

# The little emperors' small screen: parental control and children's television viewing in China

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## Introduction

The arrival of television in ordinary urban homes in China, around 1980, coincided with the implementation of the one-child policy, designed to curb what was officially seen as an otherwise uncontrollable population growth.<sup>1</sup> This coincidence consequently created a unique generation of urban children, born in the early 1980s, with a small screen at home, and nicknamed 'the little emperors of China' because of a popular belief about the power they wield within the family as the lone child of their parents. The unusual circumstances in which they were born and are raised make their life-world and lived experiences particularly interesting for sociological treatment. Here I shall take one aspect of their life-world, an important one at that, as the focus of attention: their daily engagement with the small screen at home. In a way, these children can be said to have grown up with the company of the small screen in the absence of siblings, and television remains of paramount importance to them as the 'fourth audio-visual member' of the family. In the process of conducting research, parents attempting to exert regimes of control over children's viewing turned out to be a useful entry point into the problem. Chinese parents hold very high expectations of their lone child in terms of academic and other achievements, and are determined not to allow extra-curricula activities to detract from schoolwork. It is hard to overestimate the important role they play in their children's lives.

In recent years, work on children and television has moved away from the search for 'effects' and has taken a distinct 'interpretative' turn. Research has been increasingly focusing on the interpretative procedures that children employ in making sense of televisual texts, and on the way

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that watching television is shaped by the routines and rules governing daily life in families and households. Analyses of these processes are essential for a full understanding of children's relation to television. However, as I hope to demonstrate through my own study of Chinese children, they are not sufficient in themselves. They have to be linked to the broader process of social and cultural changes which has enveloped and shaped them. For this purpose, I begin with an account of the changing structures in Chinese society in the 1980s, which, directly or indirectly, impinge on children's life-world of engaging with the small screen. Then I present in detail the empirical study of parental control and children's television viewing, which only makes sense in view of the myriad social and cultural changes in post-Mao China. In conclusion, I discuss some inherent problems in doing sociology in China, and try to catch up with the most recent developments in cultural production and consumption in the 1990s.

### **Changing structures: social context and domestic milieu**

To lay out the context and milieu in which children's engagement with the small screen can be located, several impinging structural elements have to be specified from the outset. These include the existence of an ever more competitive schooling system in the 1980s; the imposition of the one-child policy by the state, which defines the new relationship between parents and the lone child; and the increasing commercialization of television and cultural production in general. All these started in the late 1970s, with the end of one era and the beginning of another — from China under Mao to that of post-Mao reforms. A number of strategic changes in 'nation-building' initiated by the reformist government after Mao set the foundation for social, economic and cultural orders in the decades to come. Political mass movements gave way to economic construction; 30 years of isolationism ended with the adoption of the open-door policy; and a market economy was introduced as a remedy for rigid state control.

The sphere of cultural production and consumption has been going through a parallel process of opening up and reorienting towards the market. The Party's monopoly over cultural production and distribution was decisively over. Culture was no longer seen as the mere handmaiden of political propaganda and ideological indoctrination. It began to be recognized as a profit-seeking economic activity, adding to the GNP. Cultural economics replaced cultural politics, and its new function of producing pure entertainment was well received by the 'masses', who had become rather apathetic to political mass movements too often mobilized in Mao's China. In this particular sense, culture has indeed been depoliticized. Popular entertainment in effect trivializes ideological campaigns and paralyzes political propaganda, as partly exemplified by the aborted

attempts made by the Party's 'old guard' to cleanse 'spiritual pollution' in 1983 at an early stage of the economic reform, and again to resist 'bourgeois liberalization' in 1987 when the full force of the reform was already being felt.

The 1980s was not only a decade of economic construction and cultural pluralization, but also a decade of ideological mess. The deep-rooted Confucian tradition, the legacy of Communist egalitarianism, and the newly-instituted market ethos coexisted uneasily with one another. Confucianism, the dominant value system by tradition, was forced out of its central place by the Communist state, and was substituted by an official Marxist-Leninist ideology. This official ideology, however, has been eroded by a series of liberal market strategies in the post-Mao era. The erosion makes room for the rapid expansion of the new ethics of individualism and consumerism on the one hand, and for the revival of some traditional Confucian values suppressed in Mao's revolutionary China on the other. The Confucian spirit of moderation, or the middle way (*zhong yong*), regrets the consequences of radical and extremist Maoism. The legacy of Communist egalitarianism abhors the new tendency towards polarization between the rich and the poor. The market, with all its vitality, is the reality to be reckoned with. It strides ruthlessly towards its own goal of profit-making, with little regard for social justice and moral standards. A balance between the three, many would agree, needs to be struck before it is too late.

