This paper offers a perspective on mainland Chinese popular culture — both official and mass market — by focusing on certain aspects of the evolution and manipulation of contemporary advertising. In particular, it discusses some of the issues arising from the intersection of advertising and popular culture on the one hand, and politics and propaganda on the other. In exploring this, I will venture some observations on the impact of commercial culture upon the mechanisms through which the Chinese Communist Party is promoted and promotes itself within the public media. Of particular interest here will be the role played by influences from abroad and by China’s home-grown “avant-garde” in the Party’s remoulded image-making.

China’s official (that is, state-funded) propaganda and entertainment has, for some years, been developing a style of “corporate advertising”. Much studied in relation to the US mass media, corporate advertising promotes legitimation in a number of ways, including through the appropriation of the meaning of national and cultural traditions, and the manipulation of what have been termed “paleosymbolic scenes” (the private and subjective meaning of scenes represented in terms of and linked to public ideological contexts). The Party’s multi-faceted propaganda/public-relations organizations increasingly represent it through a statist-corporate voice that offers basic definitions of group morality and ethics, consensus, coherence and community in ways more

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* My thanks to the editors and external referees of The China Journal for their many useful comments and suggestions.

familiar to us from international corporate advertising practice than Maoist hyper-propaganda.

The Party today not only manipulates routine public pronouncements and orchestrated news reporting to achieve this end, but it also pursues its goals through a range of national media entertainments and promotions. It achieves this through the Party Propaganda Department, the government instrumentalities devoted to public enlightenment like the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Television and Broadcasting (recently subsumed under the Ministry of Information), as well as a myriad of subordinate organizations: Party newspapers, Central TV, Central People’s Radio, and so on. At other times, the Party’s messages are conveyed through non-Party organs and allied mass media that are directed at one level or another by in-house Party committees. Such committees function both as surrogates for Party authority and as representatives if not mediators for non-Party interests. As a result they are enmeshed in a complex of relationships that range from the purely propagandistic-ideological to the corporate-promotional.

The Velvet Prison of Consumption

During the 1980s, the avowed official ideology, what the authorities presumably out of habit rather than sincere belief still call “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought”, expanded to embrace a burgeoning realm of market culture. Issues relating to consumerism, that aspect of social life influenced in numerous subtle ways by the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, increasingly became part of public discussion as well as intellectual and dissident debate.

One of the central features of consumer culture is to differentiate between shoppers as individuals. The design, promotion and sale of consumer items, from the most mundane to the luxurious, generally contain encoded messages that appeal to a certain market niche or to buyers with a specific “economic profile”. Whereas this aspect of marketing can be seen in a highly negative light as manipulative, in China in the 1980s-1990s to be “targeted” favourably by advertisers seemed a new and generally welcome experience. It was in marked contrast to the previous ways in which people were targeted — in political campaigns or when subjected to investigations. People had a sense that in the marketplace there was room for the “expression of the individual” and a kind of “consumer empowerment” that had been virtually unknown in the past. It was a period in which the individual, increasingly freed from subservience and fealty to the Party-state, discovered the heady delights of individuated identity, of feeling special because he or she was being appealed to through advertising rather than simply propagated at by the state. Advertising offered a materialist “liberation”. Yet to its critics, mostly writing from outside China, its promise seemed to lead to another form of subjugation

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just as beguiling as the utopian dialectical materialism of high Maoism. As Jiwei Ci has observed in his study of the Chinese revolutionary market: “Without asceticism, without altruism, without collectivism, hedonism knows no bounds except those imposed by reality, and these bounds do not dampen hedonism but only sour it... . China’s utopian project, which had begun as ideologically sweetened asceticism, ended as disenchanted hedonism. What is worse, those at the anticlimactic end of this failed journey could not find even the comfort that comes from the confident certainty of a noble beginning and the strength therein to begin anew”.

The consumption of goods in an environment of abundance, even relative abundance, signalled a radical change in China, though it accorded with the government’s argument on the issue of human rights: that group economic rights (access to employment, housing, food and so on) should receive priority over the rights of the individual (freedom of speech and association, etc.). Consumerism was part of the successful attainment of “economic” rights: the rights and value of the individual were articulated solely in terms of the self as consumer, and this was non-threatening to Party hegemony.

To be sure, the economic makeover of China may presage the much-touted growth of civil society; but arguably this will be an environment in which the individual is construed more as an individuated consumer than a sovereign citizen. Advertising culture generally presents an image of itself within the context of supposed liberal pluralism and harmonious consensus. But what happens when advertising culture feeds into patterns established by Party-ordained ideological conditioning?

During the 1980s, the issue of individualism — the philosophical and political importance of the autonomous self — enjoyed only a short period of relatively open contention. Debates about unique human value, the status of abstract individuality and the nature of imposed Party constructions of the self engaged the attention of some intellectuals but provoked government bans and denunciations from 1983 onwards. Following that brief heyday of discussion and dissent, the rising tide of commercialization allowed for the reification of the individual in the public sphere, not in terms of autonomy but rather as the subject of advertising propaganda, a matrix of stimulated desires embodied in the moulded persona of the shopper.

The growth of consumer culture in China seems to have occurred on two levels simultaneously. Apart from the impetus to satisfy the actual needs of shoppers, superfluous needs and symbolic shopping came to occupy a central position in mainstream culture. As described below, the Party also enjoyed a

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4 See, for example, the section “Humanity” in Geremie Barmé and John Minford, Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), pp.149-66.
5 The authorities launched an Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in October 1983 which, among other things, was aimed at denouncing theoretical discussions of humanism.
media grip on the realm of hyper-reality, its own symbols becoming part of the meta-cultural landscape of the burgeoning commodity culture. Furthermore, because of the cultural isolation engendered by censorship, much of the imported advertising employed a symbolic language in tune with China’s political landscape and removed from its “indigenous” Euro-American context.

