a stranger sees the way your family is dressed, he would at least know the three of you work in a towel factory. Are you at all to blame? You're always given towels rather than bonuses in bags stuffed to the brim. Is your father or you to blame? If I worked at the towel factory, I would make a suit out of colored checkered towels. I would wear it all day at work and see whether or not the bosses are happy about it. If they don't like it, then I would make one of those white lab jackets out of white towels, and while walking back and forth under their glances, we'll see who ends up giving whom an operation!... I'm not trying to say anything else. If you are all sitting inside hanging out wearing towels, then I have nothing to say. But when you go outside you should think about your image. When the shorts are stitched together, words should be stitched on them as well. Each butt might as well read "Bright Towel Factory." It's not a pretty sight. It's as if no matter where any of you go you have forgotten to take along your work i.e. What do you think? Let mom make some changes?

Although Damin and Yunfang were childhood friends, growing up in the same compound, Yunfang's first love was a young technician in the towel factory where she also worked.
Damin’s break came after the technician left for America and Yunfang received a letter ending their relationship. Yunfang was wasting away in her bed refusing to eat from depression over the break-up when Damin was called in as a last ditch effort to “talk sense” into her.

Why aren’t you speaking? Sister Jiang had a reason for refusing to speak. She had revolutionary secrets. What revolutionary secrets do you have? If you continue not to eat, continue stalling, then you are a counter-revolutionary! You have no other way out but to starve to death! Dong Cunrui and Huang Jiguang had no other choice but to die! In such a position, there was no way out for them! But you! Gasping your last breath under the covers, you think they will make you a martyr? There’s no way. At most, a telegram expressing sympathy over your death will be sent to your family from America . . . Yunfang, I’ll help make a calculation for you. If you don’t eat, you can save 3 kuai each day. You have already saved 9 kuai. If you save another 9 kuai, you will have enough to be cremated. You got it? This would not be good for any of us. If you starve yourself, you are only saving your mom 18 kuai. Do you know how much an urn for the ashes will cost? It cost 30 kuai to put my father’s ashes within an urn. But with you so beautiful, legs so long, skin so white, how could anyone dare not to spend 80 kuai on an urn for your ashes! If it’s like this, then you can’t eat for about one month. You can’t possibly last for one month, so there’s no need for you to keep this up. In the end, you should just eat what you should eat. Have I made this calculation clear? You haven’t made enough money yet for the urn!
haven't made enough money yet for the urn! Yunfang, Xiao Shan's grandmother is already 98 years old. When she heard you were all wrapped up in bed, she wanted to come and see what all the fuss is about. But she can't walk. Shall I give her a ride on my back over here? If know one brings her over, she'll never have the chance. You're only 23 years old. You still have another 75 years before you reach 98. There is still 75 years of rice waiting for you to eat. You're not ashamed for not eating now! I'm ashamed for you! If I could eat for you I would, but there's no use in it. Put on your shoes and get up, Yunfang, go and eat. The best thing in this world is food. Go and eat. . . . Yunfang, say whatever is on your mind. You want to go to the squatter? I've only been sitting here a short while and I already want to go. But I won't go now. I won't go until you eat your first bite. To tell you the truth, I won't go until you go. I don't believe you'll wait for my bladder to burst with your eyes wide open looking at me. Don't play this game with me. I have known all along why you won't eat. Isn't it because you're afraid to go to the squatter? Is your lip trembling? Is it because you've wet the bed? If you haven't wet the bed, then why have you wrapped yourself under the covers? Not speaking won't get you out of anything. Not speaking just proves you're guilty, that you have already wet the bed. Don't think that just because you are wrapped up in the covers that we can't see what you're doing. We can see everything. Hurry and throw off the covers. Why play at this? If you haven't had enough, we've all had it! Can't you at least change your position? Balance a washbasin on your head? Or rather than a washbasin, how about a
bottle of soy sauce? We’re all sick of these stinky old covers!

Although Damin is a factory worker, Damin boasts a wide range of rhetorical strategies and persuasion skills. Through this monologue, Damin ultimately not only succeeds in convincing Yunfang to eat and thus continue living, but also wins over Yunfang’s heart and affections. Damin employs, although perhaps without learned conscious intent, certain rhetorical strategies endowed with an appeal to shared cultural values. As the shared cultural values expressed in the Damin’s monologue above are central to those values that construct the logic of the reception of the narratives, this scene is emblematic of the narrative’s overall value structure.

Damin’s opening line is a nostalgic reference, reinforcing the important role nostalgia plays in structuring the narrative’s logic and its reception and consumption. He compares Yunfang to three of China’s model revolutionary martyrs: Jiang Jie, Dong Cunrui, and Huang Jiguang. Only the sharing of such historical memory enforces the humor of this appeal. The second appeal is constructed by Damin’s penchant for petty calculations, a habit motivated by Damin’s family’s financial hardships and importance of basic sustenance requirements. Yunfang’s family similarly resides within the same courtyard and is also a family of factory workers and is thus ecologically linked to Damin’s family by shared space, history, and class. In his plea, Damin exclaims it would take one month before Yunfang succeeded in saving enough money by fasting to pay for her cremation (and urn). Damin’s third appeal is intended to invoke in Yunfang a sense of responsibility to the community, as he announces that he even had to carry the 98-year old neighbor to visit her.
In the end, however, a type of unabashed physical humor, ostensibly disassociated with any specific historical or cultural context, finally wins over Yunfang. Damin's exclamation that he would like to eat on her behalf is only humorous because of Damin's physical condition of obesity. Damin's mouth, a metonymy for his overindulgence in eating, is the implied reason why Yunfang had not previously been romantically interested in him. However, now Damin's mouth, as the source of comforting persuasion inspiring a will and even passion to live, is based on a type of physicality. Thus, Damin's entreaties begin with nostalgia-motivated entreats and close with a corporeal scatological appeal to relieving oneself and bedwetting. Relying upon strategies that range from invoking nostalgia and shared sense of community to the humor of parsimony and scatology, the monologue simultaneously serves to entreat the audience to engage in the act of consumption.

The above passages illustrate Damin's proclivity and penchant for loquacity. The single most important modifier of Damin's character is pin 贫, which is the adjective modifier of Damin that appears in the title of the book and television series. Pin is a key word and concept in Beijing's lexicon of local colloquialisms. The standard definition of the word in traditional and modern usage is “lacking,” or “impoverished in,” as in “poverty” (pinqiong 贫穷) or “shortage of” (pinfa 贫乏). Pin in the local Beijing context, when referring to speech, means garrulous or loquacious. However, the quality of pin is not just measured by the degree of verbosity. One can indeed be pin without saying too much. Therefore, the quality of what is being said also determines whether or not it can be regarded as pin. In some instances, only one word can qualify as pin; therefore, pin is better measured in terms of perceived verbal force than length. There is no doubt that pin is closely
connected with the Beijing ecosystem composed of high density living conditions typically found in Beijing’s hutong. *Pin* describes a transcendence of itself (*pin* as lacking or impoverished), as a way to move beyond one’s physical environment and constraints through a reliance on verbosity, wit, and sometimes even a sharp, accusatory tongue.

That Damin’s *pin* is closely linked to his family’s indigence is corroborated by the fact that one of the main causes of his personal and family’s poverty is the same as the root of his loquacity—namely, the death of his father. Upon the death of his father, Damin, as the eldest male child, inherited the role of being household decision-maker and family arbitrator. Damin’s *pin*-ness plays a primary role in conducting family affairs. While heading up family meetings, which are almost always called in order to reallocate either family funds or family space, Damin’s *pin*-ness within the space of his family is characterized as circuitous and indirect. Such is the case when Damin seeks family approval to occupy the inner room with his soon-to-be wife Yunfang. The addition of one more person within the living quarters therefore means that Damin’s four siblings and mother are required to crowd into a single room. Damin’s *pin*-ness in arbitrating family matters often takes a more long-winded approach:

After Damin and Yunfang are happily moved in together, Damin’s younger brother informs Damin that his “water is also boiling” and plans to get married. Again, the limited space of their house needs to be re-negotiated to accommodate one more family member and the newlywed’s sleeping arrangements. After threatening to move into the outdoor latrine shared by all the families living in the courtyard compound, Damin decides to attempt sharing his
room with his brother and new wife. However, every night Damin’s restful slumber is interrupted by a series of piercing cries.

Wa!
Is this daylight thunder?
Wa!
Then it just really couldn’t let up.
Yao!
Ah!
Yi!
Wu!
Ya!
Ao!
Ma!

Not only is Damin and his wife’s personal space compromised and their evenings regularly interrupted by his brother’s conjugal routine, but Yunfang is just pregnant and feared the habitual bed rattling and associated exclamations would not be ideal “womb education” for their child. In order to resolve the issue, Damin invites his younger brother for a meal out, unusual considering Damin’s parsimonious tendencies. Damin orders kidney and elaborates upon the importance of protecting one’s kidney, hinting to his younger brother to slow down his nightly exercises. However, Dajun misses the implication and Damin orders more acrid tasting kidney, suggesting that Dajun is in need of quickly boosting his kidney. Overeating the pungent kidney as the hinting continues to elude Dajun, Damin finally reveals the reason for dining his brother:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Damin</th>
<th>You’ve seen a cock stepping on eggs?</th>
<th>大民</th>
<th>你见过公鸡踩蛋儿吗？</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dajun</td>
<td>Just heard of it but haven’t seen it.</td>
<td>大军</td>
<td>听说过，没见过。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>Goo goo, ga ga! It’s crazy!</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>咕咕咯咯的，热闹着呢。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dajun</td>
<td>Really?</td>
<td>大军</td>
<td>是吗？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>You’re really noisy!</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>你们比公鸡踩蛋儿还热闹。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dajun</td>
<td>Bro’, what do you mean exactly?</td>
<td>大军</td>
<td>大军</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>When a cock steps on the chicken’s back, the chicken calls out gee gee, ga ga. Like it’s being slaughtered. Unbearable!</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>公鸡往母鸡背上一踩，母鸡吱吱嘎嘎胡叫唤，就跟有谁要宰它似的，德行大了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We’ve all been around the track. We’ve eaten pork, seen a pig run, and run with one before. There’s nothing to hide from each other! But, why can we do it and you two can’t?</td>
<td></td>
<td>大家都是过来人，吃过猪肉，见过猪跑，也跟着一块儿跑过，谁瞒谁呀！可是，为什么我们能做到的，你们就做不到呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dajun</td>
<td>What can you do?</td>
<td>大军</td>
<td>你们做到什么了？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>We’ve never ever cried out!</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>我们从来不叫唤！</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Damin’s *pin*-ness in the dialogue above is characterized by its circuitous nature—an indirect route but leading to a clear objective. Damin’s lecture is also articulated on a relatively visceral level, attributable to *pin* as categorized within a colloquial register, or popular language (*su hua* 俗话). Although verbal suggestion or implication is frequently constitutive of a more artistic or cultured mode of articulation—cultured/literary (*ya* 雅) rather than popular/common (*su* 俗) in the cultured/popular “high/low” (*ya su* 雅俗) binary of language registers—Damin’s suggestive speech is clearly founded on visceral implications. It is exactly this incorporation of polarities—indirect suggestion and direct viscerality—that endow Damin’s locutions with the quality of *pin*-ness. Despite further elaboration, Dajun remains unenlightened, and Damin finally concedes by furnishing a more blunt clarification. Dajun agrees to confront the problem and put an end to the nightly disturbances, although
without agreeing to adopt Damin’s rather impudent proposition of muffling his wife’s hollering with a preserved egg.

Damin initially believes his investment in the meal would bear the desired returns, but that evening, the disruptive reverberations recommence. Damin feels he has no choice but to escape the nightly clamor by building an addition to their house. However, the construction of the addition instigates a quarrel with his neighbor over ambiguous property lines. The neighbor is concerned the expansion would impede his mother’s passage through the walkway between the neighboring houses. His loquacity ends up instigating his neighbor’s rage; Damin becomes obsessed in the pin-ness of calculating the waist size of his neighbor’s mother and inadvertently insults his neighbor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liangzi</td>
<td>How large is my mother’s waist?</td>
<td>我妈腰围多少？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>Four feet four. Heard it from the alley’s tailor.</td>
<td>4 尺 4，胡同口儿裁缝说的。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liangzi</td>
<td>Tell me again, you ass!</td>
<td>你丫再说一遍！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>Not four feet four? Then four feet six?</td>
<td>不是4尺4？4尺6？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liangzi</td>
<td>You dare to tell it to my face?</td>
<td>你丫敢再说一遍？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>Four foot eight?</td>
<td>4尺8？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liangzi</td>
<td>You fucker.</td>
<td>我他妈。。。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>It really is four foot eight? Then we’ve got a problem. Two of your mothers would have to turn sideways to pass each other.</td>
<td>真是4尺8？那就不好办了，两个妈都得侧身子才能过去了。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liangzi</td>
<td>Bastard! I’m going to bash in your fuckin’ head!</td>
<td>我他妈碎了你杂种操的！</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(65, V: 37:00)
Damin’s *pin*-ness incites his neighbor’s wrath, and Damin ends up getting his head beaten in with a brick. Even after he is knocked nearly unconscious, Damin’s mouth continues to babble sarcastic invectives:

Nothing! Only 18 stitches. Don’t help me! It’s nothing if I fall. Only 18 more stitches if I crack open my skull. It feels good! I’ll lend him two gall bladders* and see if he has courage enough to smash my skull in with an anvil. It doesn’t really feel good until I have 108 stitches. See if he dares? Who am I? I’m Damin, damn it!