The educational system which was abolished by Mao as elitist during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was quickly restored in 1977, with the resumption of the national university entrance examinations. Rebellious Red Guards were sent back to school to 'read books' (*dushu*) and to compete for higher education. The fierce competition between high school graduates is described as 'a troop of millions fighting to cross a single-plank bridge'. Towards the end of the decade, at the time when I conducted the empirical research for this article, pressure to perform well at school had already trickled down to children as young as six. Behind the strict control by parents over the time children spend watching television, for instance, is the fear that television causes poor school performance. The one-child policy has only exacerbated the situation.

The imposition of the one-child policy in the early 1980s has, in a way, altered the existing family structure and the power relationship within it. One could argue that the policy has helped to undermine traditional parental power and authority. This is true only in a limited sense. One obvious consequence of the policy is an increased attention accorded to the lone child by parents and grandparents. This situation has been dubbed a centripetal 'four (grandparents)–two (parents)–one (child) phenomenon', to highlight its child-centred nature. Children are said to have much to gain in terms of parental affection and material consumption. However, no gain

comes without a price. It is accompanied by high parental expectations of the lone child's achievement. What children do or fail to do reflects clearly and immediately back upon their family — parents, grandparents, and relatives — in a way unequalled in the modern West. They bring either honour or shame on to the family. One common way to honour one's parents in the 1980s is to work hard and perform well at school, the final test of which is to excel in the grand national examinations at the end of high school and to get a place in a good university.

A news story can provide a glimpse into the kind of pressure to which school children were then subject. A boy died after being physically punished by his mother because he failed to score 90 percent in one of his exams (*The People's Daily* 2 June 1989). This incident alarmed the public and prompted an investigation by an organization concerned with children's welfare. Thirty-six primary school children were interviewed. To the surprise of the investigators, they found out that some parents actually used the incident to spur their children to study harder and get better grades at school. Given the lack of contextual information, and a professional tendency to select and highlight certain aspects of certain stories, such an incident as it happened still points to a general situation of high pressure in which many of these 'little emperors of China' may have found themselves in the late 1980s.

The popular conception of the lone child is in a way a reflection of the public anxiety and uncertainty over the long-term consequences of an unprecedented state policy. The lone child is widely believed to be spoilt, self-centred, wilful, extravagant, and sometimes 'despotic', like many Chinese emperors in the past. This image, collectively constructed by parents, is constantly reinforced by media stories about how parents are willing to sacrifice their own material satisfaction for the sake of their lone child (for example *The People's Daily*, 30 May 1988). This popular conception somehow contradicts a less popular one, which sees the child as the sole bearer of parental hope, forced to work hard within a closed system of reward and punishment. It is true that with the rise in general living standards, disposable income has been steadily increasing, a large proportion of which is spent on the child. The children's market remains one of the most lucrative in China. But from this alone it can hardly be concluded, as many do, that children are definitely better off now than ever before. Concerns about the long-term psychological effects of focused attention and of a lack of communication and interaction with siblings, for instance, are not merely conjured up. These are serious problems which China has to face, for it is these children who will run the country in the 21st century.

Another structural element shaping children's interaction with television under parental control is the changing mode of cultural production. Here the problem, as parents perceive it, does not lie with children's program-

ming itself, despite the fact that it is becoming increasingly commercialized and that the long-standing official policy of education through entertainment has been constantly breached. The problem, as parents see it, lies with 'adult programmes'. They blame television for corrupting innocent children by showing what they do not, and should not, understand — 'sex' in particular. This seems to echo one of the two most familiar themes on children and television in the West — sex and violence. However, a closer examination of the issue reveals profound differences between the Chinese case and that of the West.

The commercialization of culture in China is no longer a new story, but its impact on society and individuals has yet to be adequately assessed. The media have been going through a steady process of orientating towards the market since the early 1980s, allowed, and at times encouraged, by the state. Government revenue has been gradually replaced by income derived from commercial advertising or sponsorship. One rather unintended consequence of this is that the ideological control by the state over the media has been loosened. How to retain its ideological grip over media products at a time when the media can find their own means of survival poses a real problem to the state. The old solution of total monopoly over sources of information and means of production in Mao's China is no longer feasible.

The 'liberalized' cultural market is often chaotic, not the least because of lack of regulation. The market has stimulated a massive production of what officialdom calls 'low-taste' (*diji quwei*) culture. Even products of a more serious kind occasionally have to be spiced with ingredients that help to sell. At the time when I conducted the research, the areas that had slipped the most out of state control were publishing and video show business. Tabloid newspapers, commercial magazines and popular fiction are churned out on a massive scale. Small video halls, often owned collectively by work units to earn extra cash, became a popular site of entertainment from the mid-1980s onwards. Films made in Hong Kong or Taiwan, either imported or smuggled in, were shown in video halls at a price often much higher than that charged by public cinemas. This situation, often regarded as a kind of cultural degeneration, was ascribed by the Party to Western influence, which is said to have sneaked in uninvited through the 'back door'. Yet, in fact, it is more a reaction, or rather overreaction, to the Communist asceticism the Party imposed on itself and the people in Mao's China. In the words of a well-known veteran journalist in exile in the USA, 'It is precisely because of the paucity and hypocrisy of that extreme asceticism that the low culture of commercial advertising, pornography and the fetishism of money so readily finds adherents today' (Liu, 1992).