The images, clothing, lifestyle and language of this symbolic world were in marked contrast to the sodden official Party ideology that still filled the media, but this is not to say that the creators of these ads were averse to appropriating Party or state-sanctioned culture if it helped push a product. Indeed, a melding of old socialist icons and new commercial practices began to take shape in this environment. By employing the tropes of nostalgia, state enterprises attempted to reposition themselves as representatives of both national and consumer interests. A crude example of this new style of agitprop appeared in early 1997 when the Number One Motor Factory, now a joint venture invested with a new lease on life by foreign capital, launched a national competition for an advertising slogan to launch the remodelled “Audi-Chrysler-Red Flag” car. The original “Red Flag” (Hongqi) was a gas-guzzling state limo that ferried high-level cadres around the cities of China from study session to plenum in the heyday of Maoism. It is worth quoting the advertisement, which took up nearly half a page in Beijing Youth News in early 1997:

All Chinese celebrated the birth of the original “Red Flag” limousine. All Chinese have been proud of the brilliant glories of the “Red Flag”.

Today, we are appealing to every Chinese to take up their pens and celebrate the great leap of a new generation of “Red Flag” cars...

Cheer on! Step on the gas!!!

“Red Flag” is a product that really belongs to the Chinese people.

In 1958, designers at the Number One Automobile Manufacturing Plant combined their extraordinary talents to create the first generation of Chinese luxury limousine, the “Red Flag”. They wrote the first page in the history of China’s automotive industry.

As the paramount Chinese vehicle, the “Red Flag” is not merely a legend in motoring history. She crystallizes the ceaseless faith, the tireless struggles, and the fiery emotion of the whole country over a period of dozens of years and a number of generations. She symbolizes the eternal glories of the wisdom and the spirit of the Chinese nation.

The “Red Flag” is a National Car of the latest international standard....
We are determined to create a new slogan for the “Red Flag” that will resonate everywhere. We want to raise high the bright red banner of Chinese-manufactured cars, the banner of our national industry. We need a slogan from every warm-blooded Chinese. If you want to make your contribution to the resurgence of the national automotive industry then pick up your pen and participate in our advertising slogan campaign!!

Other commercial efforts were more sophisticated and less directly redolent of Party iconography. The success of the economic reform was making a whole range of commodities and services available to successful individuals and groups that enabled them to go “lifestyle” shopping. These imagined and constructed lifestyles, as well as the promise of satisfaction piqued by advertising, were commonly an amalgam of worlds represented in the electronic and print media, including TV advertising, market-oriented Party propaganda, popular US and Latin American soap operas, music TV culture beamed in on VTV, B-grade movies from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the published tales of self-made comrades overseas.

The Kong-Tai Style

The pervasive influence of the “Kong-Tai style” has been of immense importance in this cultural amalgam. The expression itself is shorthand for the introduction into China of Hong Kong and Taiwan advertising and pop culture (Gang-Tai or Kong-Tai) from the late 1970s onward. But the commercial impact of Kong-Tai should not be seen simply as part of an overall influx of capital, the conversion of China into an avaricious consumer society, and the vulgarization of social mores. The process of cultural osmosis that has existed since the late 1970s is complex and multi-faceted, and Kong-Tai in many ways has provided the mainland with the means to bridge the gaps with both China’s own past and its possible future. After the Communist takeover of 1949, Kong-Tai culture initially survived in isolated off-shore centres, which increasingly from the 1960s-70s onwards were transformed into wealthy consumer societies. Hong Kong and Taiwan developed the popular written and performance culture that was once a feature of mainland urban life, in particular of Shanghai and Beijing during the Republican period. The literary ambience created by the novelist Zhang Ailing, for example, and the music of 1940s Shanghai, became essential elements of Kong-Tai culture from the 1950s onward, and have gone through a number of revivals. Commercial styles of film, music, essay writing and journalism flourished in these off-

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6 See Zhongguo diyi qiche jituan gongsi [China No.1 Automobile Company], “Hongqi — hecai! jiayou!!” [Red Flag — Cheer on! Step on the Gas!!!]. Beijing qingnianbao [Beijing Youth News], 31 January 1997. Prizes offered for winning slogans ranged from 10,000 yuan in cash to to-scale models of the new Red Flag.

shore Chinese centres and have provided indigenous forms of modern pop culture for the Chinese mainland from as early as the late 1970s when the first Kong-Tai films were screened inland.

From the 1980s onward, the Kong-Tai style, with its evocation of hip, modernized Shanghai decadence, its worldly *petit-bourgeois* patina and consumer sheen, has profoundly influenced the face of mainland culture. Writers on the mainland have not taken it very seriously, however, even when debates within élite mainland culture have been sparked by issues related to commercialization. Mainland critics have generally been blinded by their own linguistic bias and chauvinistic prejudice and have been slow to understand the transformative significance of these formerly peripheral worlds. The situation has been quite different in regard to élitist mainland attitudes to the intelligentsia-based "highbrow" culture of Kong-Tai.

The influence of Kong-Tai in mainland advertising has been truly profound. The early ads in China, dating from 1979, were clumsy, often little more than risible announcements for non-consumer industrial products and manufactures like cement mixers and bulldozers. But in the late 1980s, Zhong Xingzuo, the novelist Ah Cheng’s brother, established a major television commercial production company in Beijing, the Xingzuo Ad Workshop, which created innovative clone ads à la Kong-Tai and Japan, with an

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8 This is something recognized by Zhang Xining, for example, in “Xianggangde liuxing wenhua” [Hong Kong Popular Culture], *Dushu* [Reading], no.7, 1996, pp.26-31.

9 There have even been interesting fictional investigations by mainland writers of the extreme urban environment of Hong Kong, as witnessed in the case of Wang Anyi’s 1993 story “Xianggangde qing he ai” [Love and Sentiment in Hong Kong], *Shanghai wenxue* [Shanghai Literature], no.8, 1993, discussed by Xiaobing Tang in “New Urban Culture and the Anxiety of Everyday Life in Contemporary China”, Xiaobing Tang and Stephen Snyder (eds), *In Pursuit of Contemporary East Asian Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp.115-18.

admixture of local colour. Similar companies, many of which were spawned by state-run film and television organizations, soon flourished in southern cities like Guangzhou. Due to ease of access, these southern ad agencies came more directly under the sway of Hong Kong archetypes, and thereby set the standards of quality and innovation for inland provinces and the north.