* Gall bladder is representative of courage in Chinese culture

Damin’s *pin*-ness is similar to an uncontrollable physical addiction. Just as Damin’s over-eating leads to obesity, his over-talking, as the example illustrates above, can incite and result in physical confrontation and injury. The mouth physically links Damin’s over-indulgence in ingestion (intake) to an over-indulgence in speaking (outtake), both of which promote a vicious circle of self-abuse or imposed subjection. As a basic mode of survival, *pin* is a vicious cycle of superfluous verbosity and impoverished ecological life condition. *Pin* is inextricably both the root cause and result of the “shortage” and “poverty.” But it is also, importantly, a pleasure and spirit associated with the less affluent.

*Pin* is Damin’s primary mode of self-expression. In also possesses a practical import as a verbal mode of arbitration of family affairs and defense of his family’s identity and dignity. The humor (*dou* 调) of his *pin*-ness—replete with a range of witticisms and innuendos—can even verge on verbal art: the “alley rap.” As such, *pin* to various degrees is a
shared local value, inextricably linked to the social ecosystem comprised of high-density living conditions within the interweaving alleyways. This social ecosystem and culture is on the verge of being destroyed as Beijing’s alleys are razed and incomes continue to climb. However, Liu Heng’s narratives nostalgically memorialize the social ecology of *pin*.

*Pin*’s entrance into the modern market economy and practical application and use is illustrated by Damin’s career change. After Damin is laid off, he becomes a thermos salesman. This represents the metanarrative of China’s market reform, “modernization,” and privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and industries, during which huge numbers of factory workers are discharged from their “iron bowl” life employment guarantees (xia gang 下岗) and compelled to find new modes of employment and livelihood. Whereas previously Damin’s *pin*-ness was both tolerated and preserved by the iron-bowl system, his new occupation and function motivate Damin to adjust and leverage his *pin*-ness to meet direct market demands and consumption patterns of society. The question is whether and how the alley/iron-bowl cultural artifact is to be transformed into a market function and a means to “modernizing” life and family. Damin is furnished with an “opportunity” to transfer from “production” as a laborer in manufacturing supply line of thermoses to “consumption” as a purveyor of consumer goods. Suddenly, his family’s livelihood depends directly upon his ability to “market,” “package,” and “sell” his *pin*-ness as measured by his ability to commodify his rhetorical and persuasive aptitude.

At the same time, Damin’s compulsory departure from the SOE’s (over/under-) production marks the market entrance of the promotion of his *pin*-ness within a consumer society extended beyond his immediate and familiar alley ecosystem. This narrative resonated with the cultural teleology of the nineties—a type of indoctrination into a consumption-
driven culture; a compulsory recalibration of the re-production of superfluity/shortage
driven by the socialist production modes of iron-bowl economics. Damin’s career change is
a type of socio-economic castration, which severs his mouth from the production system
and simultaneously re-connects it to a modernizing capitalistic system driven by consumer
demand. Now profit drives Damin’s pin-ness.

We’ve already seen in the examples above how Damin’s pin-ness is often related to
his stinginess. Damin’s stinginess is more aptly characterized as kou men’er 抠门儿, which
most closely resembles “anal” in English when referring to a type of monetary disposition.133
In the passages discussed above, including Damin’s discourses on petty calculations such as
factory earnings and the price of wontons, and the savings accumulated by Yunfang’s self-
imposed starvation, Damin’s “stinginess” is revealed as one of his most overbearing
characteristics. As described by the narrator:

As for Zhang Damin, he almost never spends
any money. He only buys meal tickets, not even
ever a popsicle. If he doesn’t want to spend
money, then of course he doesn’t want
anything. If he doesn’t want anything but wants
to spend money, he doesn’t want it in the end.
His cherishing of money comes deep down
from within his bones.

Other than lecturing others on petty calculations involving marginal economic savings,
Damin also maintains the habit of self-reassurance regarding the returns of his financial
investments. For example, after Damin returns from dining his younger brother Dajun with
the objective of ending the couple’s nightly routine, Damin reassures himself by justifying to
Yunfang that although the restaurant had overcharged him, the bill would result in the intended returns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Damin</th>
<th>Yunfang, I got burnt.</th>
<th>大民</th>
<th>芸芳，亏了！</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yunfang</td>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td>芸芳</td>
<td>亏什么了？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>They overcharged me for an extra order of liver.</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>他们多收了一盘腰花儿钱！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yunfang</td>
<td>After ranting for an evening, you’re still calculating the bill!</td>
<td>芸芳</td>
<td>闹了半天你算账呢！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>No matter how I calculated it, it just wouldn’t come out right. I must have been overcharged 7 yuan.</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>怎么算，怎么不对，多收了我7块钱！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yunfang</td>
<td>I’ll give you 7 yuan. Just sleep. . . What do you hear? There’s nothing.</td>
<td>芸芳</td>
<td>我给你7块钱，睡吧。  ． ． ． 听什么？什么也听不见。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>That’s just it. The way it should be. Yunfang, this shows that the money we spent was worth it. We weren’t burned. I don’t feel bad at all. Even if they charged for an extra two orders of liver, I still wouldn’t feel bad. What did we get with spending this money? They don’t know but we know inside ourselves. What did we get by spending an extra 7 yuan? Yunfang, I really don’t feel bad.</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>这就对了。芸芳，这说明花钱花得值，我们一点也不亏，我不心疼。他们多收两盘炒花腰儿的钱，我也不心疼，我们花钱买的是什么东西，他们谁也不知道，只有我们自己心里明白。多花了7块钱又算得了什么东西呢？芸芳，我真的不心疼。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Damin’s employment by the thermos factory provides Damin with only a minimal income. The financial pressure for his family only increases after Damin marries and Yunfang is expecting a child. Damin’s monthly balance sheet for his nearly 100 yuan salary is tightly allocated: 30 yuan for food, 20 yuan stipend to parents of both Damin and Yunfang,
15 yuan as a stipend for Daguo’s education, no more than 15 yuan to support Damin’s smoking habit, no more than 15 yuan to allow Yunfang to eat chicken legs once a week after she becomes pregnant, 1 yuan for bathing, 1 yuan for hair cut, etc. (73-4). After Yunfang becomes pregnant, in addition to the additional expenses for food, such as the weekly chicken legs, additional money is also required for transportation, such as taking a taxi to the hospital. The birth of Zhang Shu—named in honor of the tree in their bedroom—also generates new financial stresses. For example, Yunfang is unable to breastfeed their baby boy, and as a result, Damin needs to invest in powdered milk. As it turns out, the only powdered milk digestible by Zhang Shu is imported from America and is the most expensive variety.

He got the runs with Chinese milk powder but was fine with American milk powder. What a stomach! He would eat half a can in three days, an entire can in five days, two cans in nine days. What a stomach! Who cares about his penchant for foreign things, eating one can after another like this, when there’s nothing left to eat, he’s going to end up eating his Chinese father! Zhang Damin squatted on the floor calculating the expenses. Wouldn’t a one-time investment in my own milk cow be better than continuously throwing money at the American milk company?

Damin initiates the implementation of his cost-saving and patriotic strategy, and he purchases five crucian carps and five pig trotters. After this is only effective in enlarging Yunfang’s breasts but ineffective in producing milk, he resorts to investing in a turtle. This incites his sister’s abusive envy, as she sees Damin spending “family” funds lavishly on a
“non-family” member. Damin pulverizes the turtle, bones and all, into very fine powder, propelled by his prudence, to make sure he gets the most value for the money spent. Sure enough, after ingesting the stewed turtle, Yunfang is able to produce milk, although their family savings have been depleted in the process to a balance of 4 yuan. The tragic-comical predicament as narrated in the text is written as if directly intended for a dramatic stage or visual rendering (83-4), with comical dialogues including memorable lines such as: “Don’t squirt at the tree, change to another tree [their son’s name]” (bie wang shushang zi le, kuai huan yi ke shu ba 别往树上滋了, 快换一棵树吧). And in the end the incident is infused with a nationalistic discourse:

Mom's milk finally defeated America's milk powder. Not right! A Chinese turtle, a turtle transformed into turtle paste, completed wasted the American milk company ... Thank the lord! The child's mother is flowing!

The visual renderings in the television mini series continue to highlight the comical aspect of Damin’s stinginess, both in terms of his loquacious colloquies but also in respect to his actions, such as pulverizing the turtle bones. The producers of the television miniseries evidently adopted Damin’s fixated behavior as a point to key in on. This is evident in the addition of a number of scenes that comically exaggerate Damin’s extreme penny-pinching behavior. In the television miniseries, for example, Damin takes Yunfang on a date to the Fragrant Hills, a temple and park area in the Western part of Beijing’s suburbs. In addition to the Fragrant Hills serving as a cultural identifier for the audience—in terms of boosting a sense of community and nostalgia—it is also a setting for Damin’s “anal” parsimony. Due to
its expense, Damin refuses to purchase a cable car ticket for himself. However, the etiquette of dating requires Damin to purchase a ticket for his date. As a result, while Yunfang solely ascends the hill by cable car, the hefty Damin scrambles to the top of the hill huffing and puffing. Damin, gasping, yells at the top of his lungs that he loves Yunfang. This scene is representative of a number of the main additions or revisions within the television miniseries. These include an increased visual identification with cultural and community symbols, greater emphasis upon romance between couples, and exaggeration of comical actions that result more from personal eccentricity than poverty.

Family relationships and dynamics is a major theme narrated and visualized throughout both the text and television miniseries. As discussed above, Damin inherits the role of family arbitrator, and his loquacious tendencies are leveraged as an instrument with which to arbitrate family relationships. Damin also plays a primary role in arbitrating or facilitating relationships between his siblings and their spouses or companions. One major episode is the incident involving his sister Dayun’s marriage. Since she elopes and marries a pig breeder in Shandong Province, Dayun’s marriage is viewed with disparagement by most of the family. This is not only because Dayun absconds to her husband’s (Li Mushao) home without expressed family acquiescence and wedding formalities, but also because her husband is an “outsider” who speaks with a provincial accent. Dayun returns home claiming that her husband beat her on the presumption that she is infertile. Damin, as family arbitrator, leverages his loquacity in an effort to mend the relationship and re-unite his sister with Li Mushao.
We all know that poor peasants like to beat their wives. But is it proper of you to run into a working class family and beat your wife? You don’t even bother to ask if our working class family minds? Why not just go on the street and beat up someone who you think doesn’t look right to you? How can you hide inside and beat up your wife? If the working class took control and beat you to death, could you take it? In the future, don’t hit your wife. If your hand starts to itch, go ahead and give yourself a few smacks in the face. If you can’t bear to hit yourself in the face, then smack yourself in the butt. You’ll rid yourself of your anger and get the pleasure of hitting someone, and you don’t have to worry about any reprisal. It couldn’t be better! If you really can’t control yourself, then pound your head into a telephone pole, or jump into a reservoir and drink a belly of water, or jump into the pig pen beating a mother pig with a club until it is crippled...just don’t hit your wife! Who is your wife? She works together with you, makes dinner for you, helps you make decisions, leaves the sweetest for you to eat, keeps the most bitter for herself, gives you the larger part of the last bite of food and eats the smaller part for herself. Is it easy for your wife? At night she makes you happy. She’s not really feeling good but she pretends she is anyway just to make you feel better. After you’re feeling good, you get up and beat her? What kind of a creature are you? Are you a real person? If you beat my sister again, I’ll break you in two! I’ll go to Shanxi’s Huo County and tear up your ancestor’s graves!
Damin's harangue stirs Li Mushao, and it is revealed that Dayun is equally belligerent towards her husband as he is to her. Dayun visited three different hospitals for fertility exams, but her husband chauvinistically refused to proceed with his own check-up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Damin</th>
<th>Then it's your problem.</th>
<th>大民</th>
<th>那就是你的毛病了。</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Li Mushao</td>
<td>I don’t have any problem. My thing works.</td>
<td>李木勺</td>
<td>我没有病，我家伙好使！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>You have to get it checked.</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>你得瞧病去。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Mushao</td>
<td>I won’t go. It works as well as it can.</td>
<td>李木勺</td>
<td>我不瞧，我这里好使得不得行！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damin</td>
<td>It’s not enough for it to just work. A mule works, but what’s the use. It only sprays sperm without growing anything. If you want a child, hurry and get checked.</td>
<td>大民</td>
<td>好使也不行。骡子好使，管什么？光散种不长东西。想孩子就赶紧瞧病！</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Mushao</td>
<td>You’ve got a good mouth. I’ll do whatever you say.</td>
<td>李木勺</td>
<td>你好嘴，你说咋着就咋着。(122, XI: 37:00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Damin accompanies his sister’s husband to the hospital and even into the restroom to egg him on in the release of the required specimen (125, XII: 31:00). Upon failure of repeated attempts, Damin buys a magazine lined with movie stars, which succeeds in helping Li Mushao with the task at hand. After her husband takes fertility pills, Dayun becomes pregnant. Li Mushao appears eternally grateful and repeatedly extols Damin for his charitable concern and his “good mouth” (好嘴). In the television miniseries, Damin’s role as a relationship facilitator is amplified. In fact, Damin plays an active role in
the conjugal or courting relationship of each of his siblings. In addition to helping his sister Dayun and husband overcome their fertility impasse, in the television miniseries Damin arranges the romantic relationship between his youngest brother Daguo and his former assistant at the factory—a character added in the television series—in addition to playing an active role as arbitrator between his brother Dajun and his wife Shasha.