Compared with these two areas, television broadcasting has remained very much under state control. Anything considered not suitable for public viewing, sex for instance, will be strictly censored. The Chinese television screen was, and perhaps still is, incomparably 'clean'. So, what are parents

actually worried about? Is this worry in fact an expression of a more general concern about the cultural environment in which they have to bring up their children? And why are parents so offended by children getting a glimpse of adult life — courting each other, getting married and having children, which are in any case depicted in a most subtle way on Chinese television? The answers to these questions have to be sought after in relation to traditional values generally, and to the shared experiences and memories of this particular generation of parents born in the early years of the People's Republic.

Most of these parents, in their mid or late 30s at the time when I conducted the research, were teenagers during the Cultural Revolution when the educational system broke down and 'Communist asceticism' went to its extreme.<sup>2</sup> They got married in the first years of the market era, and were allowed to have only one child by the new population policy. They were once Chairman Mao's devoted Red Guards, and then were sent to the countryside by Mao himself. The new era of economic reforms has instituted a different reward system based on formal education and qualifications, which they often lack. This they tend to impute to history (*lishi yuanyin*), feeling betrayed by it. Their lost past, however, has to be compensated for by a better future, which lies in the only child. They are determined that their child is not to be let down as they were. As I shall demonstrate in the following account of my interviews with these parents, their evaluation of television's influence on children, their exertion of a regime of control, their obsession with taming the small screen into a home-based electronic teaching machine, and their worry about children being corrupted by adult programmes, were in fact different aspects of the same basic concerns — how to bring up their only child in a rapidly changing, and baffling, social and cultural environment, and how to make sure that the child grows up a success and brings glory to the family.

### **Negotiations around the small screen**

The empirical data for this study happened to be collected at a special historical moment, in the month between 21 April and 19 May 1989, at the very height of the democracy movement which was initiated by university students in Beijing and soon spread nationwide. It was a time of unusual openness and seriousness. For the first time since the Communist Party took power in 1949, ordinary people spontaneously felt the need and the possibility that they could and should participate in debates about their common fate. It was a time of tremendous hope for a better future. People were most willing to talk about their fears and aspirations, their concerns and worries, both about their own families (*jiashi*) and about the nation as a whole (*guoshi*).

The research was conducted in Beijing, and in my own home city Jiaozuo respectively.<sup>3</sup> In the process of data collection and analysis, parental control emerged as an important theme which should be dealt with in itself. Parents attempting to take some measure of control over their children's television viewing is by no means a unique Chinese phenomenon, as already well documented in the vast amount of literature on children and television in Europe and in the USA. Yet, what was distinctive about these Chinese parents, I would venture to argue, was the scope and degree of control they exerted. This is clearly evidenced by my own research and has been noted by previous research as well.

Before the popularization of television at the end of the 1970s, children's media consumption was confined to books, newspapers, magazines, radio and films, all of which fulfilled the same function of ideological indoctrination and intellectual education. Since the control over media content by the state was pervasive and stringent, there was hardly any need for parents to exert the same kind of control. This situation, whereby the state acted comprehensively *in loco parentis*, changed with the increasing commercialization of television from the mid-1980s onwards. Parents started to feel the need to take control over their children's television viewing. Two separate dimensions of parental control can be identified: over viewing time and over content. This second dimension can be further divided into strategies based on the promotion of educational programmes and attempts to prohibit children from watching 'unhealthy' programmes.

#### *Control and resistance: negotiations over viewing time*

The scope of parental control over children's viewing can be demonstrated by the results of my questionnaire survey. The great majority claimed to exert control over how much children watch television, without significant differences between distinctive social strata as indexed by occupations (see Table 1). Similar congruity between social strata can be found in their

**TABLE 1**  
**Control over viewing time**

Occupation	Yes	No	No answer
Manual labourers (82)	86.6%	12.2%	1.2%
Party/state employees (48)	87.5%	12.5%	0.0%
Technical professionals (16)	87.5%	6.3%	6.3%
Cultural professionals (20)	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Others (9)	88.9%	11.0%	0.0%

*Note:* The number of cases in each category is in brackets;  $n = 176$  parents; missing case = 1.

control over what children watched. Here I have made a distinction between technical and cultural professionals because of the specific situation found in China, and perhaps in many other Third World countries in pursuit of modernization. The Chinese government places a strong emphasis on science and technology in nation-building (with some interruption during the Cultural Revolution). The best brains are often encouraged to become scientists or engineers and occupy a rather privileged social space. The cultural professionals, consisting mainly of school teachers in this case, have a lower educational background on average.