Kong-Tai became a cultural trend-setter because Hong Kong and Taiwan were perceived as modern, integrated urban environments, their communications more developed and their consumer cultures more sophisticated than those of the stodgy and out-of-touch northern capital of Beijing. In reaction, in 1993 the government attempted to ban viewers from using satellite dishes (guo, literally “wok”) to watch Kong-Tai TV programming. Even in Beijing and Shanghai, however, people failed to take down their dishes, while many organizations argued that it was professionally necessary to keep available the flow from stations like Star TV or VTV so that local programmers and writers could enrich their own work. Cable television, with its numbing tides of B and C grade movies and soft programming, was also readily accessible in the major urban centres and, throughout the 1990s, increasingly allowed audiences to feel that they were part of a virtual global village even while they imbued narrowly-defined nationalist ideology (this was particularly evident, for instance, with the broadcasting of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics).

Consumer confidence also led to a new style of campaign, not a repetition of the theatrical political movements of the past, the yundong, but ever-new waves of media-generated and media-enhanced crazes and crazes (re, xianxiang, chao as they are variously called). These crazes included the rise

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11 Among Zhong’s early work, a personal favourite is an ad for the drink Oreon. In December 1993, Zhong told this writer that this commercial was filmed in May 1989 and that the actors were university students who were taking time off from the hunger strike on Tiananmen Square to participate in the shoot. Another representative early advertisement by Zhong was made for Air China. It features Qin tomb warriors in the loess plains of Shaanxi turning to look as a jet flies overhead. Both ads feature in the documentary film “The Gate of Heavenly Peace”, directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon (Boston: Long Bow Group, 1995). Details of other successful ad-makers can be found in Du Liancheng (ed.), Zhongguo guanggaoren fengcei [Portraits of Chinese Advertising People] (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenlian Chuban Gongsi, 1995).

12 For a volume of mainland Chinese views on which ads have been successful, see Yu Genyuan, Gong Qianyan, Ji Hengquan and Liu Yiling (eds), Guanggao, biaoyu, zhaotie... yongyu pingxi 400 li [Advertisements, Slogans and Posters — Analysis of the Language of 400 Examples] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1992).

13 See “No Sex, No Violence, No News”, a one-hour documentary on cable television in Shanghai directed by Susan Lambert and Stephan Moore (Sydney: Film Australia, 1995), screened by the Australian Broadcasting Commission on 9 May 1996. As one of the talking heads in that documentary I made the case that more TV in China did not necessarily mean greater freedoms or access to “Western values”. In many cases it probably presages nothing so much as more shopping channels and the delirium of retail therapy.
and fall of a broad spectrum of ready-made fashions, from the re-consumption of Chairman Mao that began in the late 1980s\textsuperscript{14} to the Hula Hoop fever of 1992.\textsuperscript{15} Manufacturing re, literally “fevers”, became the focus of many publicists, be they official (the Party, for example, attempted to engender new “patriotic fevers” at various times) or private. The style of these campaigns was imitative of Kong-Tai commercial culture, and much of the language used for the promotions, whether in the political or cultural realm, was taken from the Kong-Tai media.

The Kong-Tai style has even had a direct major impact on the public face of the Party. This is obvious in regard to the updated political paraphernalia of congresses and meetings, and the new style of political slogans (now cannily recycled as “public service announcements”), banners and language in general, within every realm of the media and the Chinese internet.\textsuperscript{16}

From the 1980s, officially-orchestrated national moments increasingly included or were encapsulated in entertainment specials like the annual Spring Festival Entertainment Extravaganza (\textit{Chunjie lianhuan wanhui}), which was first broadcast in 1978 and became a direct national link-up telecast in 1983. This tele-event which includes artists from throughout the country (and non-mainland compatriots) came to provide a yearly sense of occasion, national consensus, and the affirmation of shared values. Its successful production was a major political task for television stations throughout the country. Whereas in the past, such as in the period of high Maoism, Party congresses and plenary sessions marked significant historical moments, during the reform era state-decreed holiday celebrations like May 1 (International Labour Day) and October 1 (National Day) and various other “politico-tainment” occasions have come to dominate as TV extravaganzas. From July 1, 1997, Hong Kong Day also joined this list of calendrical entertainment-celebrations that have over the years signalled the regulated and directed passage of national time.\textsuperscript{17}

Soap operas with a message like the TV series “Aspirations” (\textit{Kewang}), with redeeming themes about good cadres and the incorruptibility of the Party,

\textsuperscript{14} For a study of this, see Barmé, \textit{Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader} (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

\textsuperscript{15} The Tianjin Ruida Company was introduced to the Hula Hoop by an American businessman. The Ruida’s hoops were promoted via a TV ad that called on viewers to use the hoop to “reclaim that slim you of yesteryear; recall the memories of your childhood”. This helped sparked a craze that soon engulfed Beijing and then the whole of China. As reported in \textit{Zhongguo tiyu bao} [China Sports News], 23 February 1992. The fad, not surprisingly, soon fell into abeyance, thus setting the scene for a revival.

\textsuperscript{16} The rapid growth of internet access and service providers in China from 1995 led the authorities to direct considerable resources to developing a modern cyber-identity. See, for example, the design and language of \textit{People’s Daily Online} website (www.peoplesdaily.co.cn).

\textsuperscript{17} Other anniversaries, both national and local, are too numerous to mention. But they include March 8 (International Women’s Day), May 4 (Youth Day), June 1 (Children’s Day) and August 1 (Army Day).
were developed from the 1980s. They were originally modelled on Party morality plays, theatre productions and feature films, but they gradually absorbed styles of characterization and dramatization from popular Kong-Tai, Japanese, Latin American and US series that were screened in China.

It was not until the 1990s, however, that “politico-tainment” or “Partymercials” (for want of better terminology) appeared. Party culture, even when packaged for television ratings, was not necessarily all that popular, and since it was in competition with more commercial (and in many cases foreign) programs, inducements had to be found to keep viewers watching. Taking the lead from the “opposition”, quiz shows and newspaper competitions were introduced that tested the skills of participants in memorizing, for example, official Party history, and even facts and figures related to the SAR-to be, the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong.\(^{18}\)

The conscious development of Party and state “institutional advertising” (gongguan guanggao) and “public service announcements” (gongyi guanggao), as they are now called,\(^{19}\) has been a gradual process, but awareness of these modified forms of propaganda has been heightened by the general development of commercial culture. This is particularly evident in the pages of publications like Modern Advertising, a magazine published by the Chinese Advertising Association in Beijing dating from 1994, and Chinese Advertising, a journal produced out of Shanghai from the early 1980s. With the establishment of Spiritual Civilization Propaganda Offices at the provincial and municipal levels from 1996, the use of a new commercial standard in state propaganda became evident.\(^{20}\) When in 1996 the Party launched a new “spiritual civilization” campaign which featured moralizing slogans exhorting people throughout the country to comply with road rules and to speak politely, huge computer-enhanced images, neon slogan boards and advertising displays were erected throughout Beijing to help deliver the message.