In general, one of the most significant narrative embellishments in the television miniseries is the fleshing out and elaboration of the relationships between the various couples in Damin’s family. The addition of the role of Damin’s assistant in the television miniseries also provides for the insertion of a new narrative following the couple’s romantic relationship. Daguo, after receiving a college education and entering a career as a government official, ostensibly expresses cold indifference towards women and dating in general. However, in part, through Damin’s intervention, his former assistant is encouraged to pursue Daguo, and by the end, Daguo and his assistant are engaged. This conjugal union also represents a metanarrative embedded within the television miniseries: a “graduation” from the iron-bowl working class era. Damin’s former assistant had become a successful white-collar manager of a famous Beijing hotel—Kunlun Hotel—after leaving her job at the factory, and Daguo’s falling in love with his brother’s former factory assistant represents a nostalgic “return” to his roots.

In addition, the role of Bingwen, the lover of Damin’s youngest sister Xiaoxue, is fleshed out within the television miniseries. Xiaoxue and Bingwen meet in the hospital where they work. Within the text, there are only incidental or partial references to Xiaoxue’s nameless lover. However, the relationship is constructed as the most romantic within the television miniseries. Bingwen is depicted as a sharp, intelligent, handsome, young man with
a promising medical career, who also expresses devotion to his country through participating in altruistic activities. Their relationship is tragically cut short, immediately prior to their planned wedding date, when Bingwen is killed in a car crash in the Western part of China. The tragedy is only further exacerbated when Xiaoxue is diagnosed with leukemia and passes away shortly thereafter.

Another relationship elaborated upon within the television miniseries is the love triangle between Dajun, his wife Shasha, and neighbor Gu San’er. While the nameless character of Gu San’er is incidental and indistinct in the text, the character is fleshed out and endowed with one of the most distinct personas within the television miniseries. Shasha, in addition, within the text is just a caricature; however, within the television miniseries, she is transformed into one of its most complex characters. Within the text, Shasha is portrayed, if not as an unforgiving tramp, then as the unfaithful, unapologetic wife. If fact, the text even suggests that Dajun’s wife is not just having an affair but actually selling sexual services. Within the television miniseries, however, Shasha is depicted as a more central and complex character facing a conflicted predicament. Although she is also portrayed as having an affair in the miniseries, the meaning and events of the affair, or rather liaison, are expanded, with the narrative line carrying a more central importance. The liaison is presented within the miniseries as, in the first place, taking place without her full consent. Secondly, it is depicted as an inadvertent means for Shasha to acquire the finances necessary for her to invest in her business, with the tacit objective of creating a better life for her and her husband. Although Shasha is portrayed in one light as opportunistic and even dissolute, she is also repeatedly depicted as genuinely devoted to her husband and family, especially to her mother-in-law.
Furthermore, within the television miniseries, Shasha is portrayed more as a victim of circumstance, evoking a certain degree of sympathy. First, Shasha immediately provokes Dayun’s condescension as soon as she enters the Zhang household. The conflict between Dayun and Shasha continue throughout most of the miniseries, only heightened by the fact that Dayun and her husband have lent money to Shasha to help her buy inventory, repayment of which is inevitably delayed. Although the relationship at the start is not entirely wanting of mutual desire, Shasha is at the same time portrayed as helplessly seduced by Gu San; she is a victim more of her drifting ambitions than an unfaithful and undeserving wife. Later, Gu San’s gambling vice becomes more pronounced, and it is made evident that he has also become a drug addict in the process of going bankrupt. Although Shasha does maintain a certain degree of sympathy for him, Shasha rebuffs Gu San’s romantic advances and pleas for financial help on several occasions. Although given a name and identity in the miniseries, Gu San remains nonetheless an overly simplified character. Depicted as a lawless troublemaker and home wrecker, his being hauled off to prison arouses very little sympathy.

The other important relationships developed within the television miniseries are those between the elderly couples. For example, the television miniseries features a friendly relationship between Damin’s mother and Liu Daye, a widower neighbor who serves as a companion for her. He gives her gifts of lychees and invites her to participate in the yangge dancing activities with him, despite her gradual degeneration into disorientation and eventual senility. The television miniseries develops the relationship of Yunfang’s parents, and even devotes nearly an entire episode (IV) to differences between their preferred pastimes. Yunfang’s mother blames her husband for frittering away his time playing chess, while Yunfang’s father is angered by his wife’s participation in an elderly yangge dancing troupe.
because he thinks such involvement attracts other’s derision. Gu San’s mother is also featured within the television miniseries. She is depicted as living with a partner, angering Gu San (IX). The addition of these couple relationships within the television miniseries is a common narrative technique within Chinese television dramas—a branching out of family relationships resulting in an expansion of the range of character identification for the audience. This choice follows market logic, since a significant demographic stratum of the audience consists of the retired population.

The insertion of the character stratum composed of the older generation of relationships also serves to bolster one of the main themes or discourses revealed in the television miniseries—namely, a shared cultural value rooted within a common community and tradition of family/nation identification and unity. Earlier I have discussed the issue of nostalgia appeal in the text, which becomes even more pronounced in the television miniseries. A tension between a historical restoration or nostalgic remembrance and a teleological quest for a better life endows the narrative with its popular logic. Within this narrative, the unity—or trinity—of family/country/tradition, although threatened by both internal and external elements, prevails and carries with it one of the major forms of popular appeal for cultural consumers. The internal family space is negotiated in conjunction with the internal family relationships. Family unity triumphs as the family succeeds in living harmoniously within the confined space.

At the helm is Damin, a type of folk hero who relies upon an “inherited” verbal ability and authority to maintain family harmony and unity. Not only do his verbal skills win over his wife and then gain his wife’s acceptance within the family home, but Damin also works out the intermittently turbulent relationship between Dajun and Shasha, facilitates
Daguo and Damin’s former assistant’s relationship and Dayun and Li Mushao’s marriage, in addition to mediating the relationships of the elderly couples within the community. Family unity is not only threatened from within but also from external pressures. For example, Gu San, the opportunistic money-lender cum drug-addict, and Dayun’s husband, the family “outsider,” both create threats to the unity of Damin’s family. Most importantly is the threat to Damin’s own relationship with Yunfang as posed by the return of her former boyfriend. Upon his return to Beijing, Damin reluctantly acquiesces to Yunfang attending a dinner party hosted by Yunfang’s former boyfriend. In the television miniseries, Damin stalks Yunfang, following her to the restaurant of her ex-boyfriend’s dinner party. Her ex-boyfriend’s “donation” of a small gift of cash to Yunfang greatly upsets Damin. Offended by the offer, Damin insists upon returning the cash to him. Another important discourse constituting the miniseries’ popular logic is represented in Damin’s sarcastic farewell to Yunfang’s ex-boyfriend:

You’ve been in America for quite a long time? You’ve learned to wash dishes? Americans are just no good. They always arrange for us Chinese to wash dishes. No matter where you mention Chinese in the world, everyone thinks of washing dishes. One mention of washing dishes, and one just thinks of Chinese... Be careful on the plane. Last week a plane just went down in Columbia, everyone burned to death, like charcoal. Contact us after you get to America. If you get AIDS or something, come back and look for me. I know an old man, who uses a medical wrap pasted on the belly button, and it can cure everything. When you return to New York City, be alert when you're walking along the streets. Be on the alert for anyone using a bullet to pierce your ear. Let God bless you, Amen. Take care, you bastard.

在美国年头儿不短了吧？学会刷盘子了么？美国人真是个东西，老安排咱们中国人刷盘子。弄得全世界一提中国人，就想到刷盘子...上飞机小心点儿，上礼拜哥伦比亚刚掉下来一架，人都烧焦了，跟木炭儿似的。到了美国多联系，得了爱滋病什么的，你回来找我。我认识个老头，用药膏贴肚脐，什么病都治... 回纽约上街留点神，小心有人用子弹打你耳朵眼，上帝保佑你，阿门了。保重！妈了个巴子的！(155-56)
Damin’s pin-ness tames the outside threat, not just that of his wife’s ex-boyfriend, but also of America. In just a few sentences, America is described as a place plagued with discrimination, disease, and danger. As Damin secures his family’s unity, the ex-boyfriend is portrayed as a masochistic traitor, and a discourse of unity/community of Chinese within the motherland is bolstered through the exiling of the ex-boyfriend to his implied “doom.”

A popular logic constructed by the aspiration and belief in socio-economic upward mobility informs the narrative’s central teleological discourse. Damin’s youngest brother Daguo (college educated, student council president, and assigned a government post in Beijing upon graduation) primarily (re)presents the upward mobility sub-narrative. Despite Daguo’s physical and symbolic “graduation” from the alley ecosystem, Damin continues to play a primary role in Daguo’s life, negotiating Daguo’s relationship with their mother and arranging the romantic relationship between Daguo and Damin’s former assistant. As Daguo inadvertently triggers his mother’s first major Alzheimer-induced incomprehension (she gets lost trying to buy the ingredients needed to make Daguo’s favorite dish upon his return from college), Daguo is portrayed from one perspective as a threat to family unity. However, upon his return from college, from another perspective, Daguo is re-integrated into the family, and his social status helps to raise the overall social position of the family.

Tied to the narrative of upward mobility is the expansion and upgrading of space for the Zhang family. With the demolition of their old ping fang, the family is provided a new mid-rise apartment as resettlement compensation. As the alleys will be demolished, the relocation committee is preparing to move all of the families to new homes. The Zhangs are originally provided with a 3-bedroom apartment but this is changed to 2 bedrooms after
Xiaoxue dies. With over nine million square meters of old housing being demolished in Beijing as part of the city’s urban resurrection, the resettlement of the Zhang family is a key cultural identifier for the audience. In addition, according to the 2002 *Beijing Statistics Yearbook*, the average per capita living space in Beijing is growing at a rate of about 5% per year (17.6 sq m in 2001). Therefore, the expansion and upgrading of space is also a major socio-economic trend within Beijing, and to a greater or lesser extent, in cities throughout China. The narrative of the short story and the television series tapped into these socio-economic realities. However, such social realities are enshrouded in a more dominant discourse of family and cultural unity. This is clearly represented in the last scene in the television series, in which the entire family unites within the old house – representing the integration of nostalgic remembrance and social mobility, as most of the children have achieved financial independence and have their own homes, in addition to a reinforcement of the trinity of family/nation/community/tradition.

I would like to elaborate upon the discourses of tradition within the text and television miniseries. As mentioned, the television miniseries features a number of either new or significantly more fleshed out relationships between elderly couples, and in addition, a greater emphasis is placed on respect of the elders. Respect for the Zhang siblings’ mother is also a key theme throughout the short story and television miniseries. For example, the wage-earning children contribute 20 yuan each as a monthly allowance for their mother (73). Respect for the mother is also frequently cited as a reason for certain courses of action. Dayun, as discussed previously, claims Damin is harming their mother by lavishly spending his money on the turtle to assist Yunfang’s breast-feeding when Damin never even buys fish for their mother (83). Earlier, Dayun employed similar reasons to disapprove of Damin’s
The reallocation of space would result in their mother sleeping on a makeshift bed, and Dayun expressed her opposition by claiming that Damin secretly hoped to jab his mother to death with the makeshift bed’s crates. Although the mother plays a passive role throughout the text and miniseries, there is no doubt that she is a major factor in regulating, or self-regulating, the actions of all of her children. From this perspective, she is at the center of the story, always present, as a sublime yet passive force within the narrative. The importance of her role is one of the major elements tying together the unities of family and tradition.

Rhetoric and language also play a major role in engendering a sense of identification for the audience. The text and miniseries comprise certain rhetorical strategies that resonate with a local popular logic, including Dayun’s adoption of their mother’s welfare as an excuse to hurt Damin’s wife—the outsider to the family—and Damin’s expression of concern about his brother’s health as the ostensible motive behind his appeal for putting an end to the nightly conjugal rituals (47). The language, in terms of the local Beijing colloquialisms and dialect and its distinction of *pin*-ness, also plays a very important role throughout the text and miniseries in locating the narrative, discourse, and logic within a specific time and location and in constructing a framework for cultural recruitment and identification for the audience.

There is no doubt that the television miniseries received popular “television blockbuster” attention in Beijing and Damin became a household name and identifier for locals of all generations. Although the discussion above has touched upon some of the reasons for the popularity of the text and miniseries, I will take up this issue more directly. What were the narrative or visual aspects that appealed to the audience of Beijingers? One of
the main reasons for the miniseries’ popularity was its realistic depiction of a three-generation *lao bai xing* ("average folk") household beset by economic stress.