The consequence of this control is indicated in the available figures for the actual amount of time that Chinese children spent watching television. A large-scale survey conducted in Beijing at about the same time showed that children in their sixth year of primary school (12 years old) spent 1.3 hours per day on average watching television (Greenberg et al., 1989). The same survey concluded that there were more rules for television viewing than for any other media activity and that the most prominent rules concerned how much and how late children could watch on school days. The results of my survey of younger children (8 and 9 year olds) are broadly in line with this finding (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**Parents' estimation of viewing time**

Estimated viewing time	Number of parents	Percentage
1 hour or less	93	52.0%
1-2 hours	70	39.8%
2 hours or more	11	6.3%

Note:  $n = 176$  parents; missing case = 2.

Despite these modest estimations, especially in comparison with statistics compiled in Europe and the USA, there were still a considerable number of parents (38.1 percent) who thought that their children were watching too much television. There seemed to be a consensus among parents that sitting in front of the small screen was more or less a waste of time. This attitude is implied in the following detailed calculations by an academic commentator:

[Children of Shanghai] watching about one hour television per day is not that much compared with children in Japan, Europe and the US. Japanese children are more disciplined and spend much less time on television than their European and American counterparts. But they still spend about two and half hours per day on television, and that is, nine hundred and twelve hours in a year . . . . In Shanghai, if children watch one hour on weekdays and two hours on Sundays, that will add up to four hundred and seventeen hours in a year. That amounts to

thirty six percent of the total time they spend attending classes at school. (Wang, 1986: 597)

The same calculation is evident in the remark made by a mother:

My daughter is ever so obedient. She does not watch television daily. Only on Saturday afternoons and Sundays would she watch a few programmes for children. She is so self-disciplined that I never have to nag her for things like watching too much television. I have seen neighbours do that sometimes with their children.

The purpose of parental control over viewing time was to minimize the possibility of children being distracted from study by television. The negative effects of watching television, as mentioned by parents, were wasting time, affecting eyesight or sleep. Eventually it was about school performance that all the concerns about effects were articulated in the first place. A slightly earlier ethnographic study of family viewing in China provided more detailed evidence for this (Lull and Sun, 1988: 205–9). It mentioned that the most commonly expressed parental worry about television was that it might affect children's homework. To avoid distracting children from their homework, parents often had to give up watching their own favourite programmes (given the overcrowded living conditions in Shanghai generally). Parents from several families interviewed said that they had changed their viewing habits in order to create a favourable environment for their children to concentrate on studying. If adults wanted to watch television after children had gone to bed, they would always keep the volume as low as possible in order not to disturb their sleeping. Rules for television viewing were usually explicitly set up when children reached school age. One typical rule was that viewing was only allowed after children finished their homework. Rules became more stringent during examination time. Many parents believed that children should discipline themselves and regulate their viewing voluntarily.

These findings are entirely in line with my own questionnaire survey and interviews. The great majority (88.1 percent) required children to finish their homework before they were allowed to watch any television. Only a small minority (10.8 percent) were prepared to be flexible about the sequence of homework first and then television. Some parents expressed displeasure that children became careless with their homework when trying to hurry up with it in order to catch their favourite shows. In congruence with parents' requirements, nearly all the children (95.5 percent) surveyed said that they would try to finish their homework before watching television. The in-depth interviews later revealed that some children were not as self-disciplined as they claimed or wished to be. The attraction of the small screen is so hard to resist that they sometimes had to devise ways of bargaining for television over homework. One strategy, as some parents complained, was to hurry through homework, which would then enable

them to answer questions with ‘I have finished my homework’ (that is, ‘I have earned my access to TV’). Where they had failed to hurry up with homework, they might plead for permission to watch their favourite shows by promising to finish it afterwards. Thus, the finished or to-be-finished homework was converted from pretext for control to an excuse for viewing.

Children sometimes carried out ‘underground’ resistance to control, as illustrated by this boy’s story:

My parents lock our television and video in their bedroom [when they go to work]. They told me to study at home after coming back from school. They always come back from work at six o’clock in the evening. I hurry through my homework and go to friends’ places to play or watch television if I want to. I go home before they come back. They won’t find out, and my friends will not tell on me.

He could hardly conceal his complacency while telling the story. ‘You have your policy, I have my expediency’ — as the popular saying goes about the need to circumvent strict control from above. Other children, encouraged by his success, began to show off their own peculiar ways of resistance to control. Although these stories cannot be taken literally, they do indicate that these children were sometimes more difficult to control than adults would have liked them to be.