Similarly, the creation of “corporate identities” for venerable state institutions developed apace from the mid-1980s, and became something of a fad from 1993. The influence of the Kong-Tai mercantile environment was, again, fundamental. Since many state bodies like the Bank of China, China Travel,

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\(^{18}\) In regard to the late-1996 and 1997 National Quiz Show on Hong Kong, see Kevin Kwong, “Facing up to the facts”, in “The Review”, South China Morning Post, 18 January 1997.

\(^{19}\) See Cheng Manli, “Gonggong guanggao — guanggao jiazude xin chengyuan” [Public Advertisements — a New Member in the Ad Family], Xiandai guanggao [Modern Advertising], no.2, 1994, pp.24-5; and Yue Wenhou, “Jingji shenghuo xin fengjing: Gongyi guanggao” [Public Service Announcements: a New Landscape in Our Economic Lives], Renmin ribao [People’s Daily], 17 October 1996.

\(^{20}\) For example, large hoardings were set up throughout Beijing that carried public service announcements and propaganda slogans in an environment of soft-focus images and slick photographs. Clumsy and wordy exhortations, however, were also common, and they were plastered throughout Chinese cities during the summer and autumn months of 1996.
publishing organizations like Joint Publishers, the Commercial Press and Chung-hwa Books as well as various other state or pseudo-private groups engaged in business in Hong Kong, they were the first to construct a corporate facade, which was then introduced to their head and branch offices on the mainland.\textsuperscript{21}

In journalism, the influence of the Kong-Tai style of presentation was also increasingly noticeable in the most successful of the Party-affiliated press, such as \textit{Beijing Youth News}, the newspaper of the Beijing Municipal Communist Youth League. Founded in 1949, it had resumed publication after a Cultural Revolution-induced hiatus in July 1981. The editor, Cui Enqing, a protegé of Hu Yaobang, was one of a group of editors and propagandists whose number included figures like Wang Ruoshui at \textit{People’s Daily} and Qin Benli of the Shanghai \textit{World Economic Herald}. Their reformist style marked a seachange in Party agitprop. Cui’s paper in particular set a course that broke free of the invidious relationship between Party-controlled papers and readers, encapsulated in the derogatory line: “official papers run by officials and subscribed to and read only by officials” (\textit{guanbao guan ban guan ding guan kan}). The non-traditional layout of the paper, the typographical fonts (often imitative of Kong-Tai), the design of the pages, and provocative and evocative headlines immediately alerted readers, primarily adolescents and young adults, to the fact that this was not a run-of-the-mill propaganda organ.\textsuperscript{22} The language of reports was also in marked contrast to the hackneyed style of official rhetoric, introducing a form of easy-to-digest verbal fastfood (\textit{wenhua kuaiican}) which constantly ingested the latest expressions and news gimmicks common in the Kong-Tai media. These innovations paid off. During the first half of the 1990s it became the most popular daily in the Chinese capital.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} The People’s Bank of China, the chief state fiscal institution, for example, created a logo cum corporate identity marker by combining the design of traditional Chinese coins with the word China/centre (\textit{Zhong}). See \textit{Xiandai guanggao} [Modern Advertising], no.2, 1994, p.32. The publishers mentioned here relied initially on their pre-1949 commercial and revolutionary symbolism, while \textit{China Travel} gradually evolved a more marketable image.
\item \textsuperscript{23} From the late 1980s, when it was a weekly, the paper gradually expanded its reader base from its original target-audience of middle-school students. It also increased the frequency of publication to twice a week in the early 1990s supplemented by a special weekend edition when weekend papers became the fashion in 1993.
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The paper’s income for 1992 was twenty-five times that of 1990, and in 1993 the paper made three times as much again.24

The push for more realistic reporting, both for political and social reasons, had an impact in creating a more honest documentary style in newspapers like *Beijing Youth News*. Whether covering stories on natural disasters such as floods, or housing problems, or social issues, the “hard copy” style of journalism increasingly became standard. There were still numerous limitations in reporting on political or politics-related issues, however. Yet there now existed within the mainland media a corps of journalists, editors and designers who constantly negotiated a working relationship between the esoteric communications favoured by traditional hardline propagandists as against a more newsworthy style of partial disclosure and pseudo-honesty that fitted in with the modernized urban style of contemporary Chinese life.

At the other end of the spectrum, in avant-garde culture, Kong-Tai has played an inestimable role in the promotion of new and originally controversial cultural products. The following section will make some observations in regard to ways in which Party image-makers, in turn, have subsequently worked to appropriate the local avant-garde, much as they have begun to appropriate Kong-Tai culture.

**Avant-Garde Pop and Propaganda**

The nascent avant-garde culture of the 1980s and early 1990s employed subversive strategies and engaged in an insurgent reworking of traditional Party symbols, language and histories. In this process, many of the artists functioned in parallel to official culture. If not working for state institutions they often fed off their state funding and structures, while advancing their own agendas. Some of the cultural products of these artists have in turn been cannibalized in the 1990s by Party propagandists, especially by younger media workers (some of whom also play a double role as non-official artists), to serve and diversify the interests of entrenched power elites. In the continued, often fractious, negotiation between state and non-state culture, this mutual cannibalization has witnessed the creation of a more vital audio-visual pedagogical culture.