There has never been a short story like this in which I couldn’t bear reading too quickly. The story touched upon the misery and awkwardness of the experiences of our generation, and realistically reflected our changes of the times since the reforms, from acquiring a voucher buying a cheap television, speculating in fertilizer, booking train cargo space, to everyone wanting to be his own boss. Within these changes, most people were just like Damin, facing one economic tide after the next, but always upholding the ideal of pursuing happiness. (Wang Mengyu 1998)

As mentioned, Damin inherits the responsibility of mediating family affairs, and it is Damin’s (mis)handling of this fated role that greatly appealed to the audience. The socio-cultural norm is that the eldest son take on the role of family mediator, “chief family officer,” though he is not the only director on the board. Damin’s (mis)handling of this role entertained and amused the audience while at the same time re-affirming the cultural values or beliefs for such a role. Damin, although provoking audience laughter, is never mocked in a satirical or socially subversive manner. A mockery of Damin would be equivalent to deriding the cultural importance of the family unit. Such derision of a family unit—a common trope in popular culture for representing the nation-state—would by metonymic extension translate into a more subversive commentary on the tradition of the family and the nation in contemporary China. As mentioned previously, the audience identified with many of the family issues and economic burdens faced by Damin and his family. Importantly, as discussed, it is precisely this tension between nostalgic restoration—a type of yearning for the organic past—and the teleological upgrading of social class (as most clearly represented by Damin moving out of the crowded make-shift ping fang and moving into the more
commodious multi-story apartment), which motivates the television series’ popular narrative and logic.

There is no doubt that one of the most important aspects of social life for Beijingers since the 1990s has been the change in housing policy and ownership: the trend towards private ownership, resettlement and suburban migration, gentrification of the downtown areas and destruction of the “revolutionary” provisional communities, increase in living space, boom in interior decoration and furniture, etc. The privatization and “upgrading” of living space is a key social narrative for residents of Beijing, especially since the mid-1990s, and as such, resonates with the popular cultural narratives in the text and miniseries. In the miniseries, three of the most important and memorable visual images are related to this issue of living space: the tree that protrudes through Damin’s room shared with wife and son (representing the awkward yet intimate and organic family), the viewing of the new multi-story bare yet spacious apartment (representing the ostensible improvement in quality of life), and the family reunion within the old pingfang (representing the organic and united matured family).

These images are imbued and interconnected with a mythic and imaginary narrative, obscuring a social reality in the process—namely, the reality of the resettlement apparatus in Beijing. The resettled individuals can use their compensation to purchase a new house, which invariably is located further outside the city as the compensation is not sufficient to buy a house of comfortable size in the same location. Or, in some instances, the government will provide the compensation and a discounted price for purchasing housing built in the same location as the demolished housing. In both cases, it is very unlikely that the old pingfang house would remain standing when the new house is completed. The total
irrevocable physical replacement of the old housing with the new is precisely what the
popular narrative in the miniseries mystifies with the simultaneous co-existence of the old
pingfang and new multi-story house. It is exactly the wishful and imaginary proprietorship of
both (nostalgic restoration of organic unity and upgrading of material quality of life) that
captures the audience’s popular imagination.

The other reason often cited by colleagues and friends in reference to the popularity
of the miniseries is just simply that the miniseries’ humor and comical exaggeration
entertained and amused the audience. Liu Heng addresses, although somewhat ambiguously,
this issue of so-called “mindless” entertainment in his introduction with his allusion to the
cultural anti-hero Ah Q. One of the major functions of popular entertainment is its
ostensible cathartic effect. The question, of course, then becomes: Is the popular
entertainment “numbing” the consumers and reaping profits just like “drug peddlers.” There
is no doubt that television programming in China has undergone a major revolution in the
past decade, and the “mindless” cathartic sit-com-esque programming commonplace in the
United States is gradually replacing or at least gaining ground against the previously dogmatic
or didactic government-sponsored official programming. Regardless whether this is a step
forward, backward, or sideways, it can be affirmed that one of the main reasons the Garrulous
Zhang miniseries was so enthusiastically received was its entertaining and cathartic function.

The television miniseries’ connection with the local Beijing verbal performance arts
of xiao pin 小品 and xiang sheng 像声 also contributes to the series’ entertainment value. The
television miniseries, and even more so the film adaptation that stars one of China’s most
famous xiang sheng artists, resembles a series of xiao pin sketches or vignettes stitched together.
This drawing upon the performance characteristics of xiao pin, one of China’s most popular
performance genres, is another major reason for the series’ popularity mentioned by many Beijing viewers.

**Conclusion**

The resemblance of Damin’s *pin* soliloquies to *xiao pin* is one of the major reasons for discussing the works in terms of their performativity. I previously mentioned three levels in which performativity can be discussed in relation to the works. First is the issue of the short story “performing” as a visual medium, as a television miniseries and feature film. Introducing this concept of performance in a discussion of medium adaptation serves two purposes. One is to highlight one of the major literary and cultural trends in China’s cultural production in the last ten years of the century (and continuing into the 21st century). This trend of adapting fiction to visual mediums, of course, is not limited to China. The increase in financial, cultural, and symbolic capital served as an incentive for authors of fiction to sell film or television rights to their fiction and a number of major authors, such as Wang Shuo and Liu Heng, were motivated to write screenplay adaptations of their fiction or screenplays from scratch.135

The preponderance of dialogue, and resemblance to *xiao pin* dialogue in Liu Heng’s short story, makes it difficult to refute that Liu Heng was not aiming for a visual adaptation of the story. Even leaving the issue of intention aside, Liu Heng was at least greatly influenced by the literary and cultural trend of orienting fiction towards facile visualization and conversion to a visual medium. At this level of the performance—the issue of medium adaptation/conversion, I believe it is also possible to borrow the Chinese experience, of the coming-into-being of a market-oriented, consumer-oriented cultural market, to consider how
this process of adaptation or conversion can be gainfully considered a type of performance, or at least as embodying certain performative aspects.

Garrulous Zhang also (re)presents a multiplicity of “local” aspects, values, and traditions. However, the performance of such “locals” depends upon a globalizing socio-economic context. The popular appeal of the television series operates based on the conflation of local/global spaces. The surplus of residential spaces at the end of the television series symbolizes the overlapping of local/global discourses. The modern apartment appears only in a flash at the end as the self-prophesied wish fulfillment and logical conclusion of a trajectory of modernization teleology. The nearly 20 hours of drama that takes place in the hutong and dilapidated pingfang is justified by the residential upgrade. Therefore, the audience’s perception and identification with the “old housing” and “old ways of life” is always already mediated by a position located in an alterior time and space—a time and space marked by the discourses and practices of global integration. Such hybridity of (re)presentation and discourses reveals the television drama as inflected by a local/global nexus. Not traceable back or forward to an originary temporal or spatial site, the television drama dissolves polarities, performing within and engendering a hyphenated space beyond resistance.
The period 1998-2002 was momentous for China. Rapid economic develop was accompanied by China’s entrance into the WTO and Beijing’s selection to host the Olympic Games in 2008. A major issue prior to the International Olympic Committee’s vote for the 2008 host city was whether China could construct “modern” urban infrastructure and facilities in only six years. Indeed, Beijing’s municipal government pledged tens of millions of dollars for the construction of a light-rail system from the airport to the Olympic Green and downtown areas, in addition to vowing to equip all taxis with global positioning technology prior to the Games. The government and business sector focused on the blueprints and investment necessary for Beijing’s development of a “modern” metropolis with “advanced” infrastructure.

At the same time, while talk buzzed about the city’s “hard-wiring” and “hardware,” the media began to discuss issues concerning the “character” of Beijing residents. For example, were Beijing residents sufficiently “modern” in their behavior to host the large number of guests and tourists to the city for the Games? Secondly, how could Beijingers also exhibit a type of local Beijing hospitality as well? Open forums of such discussions were featured, for example, in the live filming of talk shows on Beijing TV in March 2002. At the same time, Washington, D.C. (my hometown) was also preparing a bid for the 2012 Olympic
Games. However, many residents in the D.C. metropolitan area were voicing concerns regarding traffic congestion and terrorist risks. They were worried that the Games would disrupt their lives and even introduce new security and surveillance complications. Their response was a far cry from the nearly unanimous support to host the Games by Beijing residents.

This points to issues of nationalism and patriotic pride for a modernizing society and economy. Although cultural hybridity is a fundamental characteristic of cultural production in China during the captioned period, nationalism is also an important discourse that is neither nullified nor erased by an articulation of plural and contradictory discourses. Indeed, performance theory can assist in the project of locating the multiple layers of national discourses and articulating the complex intersections between nationalism and the local/global nexus.

The cultural performances I discussed in the dissertation were largely produced and circulated within the Beijing locale and cultural milieu. From one perspective, this suggests work that can be productive in terms of forging a field of Beijing Cultural Studies. However, it is also critical to position such urban cultural research and analysis in the context of China’s uneven economic and social development. What is the extent and what are the forms of cultural hybridity in China’s less cosmopolitan areas? What are the different political ramifications of discussing cultural hybridity in urban areas compared with China’s rural areas?

During the period 1998-2002, the political legislation regarding demolition and resettlement of homes has affected all Beijing residents. These policies have politicized space and located the “local” land as a site impinged on by the government’s “modernization”
policies. The spatial re-organization of Beijing provides an active context for different types of cultural production during these years. The transformation of families and communities by the “modernization” of the city is clearly a major issue in the stage dramas, street dancing, and television series discussed in this dissertation. Importantly, the re-organization of spatial relationships in the city also impacts the development of a new class hierarchy in Beijing. Many of the residents of the older communities centrally located in the city are required to resettle in Beijing’s suburbs. As part of China’s economic reforms, many State-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been privatized, merged, or dismantled. Many of the “laid off” workers resulting from the privatization process are the residents having to resettle, to be replaced by white-collar managers who have most likely migrated to Beijing. It is evident that Beijing’s urban “modernization” involves also the restructuring of class hierarchy along a spatial axis.

The critical issues concerning class and gender can also be articulated by performance theory. Within the nexus of cultural hybridity, we can view the multiple layers of discourses concerning class or gender. More importantly, such performances of “class,” need to also be analyzed within a framework that goes beyond national borders and critically examines flows of capital and global images and technology. A complex web of discourses within the local/global nexus informs the re-structuring of classes in China at the turn of the century.
ENDNOTES

1 A wave of international newspapers began reporting the dangers and fatalities associated with coal mining in China in 2002-2003. According to the New York Times, “the government also seems inclined to tolerate a high death rate to keep coal, which still supplies about 75% of China’s energy needs, abundant and inexpensive” (Kahn 2003). I gathered other information regarding coal mining in China through conversations with Blind Shaft’s production and acting team.

2 I participated in the post-production work as the English translator of the film’s script and assisted Li Yang with placing the English subtitles on the Beta tapes for submission to international film festivals. Other post-production work, such as the sound editing, was performed in China. I am responsible for coining the film’s title in English. It was deliberated upon for several weeks and discussed with many members of the production team, while also informally reviewed by a subset of Beijing’s expatriate community. While rendered as a rather literal translation of the Chinese title, the English title also incorporates the film’s theme of deception as the slang meaning of “shaft.”

3 This is the main reason the filming location remains undisclosed. The fact that the exact nature of the relationship between the official and production team and their arrangements cannot be revealed by the film’s crew or other participants in the film’s production verifies, however, the continued retention of authority by China’s cultural censorship apparatus.

4 Arif Dirlik is credited with introducing the concept and term “postsocialism,” which in the 1990s was widely adopted to describe the position of China’s polity in the 1990s (Dirlik 1989: 362-384).

5 China cultural critic Zhang Yiwu is credited with first having introduced the term post-New Era (houxin shiqi 后新时期), which in part encouraged the debate in China on post-ism, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, postsocialism, poststructuralism. See Xie 1995.

6 Wang Ning identifies six versions of “postmodernity” in China: 1) as demonstrated by avant-garde fiction (xianfeng xiaoshuo 先锋小说) and experimental poetry (shiyan pai shige 试验派诗歌) by Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Wang Shuo, Sun Ganlu, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Ye Zhaoyan, Hong Feng, Ma Yuan, Mo Yan, Can Xue, and Lü Xin and by avant-garde poets such as Daozi, Zhou Luyou, and others of the Feifei school of poetry (feifei zhuyi 非非主义诗派); 2) as associated with the rise of the “new realist school” (xin xieshi pai 新写实派) and its challenge to the radical experimentation of the avant-gardists represented by such novelists as Chi Li, Fang Fang, Liu Zhenyuan, and Liu Heng; 3) as represented by the “Wang Shuo phenomenon” and literature of consumption (xiaofei xiaoshuo 消费小说); 4) as represented by the “new historicist” parodic re-castings of historical figures in literary writing and mass media production in films and television; 5) as represented by the increased awareness in poststructuralism by scholarly critics, including Wang Fengzhen, Zheng Min, Zhang

7 Top Chinese officials made casual comments in informal settings lamenting American coverage of the spy-plane incident. A concern about how the incident’s coverage by Western media and its reception in the US was mentioned in passing as important factors in diplomatic talks between the US and China.

8 Xiaomei Chen discusses Meng Yue’s analysis in her chapter “Operatic Revolutions: Tradition, Memory, and Women in Model Theater” (2002: 82-84).

9 By showing that science changes through the displacement and replacement of paradigms rather than the cumulative development of scientific truth, Kuhn implies that scientific statements of truth or fact are always relative to a given paradigm rather than merely a representation or reflection of reality (1962).

10 In his seminal “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought,” Geertz (1980) perceptively remarks upon, albeit with due circumspection, three important analogies—game, drama, and the text—that had garnered increasingly legitimate ground in social theory during the previous decades. In describing the growing prevalence of the game analogy, Geertz briefly cites the influences of Wittgenstein’s notion of language games, Huizinga’s ludic view of culture, and theories that related economic behavior to games as espoused by von Neumann and Morgenstern, but centers his discussion on the writings of Erving Goffman: “Goffman applies game imagery to just about everything he can lay his hands on . . . etiquette, diplomacy, crime, finance, advertising, law, seduction, and the everyday ‘realm of bantering decorum’ are seen as ‘information games’—mazy structures of players, teams, moves, positions, signals, information states, gambles, outcomes . . .” In addition, Geertz identifies two complimentary yet divergent efforts in the application of drama as an analogy in social theory, namely the ritual theory of drama as espoused by Victor Turner and Kenneth Burke’s theory of dramatic “symbolic action.” The text analogy, the one Geertz finds the most resonance with his own work, examines social institutions and practices as “readable” and how meaning is inscribed in the flow of social events.

