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Dan Chen
University of Richmond, dchen@richmond.edu

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Review Essay

Seeing Politics through Popular Culture

Dan Chen
Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of Richmond
dchen@richmond.edu

Abstract
This essay surveys the scholarship on Chinese cultural politics in the reform era and argues that popular culture is a crucial realm where politics is manifested, shaped, and challenged. Based on an overview of this literature, this essay finds that Chinese popular culture remains subversive despite evolving political rule and changing socioeconomic structures. Meanwhile, the state has kept up with popular culture and managed to dominate various cultural spaces ranging from television, film, literature, music, and comedy, to celebrities and public discussions on morality. The studies reviewed here collectively illustrate a fragmented yet vigorous popular culture that actively responds to changing political and socioeconomic conditions, challenging while also reinforcing how political power is received at the grassroots level. To explain the simultaneous advancement of state control over popular culture and the cultural creativity in popular expression, this essay proposes a framework centered on authority to capture and forecast the dynamics of power struggles in popular culture. To create, compete for, and manifest authority is a key mechanism of cultural power, and it can reveal the contentions among political, market, and traditional cultural forces.

Keywords
Popular Culture, Political Control, Subversion, China

The first decade of Xi Jinping's leadership has veered away from political norms established in the previous two decades. The breaking of the informal two-term limit for the top Party leader (Li 2022), the reduced incentives for local policy experimentation (Teets and Hasmath 2020), the shrinking space for grassroots participation (Fu and Distelhorst 2018), and the intensified control over the media (Brady 2017) have led to pessimistic views on China's increasingly authoritarian rule (Shirk 2022). But how do different segments of Chinese society receive this political shift given their varied values and interests? More broadly, how do the socioeconomic transformations of the reform era (1980s-present) shape people's meaning-making processes, which form the foundation for political judgments?

In the field of Chinese politics, much scholarly attention has been focused on formal and informal political institutions, such as those provided by bureaucracy and elite politics, as well as related realms under their control or influence, such as public opinion and civil society groups. Building on these research areas, this essay argues that popular culture is another crucial realm

where politics is manifested, shaped, and challenged. This symbolic realm deserves attention from political scientists because it is where meaning-making processes unfold, which is the basis of any political expression or behavior. Popular culture is a key outlet in which to observe people's reactions to political shifts. Furthermore, "forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional *cultural* practices." (Bhabha 2004, 29, italics original) While the state often dominates, though by no means monopolizes (e.g., Schmalzer 2016; White 1998), the manifestation of political power in the material realm, the symbolic realm may allow a more open space where ideas can emerge and gain power despite political restrictions. If so, paying attention to the symbolic realm would enable political scientists to gain a broader perspective on the forces of change beyond material political power.

For example, early in China's reform era, Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz (1989, 2) pointed out that "our lack of knowledge about this realm of ideas, feelings, and motivations inhibits us from understanding momentous events such as those of the Beijing Spring." Similarly, recent momentous events such as the nationwide protests against the zero-Covid policy in late 2022 still need to be unpacked (Yang and Chen 2021), particularly how political power influences private lives at their core and what that means for changing dynamics of symbolic power.

This essay surveys the scholarship on Chinese cultural politics in the reform era and argues that Chinese popular culture remains subversive despite evolving political rule and changing socioeconomic structures. Globalization and digital technology play an important role in facilitating this process. Meanwhile, the state has kept up with popular culture and managed to dominate various cultural spaces ranging from television, film, literature, music, and comedy, to celebrities and public discussions on morality. The studies reviewed here collectively illustrate a fragmented yet vigorous popular culture that actively responds to changing political and socioeconomic conditions, challenging while also reinforcing how political power is received at the grassroots level.