This can be observed with pop art, or “political pop” (*zhengzhi bopu*) as it was termed by the Beijing art critic/freelance curator Li Xianting in 1991.25 Pop art was one of the most common and commercially successful styles favoured by the late 1980s and early 1990s artistic avant-garde. Prominent pop artists included Wang Guangyi, who combined Cultural Revolution posters with Coca-Cola and Maxwell House advertising imagery; Yu Youhan, who

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24 Zheng Xingdong et al., *Beijing qingnian bao*, p.5.
juxtaposed, among other things, Chairman Mao with Whitney Houston; and Liu Dahong, the master of China’s “reformist baroque”. But for all of the refreshing novelty and irreverence of early Chinese pop, its subsequent economic and political trajectory has paralleled the rise of commercial art. In one of Liu Dahong’s early 1990s’ socialist comic works, “Spring Fills the Courtyard”, Mao Zedong was pictured in Yan’an lecturing to a hall full of China’s real and fictitious Party heroes and martyrs. The figures include Lei Feng, a number of Beijing Revolutionary Opera characters, the model rural Dazhai Brigade leader Chen Yonggui, as well as Yang Kaihui and Jiang Qing (Mao’s second and fourth wives respectively). Liu even inveigled a portrait of himself into the absurdist gathering.26

Even this type of send-up of Party history through art has been purloined and appropriated by the Party. The Eighth National Art Exhibition in 1995, for instance, contained a number of works that were obviously inspired by Liu’s Bosch-pop humour. In one of these, a work entitled “Group Photograph of the Age”, the PLA artists Tang Zhigang and Lei Yan collect Party martyrs together for a joint photograph at an old-style studio, with the line “The People’s Photograph Shop Commemorates Those Who Serve the People”. In this army painting, however, although the style is mock-playful, there is no irony evident or intended.27

The appropriation of “pop” art for Party purposes has been paralleled in the field of photography. The realist photography that signalled a break from posed propaganda pictures first appeared among the “Stars” group in the late 1970s. But by the mid-1990s, practitioners of soi-disant “new documentary photography” (xin jishi sheying), acclaimed by writers like the sometime-unofficial poet Daozi as part of a post-colonial avant-garde, often had their works accepted in the official mainstream arts media.28

Of course, one could interpret the rise of such artists in the 1980s as part of an unintentional Trojan-horse strategy signifying an avant-garde infiltration of sanctioned state culture. One could just as easily argue that the position of such figures within the apparatus has served a dual (or multiple) purpose. As the years have passed and the threatening innovations of the avant-garde have become part of the new artistic standards, they have participated, either intentionally or by default, in the creation of a more inclusive official culture. All

of these photographers and painters have acted as a conduit for Kong-Tai and foreign styles that have been introduced into the mainstream media. Those artistic milieus, increasingly accepted by educational institutions and mass media outlets, have in turn been adopted by Party propagandists to serve their own ends.

This can be seen, too, in film. With the rise of the “new wave” cinema starting in the mid-1980s, the body of Party symbolism, mythology and style was increasingly used by artists for independent and ironic investigations of cultural norms. This led to the creation of films like Chen Kaige’s “Yellow Earth” (1986) and Huang Jianxin’s “The Black Cannon Incident” (1985). The Yan’an mythology, as well as the Anti-Japanese War (depicted in such films as “One and Eight” and “Red Sorghum”) were recast in ways that helped to repackage and commercialize twentieth-century Chinese history along general lines that were determined by a Party-defined nostalgia. These filmic reprises of Party culture, while originally subversive if not tongue-in-cheek have, over the years, aided and abetted in the reformulation and rebirth of Party culture as part of mainstream Chinese culture, both on the mainland and within the Kong-Tai world, as well as further afield throughout “Greater China”.

By the early 1990s, mainstream Party propagandists were not averse to applying elements of the successful north-west style or “Yellow Earth formula” to more identifiably loyal cultural products than “Red Sorghum”. As a result of mass disaffection over Party corruption in the late 1980s and the street protests of 1989 the authorities, under the aegis of the Politburo propaganda chief Li Ruihuan, launched a campaign to promote the ideal of the selfless and plain-living model Party cadre, using the avant-garde’s starkly nativist yellow-earth imagery. In late 1990, the Sichuan Emei Film Studio produced a leading propaganda set-piece of that campaign, “Jiao Yulu”, a biographical film based on the career of a famous cadre martyr. It was screened amidst nationwide fanfare, and over 420 prints of the film were distributed during its initial theatrical release, reportedly a record for a Chinese film. In it the director updated the revolutionary realist style of film-making typical of

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29 The image of the sere native earth of the loess plains of the north-west, first seen in “Yellow Earth”, has been exploited by a whole school of fiction and cinema that began promoting itself from the late 1980s under the rubric of the “Chinese Western”. The “model opera” of the genre must surely be Zhang Yimou’s “Red Sorghum” (1988), a brutal paean to peasant cronyism. The film’s theme song, “Keep Going, Little Sister”, shouted by the tone-deaf proles who identified with the mindlessly chauvinistic message of the film, echoed down the streets and alleys of Chinese cities and towns throughout the summer of 1988, audible evidence of the popularity of the safely sterilized “native soil” culture. Zhang’s film also helped launch the “North-West Craze” (Xibeifeng) in 1988 featuring northern Shaanxi peasant songs rearranged to disco music. China’s home-grown rock’n’pop stars Cui Jian and Liu Huan joined in the chorus and grew in public stature as a result. See Barmé, “Arrière-pensée on an Avant-Garde: The Stars in Retrospect”, in Chang Tsong-zung, Hui Ching-shuen and Don J. Cohn (eds), The Stars: 10 Years (Hong Kong: Hanart 2, 1989), pp.77-8.
socialist martyr films, by employing long opening and closing sequences featuring mass scenes at Jiao’s funeral in the desert-like hills of Henan, clearly inspired by Chen Kaige’s representation of massed peasants on the loess plains in “Yellow Earth”. In the 1996 hagiography of the Tibet-based cadre-martyr “Kong Fansen”, similar cinematic techniques were employed for the exigencies of Party propaganda.

The north-western cinematic landscape took a very different, politically pungent form with the production of the six-part teleseries “River Elegy”. First broadcast in June 1988, and subsequently the object of heated controversy in 1988 and official denunciation in 1989, “River Elegy” went to great lengths to condemn the land-locked and stagnant culture of China through the ages. In particular, it used images and songs that related to the impoverished north-west, the supposed cradle of the ancestors of the Chinese people, the “Descendants of the Yellow Emperor”, and Urheimat of the Yan’an spirit, to make its rhetorical points.30 “River Elegy” juxtaposed images and statements, along with a dramatic and authoritative narrative intoned like a Party propaganda film, to create a subtext that equated Maoist-Stalinist political and economic orthodoxy with state Confucianism and traditional culture. This cultural and political admixture, the series” creators claimed, presaged disaster for China. The solution to China’s problems, it was suggested, was to abandon this traditional inward-looking, earthbound worldview (as symbolized by the Great Wall and agrarian culture) for an outward-reaching vision that aspired to the sea, commerce, and contact with the outside world.