11 Stephen Greenblatt and other New Historists call for a “cultural poetics” to engage canonical literary texts in terms of cultural and social boundaries and exchanges.

12 Ortner implies that cultural meaning is not a static artifact to be dug up, uncovered, or excavated. Rather, it is ever changing and constantly re-created by different peoples, histories, ideologies, and positions. She succinctly sums up this view by saying the “fate of ‘culture’ will depend on its uses” (1999:11).

13 Raymond Williams provides one of the most influential definitions of culture for literary studies: “as the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (1981: 13).

14 As in the EP-3 US spy plane imbroglio, economic issues formed the logic or common language during the negotiations and rapprochement, while political issues succumbed to media performances. The Chinese media constantly re-played the martyr narrative while the US media repeated the “Us versus Them” narrative by depicting the irrational outbursts of nationalistic fervor by average citizens who were made to be seen as conditioned by false information and fraudulent political influence. According to an inside source present at the EP-3 US spy plane negotiations table, Chinese officials pressured for a US apology by threatening to delay visits between the flight crew and US envoys. This tactic misfired as the US envoys responded by asking the Chinese officials how they would feel if the US State Department issued a travel warning to China. As jeopardizing China’s tourist industry was out of the question, the US envoys were without further delay ushered in to confer with the flight crew. Economic issues, such as the portent of economic sanctions imposed by the
US—in the form of repealing China’s permanent most-favored trade nation status to impede entry into the WTO—and China blocking measures favorable to major US industries, such as petrochemical, hi-tech, telecommunications, and finance guided the negotiations through to an acceptable agreement and rapprochement.

15 Victor Turner’s “social drama” (breach-crisis-redress-outcome) is discussed in Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors (1974).


18 The issue here is twofold: 1) the unintended domestication, obfuscation, or generalization of a nation or region’s historical and cultural complexity by non-indigenous theoretical apparatuses; 2) the orderly exhibition of the Chinese example as “other” evidence of the Western-centered theoretical schema.

19 Rey Chow interprets Judou’s voyeuristic eroticism, in which Judou consciously permits herself to be looked upon through a keyhole while she bathes, as representative of a certain discursive and visual strategy of defiance in Zhang Yimou’s films. According to Chow, “Judou’s move is that of quoting the cliché: she exhibits her female body for the male gaze literally, in the manner that one cites a well-used platitude. The effect of this gesture—of quoting the most-quoted, of displacing the most fetishized—is no longer simply voyeuristic pleasure but a heightened self-consciousness” (1995: 167).

20 Bhabha identifies the importance of the notion of beyond as informing post-colonial studies: “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond” (Bhabha 1994: 1).

21 A volume of essays edited by Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (1989) examines Chinese popular thought and culture in the eighties adopts a methodology that attempts to integrate field observation and interviews with analysis of cultural artifacts. His approach has been helpful in identifying similar strategies for my projects.

22 Broadhurst details Aristotle’s “drama of illusion”: “drama of illusion . . . creates events that represent ‘absent’ as being ‘totally present.’ It is a drama of catharsis by terror and pity; a drama of spectator-identification with actors. It presupposes a dramatic structure that will have coherence, self-inclusiveness and the possibility of a recognizable sequence; in short, a beginning, middle, and end. The dramatic action and plot assume both a teleological and eschatological basis” (Broadhurst 1999: 2).

23 Features include emphasis on the corporeal, technological, and chthonic, heterogeneity, experimental, marginalized, indeterminacy, fragmentation, collapse of distinctions, mixing of codes, pastiche, parody, shift-shape, reflexiveness, exploration of the paradoxical, montage and collage. “It can be seen that the features of liminal performance display a close affiliation to the aesthetics of postmodernism” (Broadhurst 1999: 12-13).

24 Here my reading of post-colonialism is adopted from Gilbert and Tompkins: Post-colonialism is “not a na□ teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, post-colonialism is, rather, an engagement with and contestation of colonialism’s discourse, power structures, and social hierarchies” (2000: 230).
This chapter is based on a paper presented at the Going Native: Recruitment, Conversion and Identification in Cultural Research Conference hosted by The Ohio State University’s Center for Folklore Studies in May 1999. I would like to express my thanks to Xiaomei Chen for her continual support in my research of Chinese drama. I would also like to thank Zhang Nan and Wu Runmei for their insightful discussions on Chinese experimental drama. A special thanks is also given to drama and film director Liu Liexiong.

Xiaomei Chen notes: “Chinese dramatists’ and critics’ support for modernist theater in the early mid-1980s reflected, more than anything else, their wish to figure in the arena of world theater. Responding to the politicized literary and artistic scene of previous decades, some dramatists and critics assumed that some aspects of world theater were ‘superior’ in terms of their ‘aesthetic’ and formalist features” (2002: 293). Chen also discusses how the western forms were adopted for political and personal reasons. She points out in reference to Gao Xingjian’s Bus Stop (Che zhan 车站) [1983] and WM (1985): “. . . despite their apparent use of absurdist theatrical elements from the West, in essence constituted political and ideological reactions to the traumatic years of the Cultural Revolution” (294).

“He [Guo] revolutionized Chinese drama by introducing it to the theoretical change in direction associated with the ‘looking at the world’s vision of China’ . . . By relying on his astute academic knowledge, he made Chinese drama surpass dualism and adopt pluralism” (Lan 1999: 264). Lan is exactly right in drawing our attention to Guo’s incorporation of the “world’s vision” in his dramatic language, techniques, and production. However, Lan is a little too zealous in his program of adopting a Bakhtin inspired critique of Guo Shixing, and in doing so, makes Guo an exemplary object of Bakhtinian analysis and neglects the ways in which Guo’s dramas are actually contesting Western discourses, such as modern and postmodern theories. For example, “The ancient European carnivalesque atmosphere has been resurrected within a type of life brimming with local Chinese expressions” (Lan 1999: 267). Rather than the Chinese environment being imposed with a foreign expression of the carnival, if anything, Guo Shixing expresses the local version of the universal theme of carnival. Zhang’s view is symptomatic of Chinese scholars who fall into the routine of adopting Western theory and displacing Chinese artistic agency. It is not so much a problem of authorial intent than critical self-awareness. Most importantly, Lan neglects the relevance of Bakhtin’s theory in constructing a subversive, interventionist, or even critical discourse, and how the Bakhtinian techniques adopted by Guo fit into the global/local nexus.

The study of performance in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology as applied to ethnography and specifically the ethnographer represents a major shift in the field, as the ethnographer and ethnographic practices are thus viewed from a constructivist paradigm, thereby negating the ethnographer’s claims to neutrality and objectivity. See Turnbull (1990) and Conquergood (1985).

Indeed, there is much discussion on the power of performance as a subversive or transgressive act in relation to gender and racial politics. Elin Diamond’s (1989) notion of “mimesis” is similarly discussed by Homi Bhabha (1984) in the context of post-colonialism is an important technique employed to engender intervention and subversion. There is also a tendency in post-colonial studies (à la Said) to reduce the power relationships between East and West to that of native resistance and Western domination, as Lydia Liu warns. In her notion of “translingual practice,” Liu provides the methodology and theory with which to pursue a more complicated discursive space that allows for ambivalence and cultural mediation. She is primarily interested in the process in which the ‘modern’ and ‘West’ are legitimized through rhetorical strategies, translations, and discursive formations, naming practices, tropes, and narrative modes, and how the subject/nation is mediated and constructed within these processes of legitimization. Liu writes (1995: 39): “Rather than continuing to debate how modernized China or how traditional it still remains . . . one might do well to focus on the ways in which intellectual resources from the West and from China’s past are cited, translated, appropriated, or claimed in moments of perceived historical contingency so that something called change may be produced. In my view, this
change is always already different from China’s own past and from the West, but have profound linkages to both.”

30 Drama critic Tian Benxiang 田本相 duly notes the hybridity of Guo’s plays: “It seems as if his [Guo’s] dramas are not traditional, and even anti-traditional, but indeed they are traditional. It seems as if they are not modern, but yet they are. It seems as if they have some foreign absurdism, but the absurdism is without a doubt from China, and even from Beijing itself” (1999: 321). One can also examine the interplay in the local/global in terms of the acknowledged influences on his creative process. Guo tells how he was greatly moved by the paradoxes, farcical logic, and satire of Friedrich Durrenmatt’s An Angel Comes to Babylon and Romulus the Great, which Guo had access to by way of Chinese translation by Ye Yanfang 叶延芳. He was also influenced by Ma Zhongjun’s 马中骏 children’s plays, including Red Room, White Room, Black Room (Hong fangjian, bai fangjian, hei fangjian 红房间/白房间/黑房间) and The Old Wind Blows into Town (Lao fengliu zhen 老风流镇). During the Cultural Revolution Guo managed to salvage scraps of denounced foreign classics, including those by such authors as Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Turgenev. Guo first became interested in Chan Buddhism through Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis by D. T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm, and Richard De Martino, and this sparked creative process: “I suddenly felt something I had never felt before; the chaotic world had a totally different meaning. My knowledge was illuminated by paradox, Zhuangzi, and Chan, and I suddenly had a new view and feeling for the post-modern drama that followed absurdist drama. I experienced a strong creative impulse deep inside, and that drama about fishing slowly began to take form” (Guo 1999: 357).

31 Based on Guo’s (1999: 353-62) autobiography.


33 Gao Xingjian was presented with the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature primarily for his novel Soul Mountain. See Modern Chinese Literature and Culture’s Fall 2002 issue (Volume 14, No. 2) devoted to Gao Xingjian.

34 An anthology contains all four of Guo’s dramas and several useful articles (Guo 1999). Bad Talk Street was originally published in Xin juben 1998.5 (see bibliography). By mid-2001, video CDs for Birdman and Fishman were readily available in Beijing at bookstores like Sanlian Bookstore (Sanlian shudian 三联书店) and the Beijing Capital Theatre’s drama bookstore (Beijing shoudu juchang shudian 北京首都剧场书店).

35 This drama was close to his heart and home, since Guo was a go (wei qi 围棋) enthusiast and is actually a descendant of chess champions. His grandfather Guo Xuchu 过旭初 and great-uncle Guo Ti 过惕 were national champions from the 1920s to 1960s. His paternal ancestor Guo Bailing 过百龄 was a chess champion during the late Ming (Guo 1999: 353).

36 According to Beijing friends, the expression did not enter common parlance until the late 1980s. A new language of “economy” apparently accompanied the socio-economic reforms that put a greater “price” on time.

37 All page references following the dramatic excerpts and translations refer to the Chinese scripts in Guo 1999. All translations are my own.
Xiaomei Chen is exactly right when she states: “The play deals with the profound cultural shock produced by social, economic, ideological, and international conflicts, and by the threat of rupture from a familiar path” (Chen 2002: 330). I agree that the play represents the historical and cultural context of its material production, and in addition, as elaborated throughout the chapter, exhibits a political interventionist purpose in the local/global nexus.

This observation is based on remarks made by several audience members after a performance of *Bad Talk Street* in 1998. I would also like to thank former Beijing entertainment journalist Runmei Wu for sharing her reaction to the drama and her discussions with the audience following several performances of the drama in Beijing.

There are a number of linguistic studies that analyze and discuss how the nature of Chinese language structures cultural and social practice. For example, Margaret M.Y. Sung discusses how certain practices associated with taboos and rituals are constructed by the homophonic nature of the Chinese language. She provides these reasons for the abundance of homonyms in the Chinese language: noninflectional nature of the language, monosyllabic nature, the phonological devoicing in the language’s historical evolution. She notes: “On the average, every character has 5 homophones.” It is important to note that “homophones” here are only between the same tonal syllables. Therefore, the name of the drama is not a true homophone in this sense since its tones are different. In addition to documenting the reasons for the language’s homophonic nature, more related to our discussion is Sung’s argument that the structure of the Chinese language shapes the social practices and social reality of the Chinese culture. She provides many examples in her article, including well known examples such as the “bat” (fu 蝠) being a lucky token on account of it sharing the same pronunciation with “luck” (fu 福) (Sung 1979).

He puts a local culture, or rather, an aspect of the local ecology on trial, like in *Birdman*. However, again we see his keen interest in the issue of referentiality of language, as the bad talk has both social and artistic meanings.

Whereas his “trilogy” was about local cultures particular to a special group of individuals, *Bad Talk Street* exhibits, and like *Birdman*, puts on trial a more generalized culture. Guo’s experimentation with the fusing of content and form continues in *Bad Talk Street*. “But this is a pure ‘spoken’ drama (hua ju 言剧), and placed in the dramatic history of the last ten years, you can see after it was experimented with in different ways, spoken drama is once again returning to the successful experiments with language. Language itself is here once again made the main theme” (Guo 1999: 349). The interesting issue here is that the “spoken drama,” a non-native form is being “localized” (i.e., infusing “local language”) at the same time it is being “globalized” (infusion of the local language makes the drama align itself with the Western modernist and post-modernist dramatic traditions).