#### *Promotion and prohibition: control over content*

Parents not only took control over viewing time, but also over viewing content. On the one hand, they sought to strengthen any positive link that existed between educational programmes and schoolwork, making conscious efforts to convert the small screen into a home-based electronic educator. On the other hand, they tried to bar what they saw as the undesirable influence of television from reaching their children. My survey shows that most parents of all social strata claimed to have encouraged their children to watch programmes regarded as morally uplifting or intellectually educational (see Table 3).

However, it is noticeable that this tendency was more marked among Party/state employees, who had a strong interest in inculcating ‘correct’ values and activities, and among cultural professionals, who, to borrow from Bourdieu, tend to overvalue cultural credential and competencies as the major public indicator of cultural capital that constitutes the basis of their claims to privilege and power (Bourdieu, 1984). Unfortunately, the sudden curtailment of the fieldwork did not allow me to explore these dynamics in more depth. ‘Programmes of educational significance’ is a common phrase parents used to refer to what they encouraged their children to watch. Children’s programmes were at the top of the promotion

**TABLE 3**  
**Promotion of certain programmes**

Occupation	Yes	No	No answer
Manual labourers	84.1%	11.0%	4.9%
Party/state employees	91.7%	8.3%	0.0%
Technical professionals	75.0%	18.8%	6.3%
Cultural professionals	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Others	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Note:  $n = 176$  parents; missing case = 1.

list, not surprisingly so because most of them were highly educative intellectually or morally.

One mother told me that she insisted that her daughter watch *Confucius*, a television series shown at the time, because 'it teaches her the spirit of diligence'. Teachers also cited examples drawn from television programmes in class. One schoolgirl repeated to me the whole story of *Xilong and Xifeng*, told by her teacher in class to encourage pupils to study hard (as Xifeng) rather than to rely on 'fate and fortune' (*ming*) (as Xilong). This was quite typical of the way children were inculcated with positive values concerning education and social mobility in a general climate of sharp competition in the 1980s.

Tiantian, then a first-year primary school pupil, lived with her retired grandparents in order to go to a good school nearby. In addition to all her school and homework, she had to follow several courses designed for children on television. The time-table she stuck on the wall in her room read:

6:30	get up
7:00	have breakfast, sort out the schoolbag
7:35	go to school
11:30	come back home, do outdoor activities
12:00	have lunch
12:30	help with some housework
13:00	learn English, read or paint
13:30	go back to school
17:00	come back home, do homework
18:00	have supper
19:00	practise electronic synthesiser
20:00	do free activities
20:30	get ready for going to bed
20:50	go to bed

Although no specific time slot was allocated to television, Tiantian watched a number of carefully selected programmes, including *English for Children*, *Children Reading Chinese*, news and some other children's programmes. Her grandmother, who used to lecture in the university, allowed her to watch only 'meaningful' programmes. She put great emphasis on early education and felt a strong sense of responsibility for Tiantian, who was left to her care precisely because of a possible better education.

I spent the evening in their flat observing the situation. The self-discipline exhibited by the little girl was impressive. After supper, she went to do her homework and got it signed by her grandmother when finished (as the school dictated). Then she played the electronic synthesiser as part of her music education. She was in fact attending an after-school music class, which was one of the many kinds of paying classes teaching music, painting, calligraphy and other artistic skills. After a brief interval, she switched on television to learn English with a text book. After *English for Children*, there was also *Children Reading Chinese*, which she again followed carefully. By the time she fulfilled all these obligations, it was already eight o'clock, time for some unregulated free activities. Most of her evening had been taken up with 'meaningful' activities approved by parents, or grandparents in this case. This rather rigid pattern was designed and enforced to advance her education at an early stage.

Children's early education was and is considered so crucial for their future that many parents are willing to invest in it all that they can afford. Intense competition between children has become a competition between parents. No one wants to be left behind in the game of educating the only child. Tiantian's case may not be the most typical, but it is the ideal-typical. Most parents, be they factory workers, cadres (now civil servants), or highly educated professionals, seem to share one and the same ambition of turning their only child into a successful story via the gateway of better education. Their willingness to pay for its sake is directly reflected in the ever more buoyant children's market, whereby food and toys are sold as 'intelligence-enhancing' and, more recently, a computer game machine has been promoted as a 'study machine'.

The other aspect of parental control over content was related less to intellectual than to moral education, although some still used the former as an excuse to exert control. It could be regarded as a reaction on the part of parents against what they saw as the unacceptable face of commercialization in television programming. These parents, growing up during the Cultural Revolution when all sexual connotations were strictly eliminated from symbolic production, not only had to battle with a more 'permissive' society themselves, but also had to bring up the lone child in this rather estranged environment.