Despite its patriotic subtext, “River Elegy” was the first cultural victim of the post-Tiananmen purge, and numerous published denunciations were followed in August 1990 by an official made-for-TV riposte, “On the Road: A Century of Marxism”.31 “On the Road” imitated the narrative and filmic style of “River Elegy”, appealing to the same audience and employing a similarly emotive and truncated logic. Its creators even engaged the services of the same actor to read the narration. But each of the four episodes extolled one of the Party’s Four Basic Principles (that is, to adhere doggedly to socialism, the proletarian dictatorship, Party leadership, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought). Employing a Kong-Tai technique, the tone of the series was established by a Canto-pop-style theme-song that opened each episode.

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31 This four-part series was screened amidst a wave of publicity on CCTV and followed by the publication of its bombastic narration in the pages of Guangming Daily, one of the nation’s leading newspapers. “On the Road” was produced by the Party’s Department of Propaganda, advised by Deng Liqun, one of the most active Party ideologues in Beijing and a man who had been trained in the art of the cultural purge in Yan’an in the early 1940s.
You are a seed of fire, igniting this slumbering land; [the screen shows an image of Karl Marx]

You are a prophesy, describing the path for all human ideals; [cut to a picture of Lenin]

You are a banner, fluttering in the wind ready to face all on-coming storms; [images of Mao]

You spoke a truth, you are a banner, having fallen and risen, you emerged victorious. [Deng Xiaoping shown bobbing up and down in the water as he does the breast stroke]32

Entertainment in the service of the Party decontextualizes history and historical incidents. The background and detailed content of events are blurred so that it becomes unclear just how any particular incident should be historically situated. This style of “fuzzy logic” is consistently used with the aim of rendering the Party of today innocent of culpability for the past. For example, the narrative in “On the Road” waxed eloquent on the subject of the Party’s record, and the four decades of Communist rule are spoken of as consisting of a series of almost unmitigated triumphs. The disasters of the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution are thus blithely passed over.33

Starting in 1991, a rash of similar TV shows appeared, including the State Education Commission-sponsored “Song for the Holy Land” (Shenzhou yin), a multi-episode paean for reform; and “Looking along the Great Wall”, written by the leading Party/Army reportage writers Liu Yazhou and Qian Gang and made by the military division of Central TV with Japanese financial backing. “Looking along the Great Wall” used the Wall as a focus for an exaggerated and dramatic homage to Mother China, and its makers rebutted the disparaging abuse that the national icon had suffered at the hands of the discredited team behind “River Elegy”. While “On the Road” was ham-fisted and,
according to many people, ineffective, shows like “Looking along the Great Wall” were widely acclaimed for their relatively sophisticated and subtle approach in propagating the patriotic official line on traditional Chinese culture and the modern world.34

Another feel-good multi-episode production, “Soul of the Nation”, focused on the glorious history of the martyrs of the People’s Army. A war documentary with a propaganda edge that took many of its cues from “River Elegy”, this series was popular with younger viewers and was soon available both in book form and on video at Xinhua Bookstores and film outlets.35 Through such popular media efforts, Party pedagogical advertising has continued with some success to present a narrative of Chinese history that places an emphasis on the primacy of the Party in that history. Collective voices, memories of resistance, as well as the histories of subordinate groups that were or are at variance with the Party’s narrative are most often effectively excluded from the public realm, or so channelled and prescribed as to be nugatory.

In 1992-93, even Xia Jun, the director of “River Elegy”, turned his hand to producing pro-status quo tele-documentaries like “The Peasants” and “The East”.36 Both series used the style of cinéma verité originally championed by film-makers like Shi Jian and Chen Jue (whose eight-part documentary “Tiananmen” was banned in 1991).

Through the above examples we have attempted to demonstrate in brief that stylistic innovation, if its content can be adequately policed and managed, is not necessarily a threat to monopolized ideological discourse. In this small sampling it can be seen how discordant elements of contemporary popular and élite culture have been incorporated into mainstream propaganda and the arts in recent years.

The Dialectics of Avant and Derrière

The existence of the great divide between high and low art remains, literally, academic. For decades elements of high art have been feeding the wellsprings of advertising culture, as James Twitchell has eloquently demonstrated in his study of the subject.37 Meanwhile, lowbrow or vernacular culture has often

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37 James Twitchell, ADCULT USA, pp.179-228, especially pp.207-13.
availed itself of gimmicks, techniques, motifs, subject matter, and styles from high modernism. That avant-garde Chinese culture has similarly fed Party propaganda comes, therefore, as no great surprise. One is reminded of an observation made by Arthur C. Danto, a philosopher of art, in an essay entitled “Bad Aesthetic Times”:

An awful lot of what was introduced in a kind of anti-establishment spirit has — such is the irony of things — found its way into the highest precincts of contemporary high art, as if co-operation were irresistible, and the art world, like the commercial world, feeds and flourishes on what was intended to call it in question and overthrow it.38

The various efforts of mainland Chinese avant-gardes of the 1970s and 1980s (‘disturbatory art’, to use Danto’s expression) initially appeared aesthetically unsettling and “bad” to those nurtured in the tradition of the Party’s artistic canon. As we have observed, however, during the 1990s the techniques and poses of the avant-garde were well on the way to becoming part of accepted standards, and they were increasingly employed to teach and communicate what are good aesthetics in educational institutions and the media by younger state employees, thereby aiding in the creation of an alternative or at least dilated canon of taste.

One is inevitably tempted to ponder future possibilities. When, for example, revivals of 1980s-90s’ Chinese modernism are spawned in the future, will the canonized avant-garde appear as dreary and pedagogical in comparison to revitalized and commodified mainstream (official and commercial) culture as modernism so often does today in Euro-America when it is juxtaposed with the more vital vernacular arts like graffiti, caricature, comics and advertising? Similarly, following the first wave of avant-gardist inversions of Communist symbolism since 1976 and the subsequent re-takes of these inversions by commerce and Partycult from the late 1980s onwards, can’t we also expect to see non-official artists and writers further plunder the new advertising culture for their work, to indulge themselves in Party-based bricolage? If so, Party artists may well respond with counter-bricolage.