Guo Shixing wrote the introduction to Yang Xin’s *Read Hutong*: “The hutong are to the natives of Beijing what coral reefs are to marine life. The life of the Beijing people is what it is because of the hutong. Although recently the voices to do away with Beijing’s hutong are very loud, I still hold this view” (2001: 9).

In the playbill, Guo says: “I wanted to write about a type of human ecology: every person is surrounded and harmed by this bad talk. In an area in which the population is dense, and the living space is narrow, people are never able to have their own privacy. China’s political movements one after another make ‘the invasion of others’ become a type of daily sustenance, and bad talk is one of the more mild forms of this invasion, and it is one of the most interesting forms. It is different from backstabbing and won’t cause lawsuits, and it can even evolve into a pure form, and become a type of skill, a type of art.”
Several audience members mentioned that Madame Zheng’s rumor-mongering reminded them of the “block leaders,” who watched over their neighbors, organized in the 1950s and 1960s.

Wu Dalang is a well-known character in Chinese pre-modern fiction. He is the brother of Wu Song, one of the major heroes in Outlaws of the Marsh (Shui hu zhuan 水浒传). Wu Dalang is popularly recognized, and made fun of, for his short height and status as a cuckold. In The Golden Lotus (Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅) and related fictional narratives, Wu Dalang’s wife Pan Jinlian and lover Xi Menqing murder Wu Dalang.

Although he is an old-time resident, Wise Whiskers supports the demolition of the alley neighborhood. From one perspective, it is ironic that those who wish to preserve the local neighborhood and culture are the three outsiders. Mystery Man, however, doubts the sincerity of Bright Eyes and Clever Ears’ interest in the local culture and accuses them, although erroneously, of representing the municipal housing reconstruction committee. In an even greater irony, it is the “crazed lunatic” who claims the greatest devotion to saving the local culture, although, his entrance into the community is motivated by his running away, rather than an intentional running to something or someplace. However, at the same time that he is savior, Mystery Man can only run away—representing the impossibility of preserving local culture on a local site. The fact that an escaped patient of a mental institution” is depicted as a savior suggests the relative insanity of the local residents and outsiders. This suggests Guo’s enigmatic criticism of the apathy of local residents to the city’s urban demolition and relocation policies. His parading of local culture is thus mediated by a real critique of local political practices, absurdly represented in his drama by Mystery Man.

This is an excerpt from the inside cover of the program for the play’s September 1998 performance. Original Chinese is as follows: “整个戏是一个言说过程，所言之物在言说中瓦解，消散。民谣和绕口令不过是-一种象征，它代表着言说本身，它展示了言说的精彩和无意义，一致使言说成为艺术。”

I was interested to learn about the reaction to the play by different audience members. Several audience members noted that the drama reminded them of the richness of their culture. However, while recognizing and identifying many of the children’s rhymes, for example, the audience members I spoke with identified less with other verbal arts. In this sense, the audience members felt proud of an association with the rich tradition but at the same time felt to be an outsider from his/her own tradition. Secondly, many audience members were confused by the role of the Mystery Man (and even the roles of Bright Eyes and Clever Ears) and unsure of the meaning of the play in general. Many audience members praised the actors in their ability to showoff the verbal arts, but when it came to discussing an interpretation of the meaning of the play, many fell silent. I suggest it is this simultaneous interiority and alterity that Guo attempts to evoke in the audience.

My theoretical approach and methodology is indebted to Dorrine Kondo (1997), whose work examines the performance of identities in the process of subject formation within an aesthetics/politics nexus. Her studies of the performance of race, gender, and nation in the context of fashion and theater has assisted in the project of developing a methodology based on performance studies to engage Guo Shixing’s dramas. However, it is important to point out, whereas the local/global nexus is always present in Kondo’s discussions, she is primarily examining the processes of subject formation within the hegemonic discourses of orientalism and commodity capitalism. Therefore, the theoretical prosthesis of the local/global nexus lack the political efficacy she wishes to harness to critique and contest such discourses, and as such, is never fully developed in her discussions. In her seminal study of Chinese cinema, Rey Chow (1995) also examines issues pinned on the local/global nexus concerning display and spectatorship.

It is increasingly unfeasible for any cultural performance to be classified as entirely “local” in nature and hence, not yet “ethnicized” although in theory it is conceivable. Therefore, ethnicity becomes an important category in all cultural performances as a result of the spatial and geopolitical fluidities and ruptures.
The intrinsic axis is more intuitive, and includes the reception (and re-performing in anticipation of the reception) of the cultural performance in a de-localized context. The indirect dialogue between the non-framed socio-cultural aspects brought into being by the ethnicized performance constructs the extrinsic axis.

I'm referring to theatrical or performance techniques that lay bare prosthetic devices and de-naturalize the performance or theatre event. Brecht theorized such techniques as those that serve to create the “alienation effect” by dismantling the “proscenium” (or “fourth wall”). The dis-illusionment engendered by such techniques would, according to Brecht, result in active participation by the audience (Carlson 1984: 383). Although indebted to Brecht in terms of focusing on formalistic techniques that generate the self-consciousness of form, my definition of formalistic reflectivity is constructed more from theoretical pursuits of Richard Bauman (1977), namely his engagement with “frame of performance” and Umberto Eco’s (1977) discussions of “double coding” (as originally discussed by postmodern architecture theorist Charles Jencks and applied to postmodern literature). The use of these techniques is one of the features of “political theatre,” as defined by Graham Holderness (1992: 13): “The political radicalism of cultural activity depends on the extent to which it refuses that relationship with the master-narrative, resists its paternal power, fights to liberate and occupy free space independent of its authoritarian claims. In this sense a politics of content can be read as a collusion with the dominant ideology, and the political character of a cultural form should be sought only in its politics of form—estranging, alienating, self-reflexive—and its politics of function—de-stabilising the conventional relation between spectator and performance, disrupting traditional expectations of narrative and aesthetic coherence, de-familiarising and interrogating the oppressive power of naturalized cultural forms.” Jon Erickson (1990) articulates more skeptical views on the efficacy of such techniques.

In the chapter “The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning,” Gates (1988: 44-88) discusses the black appropriation of language and the practice of signification: “Signifyin(g), in other words, turns on the sheer play of the signifier. It does not refer primarily to the signified; rather, it refers to the style of language, to that which transforms ordinary discourse into literature. Again, one does not Signify some thing; one signifies in some way.” Gates suggests intervention and revision occurs through excess of significature through repetition and figuration.

In “Occidentalist Theater: Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Brecht as Counter Others,” chapter two of Occidentalism, Xiaomei Chen (2002a) touches upon the irony of how Brecht “misunderstood” traditional Peking Opera aesthetics as performed by Mei Lanfang and then how Brecht was later “misunderstood” in China. It is important to note that Chen deems these “misunderstandings” as productive, and an inherent part in the politics of traveling theory of transcultural hermeneutics.

Xiaomei Chen’s (2002a) theory of “occidentalism” is an example of identifying local discourses which are not entirely subsumed by meta-narratives, including “orientalism” or transnational capitalism, History, etc.

This chapter is based on different conference papers presented at the Chinoperl conference in conjunction with AAS in March 1999 in Boston and the Third Annual Conference on Holidays, Ritual, Festival, Celebration, and Public Display hosted by the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University in May 1999. I would like to express my gratitude to Mark Bender for the inspiration behind this micro-ethnographic project and his invariable guidance throughout its germination. Xiaomei Chen provided valuable feedback following the Chinoperl conference. I would also like to thank Wu Runmei 吴润梅 for trekking through Beijing and assisting with videotaping and interviews, and for giving me an opportunity to write a piece on yang’ge for Beijing This Month. Xu Rui 许锐, Liu Jun 刘军, and Xia Mei 夏梅, all associated with the Central Dance Academy in Beijing, assisted greatly with providing resources on Chinese traditional dance, as did Luo Bin 罗宾, assistant director of the Dance Research Institute of the China National Arts Academy. Lastly, I would like to thank Zhang Nan 张楠 for her patience and enthusiasm in providing personalized yang’ge demonstrations.
Also referred to as “senior citizen rice-sprout dancing” (laonian yang’ge 老年秧歌) and “fitness rice-sprout dancing” (jianshen yang’ge 健身秧歌).

The surge in this form of rice-sprout dance occurred throughout the urban areas in northeast China, including, in particular, the cities of Tianjin, Dalian, Jilin, and Shenyang.

Jing Wang (2001) briefly discusses SCYG as a possibility of a type of leisure activity in postsocialist China that is not inscribed by nationalist or state ideologies. “As a spontaneous street culture,” states Wang, “the yangge dance seems to provide . . . a vibrant leisure culture community existing beyond the immediate reach of the market and the state” (82-83).

The term “recycling” is adopted from Siu (1989) in her discussion of the resurgence of traditional ritual practices in Nanxi during the 1980s. I employ the term because it assists in engaging the connections between cultural change and political economy.

The promotion and planning of Beijing’s central business district (CBD) was a major event in 2000. The CBD was officially unveiled at the 2000 Beijing Chaoyang International Business Festival held in August. Endorsed by the State Council in 1993 (article 144), the Beijing Municipal Government did not draft guidelines for the planning and construction of the CBD until 2000 (article 76). The promotion of the CBD was linked in campaign ads to China’s entry into WTO and less explicitly to Beijing’s bid for the 2008 Olympics. The demarcated CBD contains a total area of 3.99 square kilometers located in the eastern part of Beijing (Chaoyang District). According to official sources, 99 of the world’s Fortune 500, including Motorola, Hewlett Packard, Ford, Samsung, UBS AG are located in the CBD.

Dai Jinhua (2001) mentions these advertising placards located in Chaoyangmen in her discussion of advertising and nationalism/internationalism.

Victor Turner (1982b) theorizes the “liminal” and “liminoid” in “Liminal to Lominoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual.” For Geertz (1972), “deep play” is potentially subversive and transgressive of established cultural codes while “shallow play” is not.

Richard Schechner’s (1996) discussion of “street theatre” examines the universals of performance across national and cultural boundaries, comparing, for example, anti-Vietnam war protests with China’s 1989 “democracy protests.”

The ideas and approach of developing an interpretive frame for the performance event has been influenced by John Miles Foley’s (1995) approach to the performance of oral narratives. Foley stresses the important role traditional referents play in constituting a performance arena and formulates immanent art as a concept articulating the relationship between structure to meaning as informed by “the enabling event, and in the context of tradition, the enabling referent” (7). Foley’s ideas are in part derived from Richard Bauman’s landmark study on verbal art as performance: “Performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal” (1977:9). Thus, the performance context, or frame, is crucial to the understanding of any performance event, as the elements of the performance take on meaning through their interaction with such a frame.

For example, the poem by Lu You (1125-1210) entitled “Seasonal Rain” (Shi yu 时雨):

224
时雨及芒种，
Seasonal rain during Grain in Ear,*

四野皆插秧，
Planting seedlings right and left,

家家麦饭美，
All families have ears a plenty,

处处菱歌长
With planting songs growing all around.* #

* Usually falls on 5th, 6th, or 7th of the 6th month of the lunar calendar (the ninth solar term).

** Ling’ge is not the same as yang’ge; the former refers widely to songs performed by peasants in China’s Jiangnan region.

Luo (1994: 191) cites this poem, which was extracted from Luyou ji (Zhonghua shuju, 1976). Gamble (1970: xviii) notes that the legend concerning the origin of yang’ge in Dingxian County is that Su Dongpo, while serving as county magistrate from 1037-1101, wrote words for the rice planters to sing while working in the paddy fields.


69 Cited in Luo 1994: 192. Extracted from Linbian jilue (Records by the willows), vol. 4 of Tushu jicheng (Records by the willows), vol. 4 of Tushu jicheng (Library集成). Shangwu shuju, 1936.

70 In his introduction to the collection of Dingxian County yang’ge village plays, Gamble (1970) expresses exasperation at the widespread use of the term yang’ge. He identifies various widespread uses for the term, including a generic term for rural folk songs, the songs, dances, and chatter of the stilt-walkers (gao qiao 高跷), dancing as designed by the Communist Party, and the village plays included in his anthology.

71 This is an excerpt from Hunan Province’s Yuanling Gazetteer (Yuanling xian zhi 湘潭县志) as cited in Luo 1994: 192. Excerpted from Yuanling xianzhi 湘潭县志 (Yuanling gazetteer), vol. 28 of the Guangxu block-printed edition.


73 Luo (1994: 193) cites records of the houta in Qing dynasty regional histories, and he personally witnessed the rao houta form of yang’ge in Suide in 1957. Another example Luo provides of yang’ge’s connection with ritual is that yang’ge’s troupe leader in the Northern region of Shaanxi Province is referred to as “umbrella leader” (santu 傘頭) and holds an umbrella and a hu cheng 虎撑. The umbrella represents the protecting and sheltering of people from the wind and rain and the hu cheng, according to Luo (1994: 194), represents the Tang Dynasty doctor Sun Simiao 孫思邈, who later was bestowed with the title Medicine King. According to legend, Sun once used a metal hoop to prop open a tiger’s mouth in order to get a good look inside. After curing the tiger, the metal hoop came to be known as a hu cheng. Later, according to Luo (1994: 194), the hu cheng evolved into the bell used by village doctors to sound their arrival, and hence became the symbol for village doctors and for the warding off of maladies and sickness. It was later adopted by yang’ge as an instrument to direct the changing formations and patterns of the yang’ge troupes.
For example, in the Shaanbei region, yang’ge performed by a large number of performers is called “large arena yang’ge” (dachang yang’ge 大场秧歌), while the form of yang’ge with only two performers is called ti changzi 踢场子. In Shanxi’s Huabei region, ti changzi can refer to three forms of yang’ge, including yang’ge performed in an arena by a large number of performers, yang’ge performed by a small number of performers, and yang’ge that involves parading along the streets. Yang’ge in China’s Jiangsu region is called huagu 花鼓 “decorated drums,” while yang’ge is called di huagu 地花鼓 in Hunan, caicha 采茶 in Jiangxi and Fujian, huadeng xi 花灯戏 in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, and caicha wu 采茶舞 in Guangxi.