The ethnographic study of family viewing mentioned before came to the conclusion that very few parents thought there were programmes that

should not be viewed by children, a finding which was said to be best explained 'by the type of programming that exists on the Chinese television network and stations' (Lull and Sun, 1988: 220). It was further argued that, generally speaking, programmes were not thought to be a bad influence because of content, and that with the exception of concern about the adverse impact of kungfu shows on boys, very few families worried about the effects of exposure to certain kinds of content on their children. This conclusion is highly problematic because it assumes that reception can simply be read off from the televisual text. It becomes even more problematic when the text is actually being read by someone from a very different culture — that of America, or rather California in Lull's case. The fact is, what seems to be perfectly acceptable on American television can be, and often is, seen as scandalous on Chinese television. It was probably the case that the American researcher and his Taiwan-born research assistant did not manage to make people talk about something as unspeakable as 'kisses and hugs' on the public television screen. Unable to uphold their ethnographic principle in research practice, they simply slipped into the comfort of text — the very object of attack by the 'new' trend of reception analysis in audience research they embraced, which was rightly and timely criticized by one media researcher as 'the new revisionism in mass communication research' (Curran, 1990).

My survey shows that the great majority of parents claimed to prohibit children from viewing certain programmes (see Table 4). Once again, a general convergence of attitudes towards undesirable content can be noted, with the noticeable exception of technical professionals. This can be partly explained by the elite educational background of this social group. As higher education, intended or not, can open up one's cultural horizon, highly educated people tend to be more open-minded and tolerant towards alternative values and ways of life. In comparison, cultural professionals, mostly school teachers, have a lower level of formal education on average, and tend to hold a more rigid attitude towards prohibition. In fact, the liberal tendency of these technocrats was already noticeable in their replies

**TABLE 4**  
**Prohibition of certain programmes**

Occupation	Yes	No	No answer
Manual labourers	84.1%	13.4%	2.4%
Party/state employees	83.3%	14.6%	2.1%
Technical professionals	62.5%	31.3%	6.3%
Cultural professionals	85.0%	15.0%	0.0%
Others	55.6%	11.1%	33.3%

*Note:*  $n = 176$  parents; missing case = 1.

to the question whether or not they encourage their children to watch certain programmes on television (see Table 3).

When asked to specify what sorts of material they would not like their children to watch, more than half (62.5 percent) referred to love stories, but used different phrases, such as 'unhealthy programmes', 'obscene conduct', 'programmes unsuitable for children', 'adult programmes', 'films imported from the West', 'things about men and women', 'kissing', 'hugging', and 'bedroom scenes'. Far fewer parents (11.4 percent) mentioned kungfu or other violent programmes.

The in-depth interviews conducted after the survey helped to further clarify the situation. One primary school teacher argued strongly that children should not be allowed to watch everything on television. According to her, 'Such programmes are not suitable [for children] and do them harm. They will make children think and ask about embarrassing things. This may affect their schoolwork.' She regretted the fact that it was hard to keep the situation under total control, saying 'even if you smash the television at home, they may go to the neighbours to watch these things'. Another teacher thought that it was perhaps less harmful to younger children, citing an example of her four-year-old son imitating the act of kissing on television. She was hoping that the boy was too young to be imprinted permanently. One father was very proud of his own 'innocent' childhood, as contrasted with what he saw as the current moral degeneration:

In the old days, girls and boys did not speak to each other. We all studied hard. Now children are learning too much from films and television, while they should listen to parents and teachers. I remember once, they were showing a couple in bed on television. My son asked me what they were doing. I didn't answer. He asked his mother. She told him that it was most obscene. They show these things on public television and put parents in a awkward situation.

The 'good old days' were often evoked to highlight the current problems. A mother of two children lamented Chairman Mao's China, when she said:

There was at least not so much of this crap in films, television, books and magazines. If the Old Man were still alive, he would never have tolerated them. I can't stop the TV station from broadcasting these things, but I can make sure my children are not to watch them.

A retired grandfather told me a story in a well-ordered fashion to put forward his argument strongly.

I have this neighbour, Grandma Li. She has a little grandson, who just started school last autumn. But these days, he keeps asking his Grandma for a wife. How come? Some time ago, Grandma Li came across her grandson together with two other boys running after a little girl and tried to kiss her. The little girl wouldn't let them. They dragged her down to the floor and forced kisses on her.

Grandma was passing by and went up to stop the boys. But the grandson protested, 'people are kissing each other on television, why won't you let us do it?' She was stuck and came up with the answer 'one only kisses one's wife'. From then on, the little boy kept asking for a wife [laughter]. What a silly boy! . . . But, we cannot blame him. It is television that corrupts morals and has to be blamed for it.

He went on to criticise *Red Sorghum*, the Golden Bear winner in the 1988 Berlin Film Festival, complaining that immoral sex was presented as true love.

Only one mother, out of all who were interviewed, was ready to compromise, which she thought was a more feasible strategy. She said,

I explain to my daughter that love between men and women is a good thing, but only for adults, and that she will only understand it when she grows up. But I don't encourage her to waste her time on love stories. She seems to listen to me.