To keep abreast of the demands of the market — the international arts and cinema circuit, advertisers’ needs and Party initiatives — the avant-garde must perfomce attempt repeated innovations of the stock of Chinese-based sign systems and values. They are sign systems that have been formulated and articulated by the authorities for nearly half a century, and the further appropriation of them by the avant-gardists may give birth to the type of “second-degree kitsch” that is so common in post-industrial societies.39 Presumably,

39 Such second-degree kitsch is “self-referential — a sort of kitsch-kitsch.... It capitalizes on an acquired taste for tackiness. It is a popularization of camp sensibility, a perspective wherein appreciation of the “ugly” conveys to the spectator an aura of refined decadence, an ironic enjoyment from a position of enlightened superiority”. See Celeste
the avant-garde will produce anthologies of previous avant-garde strategies, enabling them to be re-circulated into mainstream political and commodity culture, and thereby creating a nostalgic revival of post-totalitarian tropes that have been colonized by the corporate-totalitarian state.

**Communism as Commercials**

By the mid-1990s, the marriage of propaganda and mainstream advertising was proceeding according to its own rules and conventions. In Shanghai, the boom town of the post-1992 high tide of economic reform, for example, some wily advertisers formulated methods for remaining politically correct while waiting for an influx of non-Party corporate advertising dollars.

In early 1995, the Charisma Advertising Agency (*Shanghai Fengcai Guanggao Gongsi*), a small local concern, featured Party slogans on all of its lit advertising displays along Changshu Road just outside the Hilton Hotel in the Jing'an District. The displays, put up to commemorate the 45th Anniversary of the People's Republic, carried small and discreet messages like “Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought!” and made it clear by featuring the company’s name and telephone number that, for a price, the slogans could be replaced with commercial ads by any interested party or, rather, company. The agency was run by Shen Xuejiang, a captain in the local PLA Cultural Department and an award-winning artist himself. Over the summer of 1995, his propaganda signs were, indeed, displaced by more profitable messages.\(^{40}\) Just as the “attention engineers” devoted to the creation of consumer culture in America were born of the Christian tradition, so commercial propagandists of China like Shen Xuejiang were steeped in Communist agitprop.\(^{41}\)

In southern Chinese cities the pace of the commercialization of politics proceeded much faster than in the north. In 1990, for instance, when a new national law on the national flag was promulgated, municipal leaders in Guangzhou organized a solemn flag-raising ceremony that was telecast province-wide. As the five-stars-on-red was hoisted on the flagpole, a

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\(^{40}\) My thanks to Tom Parker for searching out Mr Shen and obtaining this information on my behalf.

\(^{41}\) The expression “attention engineers” comes from Twitchell’s *ADCULT USA*, p.33.
mellifluous female voice announced: “Today’s ceremony was generously sponsored by the following factories...”

Sometimes the commercial sector has treated Party icons as considerably less than sacrosanct, but in ways that were anything but hostile. Indeed, this commercialization of Party icons has played on the fact that many people feel comfortable with the icons — and this sense of familiarity, driven home through the new commercialization, indirectly becomes a reinforcement of political legitimacy.

In 1991 and 1992, for example, Mao T-shirts appeared in stalls in Beijing and the provinces, taking commercial advantage of the post-1989 Mao fad. The shirts included numerous portraits of Mao, either as a young man or in his Edgar-Snow prime, and lines rehearsed from the Cultural Revolution like: “I love studying Chairman Mao’s works”. Some people presumably wore these as a means of public rabble-rousing or qihong, as the popular Chinese expression puts it, but while the use of dead leaders’ pictures in product promotion was forbidden as the 1990s progressed, Mao quotes appeared in TV ads and on billboards with increasing frequency.

One insecticide, for example, was advertised with the slogan “Away with all pests!”, a line from an anti-imperialist poem penned by Mao in 1963.

Similarly, a make of vacuum cleaner was promoted with a TV commercial voice-over telling viewers that “dust won’t disappear of its own accord”, a phrase taken from a famous Mao quotation about reactionaries who, like dust, would not disappear of their own accord.

And in 1995-96, the Great Leader’s immediately-recognized calligraphic inscription for the expression “the People” (renmin) was used by the Haicheng Pager Company in advertisements which read “Haicheng Pagers, wholeheartedly serving the People.”

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42 Tian Bingxin and Wang Zhigang, “Guangzhou: yizuo bu shefangde chengshi” [Guangzhou: A City not to be Underestimated], Yue-Gang xinxi bao [Guangdong-Hong Kong News], 5 October 1991. One is only surprised that a political tele-special like the 1991 TV recitation of the Chinese government’s white paper Human Rights in China was not similarly sponsored by local companies, or, better still, reform-through-labour enterprises and farms. Instead the publication of the droning riposte to Western concerns about human rights abuses in China was turned into a TV non-event that consisted of a glum presenter reading out the entire document on air against a blue backdrop with the title of the paper printed on it.

43 For an illustration of such a shirt, see Barmé, Shades of Mao, p.96, fig.28.


45 These ads appeared on Beijing TV in mid-1996. For the use of the image of PLA martyr Lei Feng and an accompanying Mao quote “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” for the promotion of the Changsha Municipal Advertising Company, see Barmé, Shades of Mao, p.87, fig.13.

46 “Haicheng xunhu quanxin quanyi wei renmin fuwu.” Billboards with this line (written in white paint on a red background, in imitation of original propaganda slogans) were situated at the main intersection at Dong Daqiao in Chaoyang District and at the
For years, the Zhang Xiaouquan Knife and Scissor Store on East Nanjing Road in Shanghai has promoted its wares with a twist on a 1956 quotation from Mao: “Zhang Xiaouquan knives and scissors should not be abandoned even after ten thousand years!”

Conclusion

The infiltration by Kong-Tai and international commercial culture, and the co-opting of elements of the avant-garde, have had a profound effect on the appearance of the Chinese media. It is necessary, of course, to consider whether these developments are merely cosmetic. Has the commercialization of official culture fundamentally altered the nature of information exchange and the power structures of control and propaganda?