1. The Field of Cultural Politics

Many works in cultural politics come from scholars of cultural studies, media studies, communication studies, literature, anthropology, history, and sociology. What is the significance of cultural politics to political science, and how can political scientists productively engage with cultural politics? I argue that cultural politics provides a promising opening to expand how we understand politics in China. Contestation for power happens in both material and symbolic realms. Cultural production and representation can reveal and meaningfully influence the power dynamics at the grassroots level. During a time when digital media profoundly changes how we understand and discuss politics, cultural products and cultural power need to be taken seriously when considering how politics is embodied, contested, and transformed. Meanwhile, the symbolic realm is closely related to the material realm, as material power can privilege certain sense-making logic trajectories but can also inspire subversive thinking. Therefore, the political significance of popular culture lies in how it intertwines with China's momentous economic and political changes (Link et al. 2002, 2).

Seeing politics through popular culture also enables political scientists to understand how political power trickles down into the quotidian life. Understanding how politics is manifested, not only at the institutional level but also at the grassroots level, will lead to a well-rounded view of political dynamics. More important, when trying to understand politics at the grassroots level, we have to pay attention to the complex mechanisms and interactions among different forces that compete to shape China's modernity, including political, market, and traditional cultural forces (Dutton 1998). In other words, political forces do not operate alone, but they shape and are shaped by other material and symbolic powers. Popular culture provides a site for us to observe how they interact, compete, and manifest themselves.

For example, the seminal book *Unofficial China* (1989) defines popular culture in a way "that centers around the most salient problem in modern China—the tension between state and society...popular culture, as used in these chapters, includes any kind of culture that has its origin in the social side of the tension between state and society" (Link et al. 1989, 5). This sphere of popular culture is separate from other kinds of tension such as "tensions between traditional ideas and modern ideas, between the different self-images of ethnic groups, between the mores of cosmopolitan intellectuals and those of workers, peasants, and soldiers" (Link et al. 1989, 5). More than a decade later, the second book in this series on Chinese cultural politics, *Popular China* (2002), shifts its focus from state-society relationships to tensions around different aspects of globalization, including the simultaneous lures of new opportunities and pressures of new-found aspirations in the global market economy (Link et al. 2002, 3).

Building on this dynamic conceptualization, this essay centers on popular culture that embodies a reaction to state power. As such, cultural politics, as reviewed in this essay, exists across social groups stratified by political, market, and traditional cultural forces. It softens the distinctions between state and society, official and unofficial, reflecting the changing realities four decades into the reform era.

Scholars of Chinese cultural politics have built a compelling framework to capture the nature of China's transformation. A central tension characterizing the reform era is the persistently strong desire of the Chinese state to control various aspects of society on the one hand, and the retreat of state welfare and the adoption of a neoliberal mentality on the other (Jeffreys 2009; Li 2019; Rofel 2007; Sigley 2006; Song 2022). The persistent sense of insecurity propels the state to intrude in various aspects of social life, creating oppression, grievance, and conflict. But this characteristic coexists with a retreat of state welfare, molding a citizenry that is self-motivated, disciplined, and always striving. As such, the Chinese state in the reform era demonstrates "a hybrid socialist-neoliberal (or perhaps 'neoleninist') form of political rationality that is at once authoritarian in a familiar political and technocratic sense yet, at the same time, seeks to govern certain subjects, but not all, through their own autonomy." (Sigley 2006, 489) The creation of the "desiring subjects" that manifest neoliberal subjectivities is done primarily through popular culture, such as window displays, newspapers, soap operas, gay bars, and other public culture venues (Rofel 2007). Importantly, such a creation can be culturally monotone, including the formation of a "middle-class" society and a state-sanctioned notion of Chinese nationalism, which is often centered on patriotism, anti-Western and nativist sentiments, and gender anxieties (Song 2022). Three decades into the reform era, Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz, in the third book of their Chinese cultural politics series, *Restless China* (2013), find that restlessness, which is

derived from a "values vacuum" in the postsocialist, materialism-dominated Chinese society, characterized people's search for new forms of spirituality and ethics to replace a collapsing moral order. Restlessness is a complex and multifaceted collective reaction toward the dramatic consequences of intensifying authoritarian-neoliberal forces.