The means of control vary from persuasion and regulation to coercion. Switching off the television was rather common. The father who was proud of his own innocent childhood was determined to take action against programmes unsuitable for children. He said, 'As soon as *Zuoye Xingchen* (Stars of Last Night) comes on, I would turn off the TV. What do children know about family life? They don't have to know it.' However, it seems that few parents waited till this stage. Rather, rules, explicit or implicit, were instituted to prevent children from watching what they 'should not' watch. Only if all these failed did parents resort to force — switching off the television so nobody could watch it.

These recorded evidences invariably point to a widespread and deep-seated concern with the breakdown of conventional moral standards and behavioural norms under the challenge of proliferated images and meanings in the age of popular television. In this particular case, many parents intervened to defend their cherished values against what they saw as their promiscuous representation on the television screen. But the question is, for how long and to what extent can they really defend those values? Will there be a time when what they are defending become indefensible? That will perhaps be the time of real changes.

## Conclusion

A few years have passed since I first collected the original data for this study. The lapse of time, I hope, will not dissolve its limited value as a snapshot of one cultural dimension of contemporary China at the historical junction of market changes, taken from the angle of critical sociology. As part of the basic sociological concern, I was searching for the missing link between biographies and histories, so as to understand the relationship

between individual actions constrained and enabled by social conditions. This missing link, I believe, cannot be found in pure theoretical exercises, which can be very useful in themselves. Instead, it has to be looked for elsewhere, in the very specificity of people's concrete lived world, through empirical inquiries guided by a sociological sensitivity towards the dialectic between constraint and autonomy, or — more appropriate to the Chinese context — between fate and its various improvisations.

My preference for critical sociology here to the current fad of 'cultural studies' approach is not an arbitrary one. Perspectives now gathered under the rubric of 'cultural studies' have deviated far from its original project in the 1960s and 1970s, and become increasingly uncritical in celebrating cultural resistance. These perspectives tend to single out the cultural sphere as more or less autonomous from other spheres of social life. If this illusion is somehow permitted in the West by the entanglement of political and economic processes with cultural and symbolic production and consumption, this is not yet so in China. No one there can afford to confuse culture with politics, or symbolic power with real power.

Doing sociology in China is an inherently problematic enterprise. Sociology's Western origin dictates conceptual limits and methodological difficulties when applied elsewhere. In China, both the relationship between society and the state, and that between individual and society, are very different from those in the West. Chinese society is heavily dependent on and directed by the state. In the absence of a Western-style civil society, the state is protective and suppressive at the same time.<sup>4</sup> The forceful imposition of the one-child policy by the central government at a huge human cost is one example of a strong state intervening in a weak society. In a similar vein, to what extent can members of Chinese society be regarded as individuals in the classical liberal sense is another question. Few Chinese can afford to indulge themselves in the illusion of individual freedom and autonomy. The traditional Confucian state of the past tied people down to the family-clan system. Its recent reincarnation in the Maoist state sacrificed the individual to Communist collectivism. The individual has little other meaning but that of being part of a collectivity — be it family, community or society. Harmony between people is valued more than people themselves. Undoubtedly, social and cultural changes under the influence of Western ideals have made a considerable impact on Chinese society as a whole. Yet an essential difference remains to make it necessary for the researcher to reflect on the conventional wisdom of individual autonomy *vis à vis* structural constraint within the context of each specific inquiry into Chinese problems.

I take my theoretical stance broadly with those who have constantly attempted to go beyond the conceptual divide between action and structure, or between autonomy and constraint.<sup>5</sup> The very split of the sociological enterprise into two opposing approaches — individualism and structuralism

— reflects the nature and scope of that divide. If narrow individualism, with its focus on the self-contained life-world, clearly does not provide a useful perspective on the fate of individuals closely tied within familial and social webs, ahistorical structuralism is equally invalid in explaining the fast pace of social and cultural changes in China. A third route, opened and trodden by forerunners of critical sociology — whether it is called constructive structuralism, the theory of structuration, or simply the sociological imagination, will hopefully cut through the false divide, and lead to a better understanding of personal troubles in relation to public issues in contemporary China.

As the market further penetrated Chinese society in the first half of the 1990s, culture became even more 'pluralistic' in production and consumption. On the one hand the market has helped to liberate the intellectual and creative energies heavily suppressed by ideological puritanism in the past. This is particularly so in film-making and literature. The so-called 'fifth generation of directors' have already gained their due international recognition. Literature, rooted in a long and rich native tradition and constantly stimulated by fresh ideas and conceptions from the West, is the most creative area in the sphere of culture. These two together are now regarded as high-taste culture (*gao pinwei wenhua*). Meanwhile, the market also makes it possible to churn out on a massive scale pure entertainment for sale. This has already been described as 'mass culture' (*dazhong wenhua*), which has a rather different connotation from that in the West. The legacy of the Marxist-Leninist ideology retains a utopian conception of the masses as the masters of history, and hence of mass culture as democratic and progressive. Although this conception has been losing its credibility, mass culture can still be seen as something neutral if not outright positive. Culture and its judgement are being debated within and outside academic circles, and cultural theories are developing, often independently of their Western forerunners.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the market is also responsible for the increasing production and circulation of pornography and semi-pornography at a time when prostitution has become a serious social problem.