Because “stilts” gaoqiao 高跷 in some parts of China is also referred to as yang’ge, in those areas (mainly China’s northeast), yang’ge is also called di yang’ge 地秧歌, or “land yang’ge” (Luo 1994: 193).


According to Wang Kefen (1995: 499), major traditional regional forms of yang’ge include: Shaanbei yang’ge 陕北秧歌, Hebei di yang’ge 河北地秧歌, Jiaozhou yang’ge 胶州秧歌, Dongbei yang’ge 东北秧歌, and Haiyang yang’ge 海阳秧歌. Major performance forms or genres of yang’ge include: guzi yang’ge 鼓子秧歌, dideng yang’ge 地灯秧歌, santou yang’ge 伞头秧歌, ti changzi yang’ge 踢场子秧歌, pozhun yang’ge 破阵秧歌, and ershiba su yang’ge 二十八宿秧歌.

In the contemporary period of PRC history, according to Li Wei (1981), the singing component of yang’ge has essentially disappeared in many rural areas. His book is an attempt to contribute to the restoration of the singing component. The anthology includes yang’ge mao 秧歌帽 (yang’ge lyrics without melodies) and four yang’ge ju 秧歌剧 (yang’ge dramas). Li Wei notes that he has excluded all lyrics deemed as containing superstitious or vulgar content (3).

The aesthetic terms of yang’ge’s stylized movements are difficult to convey in English. I am thankful to friends from the Central Dance Academy and Dance Research Institute for their vivid demonstrations and descriptions. In a particularly dramatic metaphor for Gen 哪, the dance aesthetic was likened to “taking a bite out of a radish”—crisp and pungent.

Mark Bender adds that there are close to 300 local styles of quy, or “art of melodies,” many of which were forms of oral narratives. Although singing was a central element of ancient yang’ge, it seems to have diminished in importance in modern yang’ge’s regional forms. Although, regarding northeastern yang’ge, Duan Junjiang (1992: 46) cites a popular ditty called “Calling on my girl” (Tan mei 探妹), which has been incorporated into the “small performance” of yang’ge.

During the first month of the new year, I call on my girl, I take my girl again to stroll about the lights and decorations; the strolling is just a pretense, but my feelings for my girl are real.

正月里探妹呀正月正，我领着小妹又去逛花等，逛灯是假意，探妹是真情...

The characters and vignettes are instantly recognizable to the audience as extracted from popular narratives, such as Journey to the West, Dream of the Red Chamber, and Tale of the Western Wing.

The dues actually became a contested issue within the group. The troupe organizer was accused of mismanaging or even embezzling the costume and prop funds. Such “bad talk” circulated around the troupe organizer’s alley neighborhood.
This information was provided through casual discussions after the performances with the troupe leader. I also met her several times during the day and was invited as a guest to her hutong home on one occasion.

Mark Bender’s (1998) description of the performance process of a taped storytelling engagement helped in designing the descriptive narrative of the performance under discussion.

These are all in the plural to indicate that the SCYG dancers make up a social group with certain performed values that are complexly interwoven with numerous co-existing social factors.

It is important to note that “senior citizens” in China tend to be younger in comparison to their US counterparts. According to a Labor Law promulgated on January 1, 1995 by China’s National People’s Congress (Quan guo renmin daibiao dahui 全国人民代表大会), the official age of retirement in China is 65-years old for male cadres and 60-years old for female cadres. Cadres are usually all Communist Party members or officials. The retirement age for all others is 60-years for men and 55-years for women. In addition, many workers in Beijing have been forced into retirement at earlier ages. Those who are “laid off” (xia gang 下岗) at older ages tend not to reintegrate into the labor force.

An interesting issue here is how senior citizens are perceived and perceive themselves between China and the US. There exist some differences in social roles, for example. It is much more common in China today for aged parents to live with their children or children's families. It is also common for the aged parents to take care of their grandchildren. For these reasons, some elderly may perceive themselves as playing a socially productive and important role in their families. However, there is still a general tendency in both countries for senior citizens to be removed from the centrality of social organization and development. In China, there is a growing inclination to view the elderly as not economically productive and a burden on society, especially in urban areas. This is in part due to the steadily increasing social security taxes paid by corporations in major cities. Thus, I believe characterizing senior citizens in terms of social exclusion and marginality is applicable in both cases, although the particular cultural forms and degrees would require greater social research.

A number of performers from the Huapu Troupe offered remarks commenting on how yang’ge helped them to feel a part of the quickly changing social landscape. Often, after a performance, the children of the performers would treat their parents to dinner at a nearby restaurant. This post-performance consumption practice also contributed to some performer’s sense of belonging to the increasingly commercialized society.

This inference is based on comments offered by participants. Comments emphasized how difficult their lives had been, and so they did not want to stay at home by themselves thinking about the past. Rather, they desired to meet their friends and dance yang’ge together.

This chapter was previously published in the Spring 2000 issue of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture (Volume 12, no.1). I would like to express my gratitude to Kirk Denton, editor, for giving me permission to reprint the article in this dissertation. Kirk offered much guidance in the formulation of this chapter’s ideas and in the refinement of its language.

Even though the seafaring metaphor has become globally ubiquitous in the media, some have astutely pointed out that because the film’s revenues are “unsinkable,” comparing the film to the ship is a misleading metaphor. I would further add that for commercial reasons, the metaphor enshrines the release of the film with a unique and ephemeral quality; it seduces us into believing that a savior has finally arrived. The metaphor also innocuously disguises the film as a single entity—just a ship. It obscures the fact that the film is accompanied by an entourage and assembly of cultural apparatuses, such as advertising agents, media representatives, and even the film’s stars. Last, the film does not so innocently “dock” at foreign ports as a seafaring vessel, but rather, penetrates into the remotest regions. If a seafaring metaphor for the film must be
adopted, I choose the term “armada,” because it points to the many elements associated with the arrival of the film. In the Chinese media, examples of the metaphorical equivalence of the film to a ship abound.

91 Domestic revenues hit a record $350 million ($750 million worldwide) after fifty-eight days. For more details about the film’s market success in the United States, see Ansen 1998.

92 When visiting Lijiang in June 1997, one of my students asked the Naxi tour guide to sing a Naxi folk song. She agreed to sing, but selected “My Heart Will Go On.” The following year, those selling bamboo flutes from Guizhou to Xinjiang had all apparently adopted the song as their advertising jingle.

93 For a citation of studies related to these two camps, see Appadurai 1996: 32.

94 In their introduction, Wilson and Dissanayake assert that the “transnational imaginary” is that which disturbs the entrenched local/global binary. They write: “The ‘transnational imaginary’ comprises the as-yet-unfigured horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence” (1996: 6).

95 Rey Chow’s (1995) discussion of Zhang Yimou’s films shows how an agential and self-reflexive employment of a “self-orientalizing” or “auto-exoticizing” discourse contains the seeds of subversive potential. Worth noting here is how Chow’s stake is based on this dynamic of the local coded as always already global, thus vitiating the local/global binary.

96 Appadurai defines “production fetishism” as “the illusion created by contemporary trans-national production loci that masks translocal capital, transnational earning flows, global management, and other faraway workers . . . in the idiom and spectacle of the local . . . control, national productivity, and territorial sovereignty” (1996: 41–42). Dirlik (1994) also discusses the mystification of the location of power as the process of “domestication.”

97 Dapian 大片, best translated as “blockbuster,” is a market concept that clearly signifies a film whose budget and ticket sales are high; it has little do with “cultural achievements” and “cinematic art.”

98 Moreover, the dapian’s influence on the domestic film industry was depicted positively by the media. For example, the domestic blockbuster Party A, Party B (jia fang yi fang 甲方乙方) was praised for adopting what Chinese film previously lacked, namely a “market consciousness” (shichang yishi 市场意识) and “modern market style” (xiandai jingying fangshi 现代经营方式). The column entitled “What do we get from introducing da pian?” states that the “blockbuster system” is both an artistic success and a market success (Zhang Tongdao 1998: 8).

99 The initial marketing strategy appeared in “Taitannikehao xuanchuan fang’an” (Anon. 1998). Also see Weng Li 1998.

100 For promotional purposes, many cities such as Beijing showed the film prior to its official release, a phenomenon termed the “evening boat.” Eighteen theaters screened the film on April 3–4, with the last show ending at around 3 A.M. At Dahua Theater (Dahua dianyingyuan 大华电影院), seven media groups were represented at the screening, including Xinhua News (Xinhua she 新华社), CCTV (Zhongyang dianshitai 中央电视台), BTV (Beijing dianshitai 北京电视台), and ABC (Meilian she 美联社). Box office revenues reached nearly six million yuan (about $732,000) in Beijing alone during this period. See Chen Bai 1998.
These three stages were cleverly referred to as lighting the fire [点火], fanning the flames [扇风], and adding wood [加柴]" by the Shanghai Film Company. See Zhou Mingying 1998.

In Zhejiang province, for example, by April 5, over 100 articles had been published in various provincial magazines (Ci 1998). Xin zhoukan 新周刊 (New weekly) published a special issue on March 26. Although the copies were sold at the steep price of twenty yuan (about $2.50), 200,000 were printed. Beijing qingnian zhoukan 北京青年周刊 (Beijing youth weekly) also devoted an entire issue to the film. With the CFC’s sponsorship, CCTV aired a special television program, Dianying shichang xiezhen: guanzhu Taitannikehao 29 (Portrait of the film market: Focus on Titanic).

For a typical example, see Beijing qingnian bao (April 7, 1998: 11). Note that it highlights the global box office record (twelve million) and the film’s Academy Awards. Also, note Lee’s logo.

The newspaper received a few hundred letters from those who had seen the film three or more times.

The newspaper received over 200 letters in response to their invitation to discuss Titanic. Ninety percent had positive things to say about the film, whereas ten percent charged that it was made only for profit. See “Taitannikehao dajia tan” (Anon. 1998).

Appadurai also discusses how the rhetoric of numbers in the colonial project overshadowed the referentiality of the numbers. See “Number in the Colonial Imagination” in Appadurai 1996: 114–138. I would like to suggest how the rhetoric of box office numbers in relation to the Titanic miracle is constitutive of “production fetishism.”

It has also been astutely pointed out that the narrative on material wealth is contradictory. Although the film implies that material wealth is secondary to integrity, love, and sacrifice, the “Heart of the Ocean” is treasured by Rose in her youth (because she flaunts it when she is sketched by Jack) and in her golden years (the jewel is not discarded until after she tells her story). Although it can be argued that the jewel was treasured for its emotional and sentimental value, it always remained a very valuable jewel. See Liu E 1998.

Others concur with Jiang in affirming Titanic’s didactic value. “The confrontation of mankind’s feeling [心情] and integrity [品质] with imminent extinction possesses a transcendent image on a metaphysical level that makes people contemplate. From this we can see that Hollywood is didactic, and it also does not use a worn out style of didacticism. It hides morals within the story’s plot” (Zhang Tongdao 1998).

Zi Zhou argues, on the other hand, that dapian will destroy the domestic film industry: “The audience’s psychology is becoming fixed; dapian cares only about ‘selling points,’ which in turn rely solely on investment. The appetite is getting larger; an investment of only several $10 million dollars is no longer of interest. The fate of domestic film is evident.” See Zi Zhou 1998.

The media reported that beginning in 2000, twenty “blockbusters” would be imported and distributed within China. There was also discussion in the media, particularly in November 1999, as to how China’s entrance into the WTO, still pending, would affect the domestic film industry. When asked his opinion of WTO, Fifth Generation director Chen Guoxing 陈国星 responded in laughter: “American flags will probably be blowing in the wind right here at the Beijing Film Studio.” In subsequent remarks, Director Chen clarified that he was less lamenting the end of Chinese film than expressing a hope for its future.
The Beijing Television Arts Center (Beijing dianshi yishu zhongxin 北京电视艺术中心) and Hainan Airlines Training Center (Hainan hangkong peixun zhongxin 海南航空培训中心) jointly filmed the television series. Filming started in August 1998 and the TV series was broadcast in October 1998. The executive producer Tian Hong 田宏 of Hainan purchased the television rights to the short story, he and jointly produced the series with Beijing Television Arts Center, which had filmed a number of China’s most popular television series, including Yearnings (Kewang 渴望), Story of the Editorial Office (Bianji bu de gushi 编辑部的故事), and Beijing Sojourners in New York (Beijing ren zai niuyue 北京人在纽约). The producer of the TV series, Liu Sha 刘沙, was also the producer for Beijing Sojourners in New York. Liang Guanhua 梁冠华, one of the main actors in the People’s Theatre drama company [featured in previous dramatic hits Tea House (Cha guan 茶馆) and Guo Shixing’s Birdman (Niao ren 鸟人) and Fishman (Yü ren 鱼人)], played the main role of Damin. The film adaptation, entitled Getting Your Jollies (Mei shi tou zhe le 没事偷着乐), was produced by the Xi’an Film Studio and Beijing Dayu Culture and Art Company (Beijing da yu wenhua yishu gongsi 北京大禹文化艺术公司) and released to the general public in 1999. Feng Gong 冯巩, one of China’s most acclaimed xiang sheng artists, played the role of Damin. Interestingly, the film was set in Tianjin, rather than Beijing, unlike the story and television miniseries.