It is obvious that China’s mass culture has been transformed since the advent of the reform era, and there has clearly been an accelerated shift away from the staple saturation indoctrination and campaign-based propaganda of the past. That does not necessarily mean, however, that there has been a concomitant fundamental change in the polity. Rather, I would suggest that through broad-based appeals to national symbols and patriotic indoctrination — increasingly delivered via a mass media that has appropriated elements of avant-garde art and global advertising styles — the ideological promotion of the Party continues to stake a competitive claim on the public’s attention and continues to shape psycho-cultural norms. It also appears evident that the development of advertising propaganda in China perpetuates ideological practices in which the public is repeatedly invoked but also sequestered and repressed within the sphere of the mass media. As John Heileman wrote of the introduction of commercialism in Eastern Europe after 1989: “For now, the commercial is not an enemy of that community, but a defining characteristic of its aspirations”. In China, that commercialism includes promotional positioning, or at least posturing, by the Communist Party. In a culture of appearances like that of the Mainland, one in which so much of what is articulated by the authorities’ culture is surface sans substance, such promotional tactics encapsulate the unique environment of commodified socialism. (This is not to suggest that cosmetic changes to the Party’s style are not often risible.

Di’anmen Bridge north of Jingshan Park.


48 For a less-than-optimistic view of state control over general advertising in China, in particular following the promulgation of the 1994 advertising law, see Mark Spence and Stella L. M. So, “Advertising in China”, Access China, no.23, October 1996, esp. pp.16-17.

In May 1998, for example, after years of having been told how odious the term “propaganda” (xuanchuan) sounds to non-mainland ears, the Department of Propaganda finally renamed itself the CCP Publicity Department.

It is often considered that commodity culture and the market have undermined the primacy of Party rule in China. This is supposedly a process that has been accelerated by the opening up of greater public spaces and discursive realms, as well as a result of international political and economic pressures and the tripartite dialogue within the Chinese world — Sino-Kong-Tai. It is argued that Party control has thus been weakened, or at least diversified, and its ideology gradually undermined to the point of becoming little more than a window dressing disguising a basic nationalistic political and economic agenda. While these views may be valid in so far as they go, the Party as an organization has also benefited greatly from many of these diverse pressures, including advertising culture. The Party retains its role of domination, and through competition in the marketplace its sign system has been enriched and enhanced.

A consequence of the new politics of advertising culture is that through a melding of the commercial and the political, the text and subtext of mass culture, the Party in its multifarious forms has continued to create a particular version of social and political reality that subverts others. It has used a “democracy of images” to reinforce its own primacy.50 It backs up its image as a responsible ruling government with a range of rhetorical and representational devices that prey on popular culture, language and images — just as they did, for example, during the Yan’an period. Party adultc actively limits the spheres it attempts to appropriate, helps transform them into commercial or media cliché, and therefore desensitizes the public to their power. Whereas people as viewers, consumers and citizens may to an extent become critical agents of these very clichés and repetitions, jaded by the info-blitz and content to indulge in private irony, this does not necessarily free them from the enmeshing power of the images and the narratives behind them.

The Party is not the monolithic source of signs and significance that it once presumed to be. By entering the marketplace of images it has witnessed a devaluation of its ideological currency, but that has not in the long run necessarily resulted in hyper-inflation or sign-bankruptcy. One reason is that due to the nature of Party domination in China, it is able to isolate itself from the wholesale ransacking of its sign system (language, symbols, and so on) by advertising culture. Not surprisingly, in certain areas the Party style still appears risible and old-fashioned, but in others a modern corporate identity is articulated with varying degrees of success (and that depends partly on which segment of the society is targeted). Party PR workers have increasingly

absorbed elements of corporate culture and promotional strategies that are reflected in the marked shifts in public presentation.

Generational changes have meant that the Party’s media outlets, as well as the media in general, are run by worldly younger men and women, people trained in the post-Mao educational environment who are more in touch than their predecessors with the social realities of the country. As noted, some of those “propagandists” (the word has a quaint air when one considers the role of these individuals) are also active participants in non-official cultural activities. Through this new set of media personnel, the overall Party view of history, nationhood and identity has to some degree been successfully re-fashioned and has become part of the basic range of signs, the paleo-symbolism, that propagandist advertisers appeal to even when they do not directly represent them or even place any store in them. As Mihajlo Mihajlov observed in regard to Soviet propaganda in the past, “those very myths and fictions themselves become instruments of power even when the subjects cease to believe in them”.51

Even this cursory review of the relationship between segments of the state-funded arts and propaganda industries and facets of the Chinese avant-garde reveals a complex and dynamic symbiosis between the public realm and non-official culture. The tropes of new-wave cinema, TV mini-series, political sloganizing, realist photography and pop art, to name the areas touched on earlier, provide intriguing evidence that just as the avant-garde has made a parasitical use of the Party’s wealth of symbols, so too “Party Inc.” has plundered the avant-garde. Both sides, if one can speak in terms of such a crude dichotomy, have a voracious appetite for the consumption of the other’s signs. The mutual cannibalization is continuous and beneficial to all parties concerned. It is a process that reveals that both the Party and elements of the avant-garde, those who are not directly politically rebellious, have evolved a piecemeal *modus vivendi* within the overall commodification of culture that is often strikingly innovative.

By studying the ways in which Party culture has engaged with its non-official opponents and the advertising culture, it can be seen that some of the potentially critical and subversive popular cultures in China have themselves been subverted. The growth of public spaces has not necessarily led to popular and avant-garde cultures becoming vehicles for the representation of a new *Weltanshauung*. Again, it has been argued here that appropriation works both ways. When basic power structures remain intact the rounds of appropriation by the Party offer interesting clues to the nature of the development of official ideological culture in Mainland China over the past twenty years.

In writing about America, James Twitchell has observed the consanguineous relationship of religion and consumption. He remarks that advertising “is the gospel of redemption in the fallen world of capitalism”, the

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“Vulgate of the secular belief in the redemption of commerce”.52 This paper argues that adcult is also offering a measure of redemption and a prolonged life to Chinese Communist Party hegemony — a hegemony that in the realm of historical and political/cultural symbols and practice may well outlive the Party itself.

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52 Twitchell, Adcult USA, p.30.