The social and cultural environment has been changing fast since the time of the original study, most probably for the worse if judged by the parents whom I interviewed. Novelties are cropping up all the time in the entertainment sector — hotlines, chat shows, computer games, theme parks, multicomplex cinemas and so on. Those parents who were most keen on taming the small screen for educational purposes may well ask, what do all these novelties have to do with children's intellectual and moral advancement? To make things worse for them, the insatiable demand for and quick adoption of new technologies outpace government control, leaving it behind to sort out legal and bureaucratic arrangements. Community based cable network, for example, has been widely used to increase

the number of channels received at home. The Hong Kong based Star TV (*Weishi Zhongwen Tai*) is broadcasting an entertainment channel in Mandarin targeted at the mainland audience. I was struck by its immense popularity with young people and its wide reception in my home city of Jiaozuo during my visits back to China in July–August 1993 and January–February 1995. This channel openly promotes values which are alien to the generation of parents ‘born under the Red Flag’. The purpose of life is presented as having fun, making money and spending it. The peculiar version of ‘Asian Pacific consumerism’, pioneered by Japan and followed by the four small ‘dragons’, has been catching on among the mainland Chinese, via the electronic media of communication in this case.<sup>7</sup> The increasing commercialization of the media, with the full participation of International Corporations, can be instanced by two commercial music stations — Beijing Music Radio, which broadcasts *Nescafe Music Time* and KFC’s *Kentucky Music Show*, and the Shanghai-based East Radio Station, which airs *Remy Martin Old Melodies* and *Volvo Hi-Fi Music* (Atkinson, 1994).

The children who participated in my survey have already reached their teens, widely believed to be a crucial stage of personal development. Their parents are, in a way, facing a much tougher situation now in attempting to keep the child under proper control. The next stage of research, given the opportunity, is to follow up the original project at this very moment to see how these parents are coping with the serious challenge of raising a teenage child in a multimedia environment, in which different value systems contend with each other. It is well within expectation, for instance, to get a flood of complaints from parents about children’s old habit of television viewing and their new passion for computer games. But, whether the same regime of control they appeared to have managed to exert, as recorded in this study, can be maintained or reasserted is a question still to be answered.

## Notes

I would like to thank my colleagues in Stirling Media Research Institute, Professor Philip Schlesinger and Mr Peter Meech, for reading the draft and making constructive comments on it.

1. The official date for the establishment of television broadcasting in China is 1 May 1958. This was a result of a hastened decision upon learning that the Nationalist government in Taiwan had decided to start its television broadcasting on 10 October, its National Day, of the same year, with the technical support of RCA. Yet the real impact of television was not felt until its popularization in post-Mao China in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

2. For an interesting and detailed account of the shared experiences and common characteristics of this age group, see Gold (1991).

3. The scope of the survey was limited by the nature of this PhD research — unfunded and conducted single-handedly. The data were gathered through a questionnaire survey of 200 children and 200 parents (divided equally between Beijing and Jiaozuo), and in-depth interviews with two groups of children (one in Beijing and one in Jiaozuo), and one group of parents (in Jiaozuo). The original project, which should have included another interview with parents in Beijing and two groups of teachers in Beijing and Jiaozuo respectively, was not completed because of the sudden change in political climate. I left the country on the first day of martial law.

4. For a useful account of the Chinese state, see Rozman (1990).

5. To mention but a few critical sociologists whose works have influenced my own sociological inquiries, C. Wright Mills' insistence on searching for connections between specific milieu and social structure, and between private troubles and public issues (*The Sociological Imagination*); Zygmunt Bauman's conceptual transcendence over the 'science of unfreedom' and 'the existentialist restoration' (*Towards a Critical Sociology: An Essay on Commonness and Emancipation*); Anthony Giddens' elaboration on the theory of structuration (*The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*); Pierre Bourdieu's continuous formulation of his constructivist structuralism (e.g. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*).

6. For an interesting discussion on 'cultural studies' in China, see Chicago Cultural Studies Group (1992). The group consists of members who have cultural backgrounds in China, India and Africa, in addition to the West.

7. In another article, derived from the same research project, I have explored in detail the relationship between children's television and the spread of consumerism through a case study of the promotion and sale of American toys in China in the late 1980s (see Zhao and Murdock, 1996).

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