Lydia Liu (1999a) discusses the problems involving the hypothetical equivalence between languages and the universalizing discourse of modernity. She states: “translation need not guarantee the reciprocity of meaning between languages. Rather it presents a reciprocal wager, a desire for meaning as value and a desire to speak across, even under least favorable conditions” (34). She builds on notions of translation largely derived from Walter Benjamin’s “Task of the Translator” and Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel,” in which the notion of complementarity “refuses to privilege the original over the translation, enables a powerful critique of the metaphysical ground of traditional semantics that has long dominated the translation theories of the West” (14). Lydia Liu’s (1995: 1-42) discussion of “translingual practice” is also useful here: “One does not translate between equivalents; rather, one creates tropes of equivalence in the middle zone of interlinear translation between the host and guest language” (40). Although Liu is commenting on neologisms constructed in the Chinese language, this notion of examining the dynamic relationship between linguistic, or cultural for that matter, articulations in a historical context, can be carried into an analysis of genre transformation as a type of translation between mediums.

Lydia Liu (1999a: 33) cites Pierre Bourdieu: “Language exchange . . . is also an economic exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market), and which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit.” The citation is from Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 66. As Bourdieu makes clear, contests over literary legitimacy is an issue of social hierarchy. Bourdieu relies upon a list of terms, such as fields of power, position-takings, habitus, dispositions, symbolic capital, to articulate the social implications of literary production and consumption. Bourdieu (1996) states: “The monopoly of power to say with authority who is authorized to call himself a writer or even to say who is a writer and who has the authority to say who is a writer; or, if you prefer, the monopoly of the power of consecration of producers and products. More precisely, the struggle between occupants of the two opposite poles of the filed of cultural production has at stake the monopoly of the imposition of the legitimate definition of the writer. . . . As a consequence, the literary field is universally the site of a struggle over the definition of the writer.” This notion can be applied here to our discussion of genre distinctions.

Dai Jinhua, as a film and popular culture scholar and critic, has written valuable articles on Wang Shuo’s film adaptations. See, in particular, Dai 1999: 182-205.

Includes: *Players* (*Wan zhu*顽主) filmed by Emei Film Studio, directed by Mi Jiashan 米家山, and based on a novella by the same title; *Transmigration* (*Lun hui轮回*) filmed by Xi’an Film Studio, directed by Huang Jianxin 黄建新, and adapted from Wang Shuo’s *Breaking the Sea’s Surface* (*Fuchu haimian浮出海面*); *Half Hot, Half Cold* (*Yiban shi huoyan yiban shi haishui一半是火焰一半是海水*) filmed by Beijing Film Studio, directed by Xia Gang 夏刚, adapted from the novella of the same title; *Exhalation* (*Da chuanqi大喘气*) filmed by Zhujiang Film Company, directed by Ye Daying, adapted from Wang Shuo’s *Rubber Man* (*Xiangpi ren橡皮人*).

See discussion of the television miniseries in Zha 1995.

Most of the screenplays written by the Seahorse Visual Production Workshop were published in the *Seahorse Literature Collection* (*Haima wenxue congshu海马文学丛书*). See Wang Shuo (1993). The collection also includes screenplays by Wang Shuo for films including *Players* and *Transmigration*.

Distributed by the Beijing Television Arts Center Video (Beijing dianshi yishu zhongxin yinxiang chubanshe北京电视艺术中心音像出版社).

Feng Xiaogang also branched out into the restaurant business. He opened a restaurant chain called “Be There or Be Square” (*Bu jian bu san不见不散*), named after the hit comedy (1998) he directed.

Wang Shuo’s most recent book *The Ignorant Have Nothing to Fear* (*Wuzhizhe wu wei无知者无畏*) hit Beijing’s bookstores in the middle of January 2000. His novel *Seemingly Beautiful* with a distribution of 400,000 copies, was the number one bestseller in 1999. *The Ignorant Have Nothing to Fear* is a collection of essays in which the media darling expresses his views on literature, art, and culture, including a discussion of his own works. The media and some critics appeared to be charmed by the audacity of his criticism, despite its tendency to adopt an overly farcical tone or parochial point of view. In “On Wang Shuo,” one of the essays in the collection, Wang Shuo evaluates his own work from the perspective of an imaginative critic. Excerpts read as follows: “Wang Shuo’s undeserved reputation is largely based on those works featuring the mocking banter of his low life characters. The success of these works cannot be credited to Wang Shuo. Language is not a mathematical formula. Its patent does not belong to an individual but to the entire community of people who speak the language. This principle cannot be reversed. It is nonsense to say that an author invented a language. . . . The style and attitude of language that is imbued with mocking banter was created collectively by Beijing’s bus ticket attendants, ruffians chilling in the streets, poker and mahjong gamblers, and those hanging out over bottles of booze throughout the night. Wang Shuo had no choice but to use this type of language in his fiction simply because he was surrounded by this type of language and lacked any ability at producing more literary types of expression. In the beginning, it was simply the easy way out. And then with his guard down, it led to his success. . . . The negative influence upon society of Wang Shuo and his works are obvious. After Wang Shuo, a sycophantic attitude of seeking popularity by making shocking statements seemed to become the only formula to success. This dragged in many otherwise socially responsible authors, leading them to abandon any sense of respect for society. Everyone’s indignation at and derision for Wang Shuo is thus well founded and rational. I don’t know if we really need a Wang Shuo to prove that our literature is flourishing. I have been constantly wondering if Wang Shuo is a fortuitous encounter or a necessary cost. The process of development and evolution always involves birth, selection, elimination, and transformation. Darkness exists to show the importance of light; new life is accompanied by agony, blood, filth, and the bewilderment of the newly born. If we were bound to pay a price, I would agree to offer Wang Shuo as that price” (Wang Shuo 2000: 47-62).
In Wang Shuo (1989), he responds to the charge that his writing is not “fiction” (小说 小说) and not “new wave” (新潮 新潮). Wang Shuo agrees that his writings are not “new wave” because of his admitted lack of ability in this regard. However, as opposed to writers, he admits to wanting to have an audience of readers. Wang Shuo asserts that “fiction” should be “fiction”—it should encourage people to read. He believes that “fiction” with any value should have a critical attitude, although not with reckless abandon. He claims that his “fiction” is actually closer to the traditional “fiction.” The reason that his fiction contains popular (通俗 通俗) elements is not because he wants to attract a larger audience but because society has already changed to contain these popular elements. What he is most interested in is the style of the popular life (流行生活 流行生活) since this has violence, romance, ridicule, and wantonness. By emphasizing these, others can recognize their importance in society. He believes that literature should have two functions: the function of pure art and the function of popularization. He always tries to find a middle ground, asserting: “If one can’t see a deeper level, then at least one will have a laugh.” He doesn’t think there is such a large gap between these functions, but Wang Shuo admits that if he were to abandon one, then he would abandon the former.

Based on Wang Shuo’s The Masters of Mischief (alternatively translated as Players). Wang Shuo and the film’s director, Mi Jiashan, wrote the screenplay for the film with the same Chinese title. The film featured popular comedians Ge You 葛优 and Liang Tian 梁天. Filmed by the Emei Film Studio, it was released in theaters in 1988 and distributed in VCD format by China Kangyi Video (Zhongguo kangyi yinxiang chubanshe 中国康艺音像出版社).

Dai Jinhua (1999) also provides a brief analysis of the film The Masters of Mischief. However, she considers the film here as a “version” or “extension” of his fiction: “Rather than calling it a faithful ‘adaptation of the original,’ it is more accurately described as a ‘filmic version of Wang Shuo.’ It is precisely as an extension of the fiction The Masters of Mischief, in which the true meaning of Wang Shuo’s ideology is highlighted” (190). She also remarks on the transfer of Wang Shuo’s discursive style between the mediums: “Arranged as a parody, the filmic discourse displays Wang Shuo-esque blasphemy and sadism of language” (190). I would suggest also examining how the products are dialectically arranged; especially in terms of the presence of a filmic discourse already contained within Wang Shuo’s written literature.

The English doesn’t completely retain the pun in the name. The name of the company in Chinese, San ti 三替 literally means “three stand-in company.” An English translation that tries to retain the pun could be “Four U Company.”


Liu Heng adapted or wrote the screenplays for nearly ten films. Black Snow (Benming nian 本命年, 1990) based on his novel by the same title, directed by Xia Fei 夏飞, starring Jiang Wen 姜文 and Cheng Lin 程琳, awarded the Silver Bear Award at the Berlin 40th International Film Festival; Judou (Judou 菊豆, 1990) [original names of scripts were Moaning in the Darkness (Hei'an zhong de shenyin 黑暗中的呻吟) and Mountain Tale (Shan feng 山风)], based on his novella Fuxi fuxi 伏羲伏羲 and wrote co-operatively with Zhang Yimou, directed by Zhang Yimou and starring Gong Li 巩俐, Li Baotian 李保田, and Li Wei 李纬, awarded an Oscar nomination for the
best foreign language film at the 63rd Academy Awards; White Whirlpool (Baise xuanwo 白色旋涡) based on his
novella Whirlpool, originally planned to be directed by Xia Fei; Family Portrait (Sishi bu huo 四十不惑, 1992)
(originally name of script was Who Are You (Qingwen ni shi shei 请问你是谁), written by Liu Heng in
consultation with Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, Li Shaohong 李少红, Li Xuejian 李雪健, and Wang Bin,
directed by Li Shaohong, starring Li Xuejian and Song Dandan 宋丹丹, awarded International Critics Award at
the 45th Locarno International Film Festival; The Story of Qin Ju (Qin ju da guansi 秋菊打官司, 1992), based on the
novella Thousands of Family Lawsuits (Wanjia suosong 万家诉讼) by Chen Yuanbin 陈源斌, directed by
Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li, awarded Golden Lion in the 49th Venice International Film Festival; Soul of the
Painting (Hua hun 画魂), based on a novella of the same name by Shi Nan 石楠 (script originally named Pan
Yuliang 潘玉良), screenplay was commissioned by Taiwanese producer Du Youling 杜又棱 and Zhang Yimou,
directed by Huang Shuqin 黄蜀芹, starring Gong Li; and Red Rose White Rose (Hong meigui yu bai meigui 红玫瑰
与白玫瑰, 1994), directed by Guan Jinpeng 关锦鹏. Most of these scripts have been published in Liu 1993.

128 The format for references, hereafter, is the story’s page number followed by the number of the video CD
and time of the scene. All quotations are from the story. The video CD scene corresponds to the story’s text,
and often, the story’s text is slightly different from the dialogue in the television miniseries.

129 “Those with land are rich; those without land are poor.” (De tu zhe fu, shi tu zhe pin 得土者富, 失土者贫)
(from The Book of Han (Han Shu 汉书); “The hearts are usually lacking with those who lavish themselves, while
the heart is filled with wealth for the frugal.” (She zhe xin chang pin, jian zhe xin chang fu 奢者心常贫, 俭者心常
富) [from Shen Zi 慎子, 外篇] (Hanyu da cidian 1992: vol. 4, 112).

130 As common term in spoken Beijing dialect, pin can mean “dexterous mouth and very talkative” (Gao 2001:
661).

131 Eating kidney is associated with boosting sexual endurance for men. A common phrase used by Beijing
residents in the last few years, for example, is bu shen zhuang yang 补肾壮阳. Its general idea is “boosting the
kidney, strengthens maleness.” One more popular saying (and belief) is chi shenme, bu shenme 吃什么, 补什么
(“you boost (replenish) what you eat”).

132 In the television series, Damin first takes on a number of miscellaneous jobs, including being employed as a
bathroom attendant at the Kunlun Hotel. The extension of this narrative heightens the melodrama because
Damin hides from his family the fact that the factory had discharged him. In addition, as the miniseries adds
the character of Damin’s factory assistant, Damin’s employment by Kunlun Hotel is an inserted narrative line
that fleshes out the character of the assistant. She is responsible for Damin’s hiring and employment at the
hotel.

133 A Beijing colloquialism meaning “stingy”: “He pretends to be poor; he’ll always be stingy.” (Ta jiazhaung
qiong, yongyuan koumen'er 他假装穷, 永远抠门儿). From Lao She’s Square Pearls (Fang zhenzhu 方珍珠) (Wang
Mian 1999: 2530). Although not found in official sources, most people acknowledge that the “men” 们 in the
expression literally refers to the “butt door,” and therefore the English expression “anal” may be a more apt
translation.

134 An anti-official reading could be read in the narrative concerning Bingwen. Since Bingwen is developed and
portrayed as a modern day “model worker,” boasting a promising career while volunteering for his country, his
death can be interpreted as suggesting an imminent end to the Party and official culture.
Apparently, film and television rights to fiction, however, are not yet a multi-million dollar business. For example, according to sources at Heaven and Earth International Culture Co., Ltd. (Tian yu di guoji wenhua youxian gongsi 天与地国际文化有限公司), Han Han 韩寒 sold the television rights to his best seller *Three Knocks (San chong men 三重门)* for RMB 300,000 (about US$38,000).


237


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