In the broader context, the capitalist forces of individualism, consumerism, and atomization and their postmodern countercurrents of class, gender, and race have been observed in the comparative literature on cultural politics (Jordan and Weedon 1995; Lowe and Lloyd 1997). The Chinese cultural politics literature illustrates these dueling structural forces; meanwhile, it also explains dynamics unique in the Chinese context. For example, situating the growing Chinese consumerism in the unique ideological environment in China, Karl Gerth (2020) argues that Communist Party policies actually developed a variety of capitalism and expanded consumerism, despite its socialist rhetoric. Although this outcome negated the goals of socialist revolution in the Maoist era, it allows the state to manage what people desire. Another connecting theme is the global flow of capital, information, and population. Studies of Chinese transnationalism point out how transnational mobility has engendered the detachment of Chinese subjectivity from the state (Ong and Nonini 1997; Yang 1999). In the 21st century, the rising influence of social media further complicates the global flow of information. The super app WeChat has allowed Chinese migrants all over the world to experience "a transition from being a digital citizen in the Chinese authoritarian political environment to one in a different political system." (Sun and Yu 2022, 5) Domestically, social media has allowed new forms of civic participation in the public discourse, such as self-media (Wang et al. 2000), as well as new forms of consumerism and performative labor, such as live-streaming platforms (Wang 2020; Zhang et al. 2019). The global "MeToo" movement has inspired online discussions about sexual harassment in China (Huang and Sun 2021). Meanwhile, China's engagement with the Global South has opened up a new space to explore how historical legacies, cultural representations, and complex negotiations interact as part of worldmaking processes (Rojas and Rofel 2022).

The remainder of this essay is organized around key questions in Chinese cultural politics in the reform era: How exactly does the state exert dominance over popular culture? For example, how does the state mobilize cultural production to promote neoliberal subjectivities and cultivate a compliant citizenry? Meanwhile, how does Chinese popular culture respond to state actions, market forces, and traditional cultural values? Based on state influence, this essay categorizes existing studies into three broad groups: (1) those investigating state domination in popular culture; (2) those studying hybrid cultural forms that emerged by blending the influence of traditional culture, state-promoted norms, and globalized modern values; and (3) those examining alternative and subversive ideas and values that emerged as a response to certain political and socioeconomic conditions. Below, this essay outlines the main strands of findings in this literature, before turning to a discussion of how a political perspective on authority can build on this literature and advance our understanding of power struggles in the symbolic realm.

2. State Domination in Popular Culture

The literature on Chinese cultural politics in the reform era outlines at least two areas where state domination has been exerted: ideological domination and cultural governance. Across the different areas, the fundamental logic remains to maintain political power. Indeed, "winning over

the hearts and minds of people through carefully chosen discourses that resonate in the population was an important factor of its [the CCP's] ascendancy to power, and this has remained a key feature of the mechanics of CCP rule" (Wielander 2018, 8). However, the tactics and forms in which state domination is exerted vary throughout the period.

2.1 Ideological Domination

In cultural products, such as television dramas and films, the state has inserted its own preferred ideals and norms in an attempt to mold the population into its imagined model citizens. For example, studying Chinese television dramas, Ying Zhu (2009) finds that dynasty dramas in the late 1990s and early 2000s held Chinese imperial rulers up as paragons of the Confucian ideal, thereby echoing the appeal to Confucian values embedded in the political ideology of the time: building a socialist harmonious society. When localizing Western television programs, the state has also found ways to infuse political ideologies into the programming, such as in the Chinese adaptation of *Ugly Betty* (Fung and Zhang 2011). Such state intervention is consequential as media representations profoundly influence perceptions of social reality. For example, studying the representations of maids in Chinese television series and the subsequent subjectivity-forming processes, Wanning Sun (2009, 54, italics original) finds that "popular culture and its dominant media forms do not merely *reflect* social change through their visualization and dramatization of social life, but also, and more importantly, are *indexical to* and *constitutive of* that change." Indeed, the state's dominance in cultural production generates a considerable amount of political leverage. As Jing Wang (2001, 71) puts it, "The state's rediscovery of culture as a site where new ruling technologies can be deployed and converted simultaneously into economic capital constitutes one of its most innovative strategies of statecraft since the founding of the People's Republic."

The Chinese state's ideological emphasis is constantly changing along with the political context, and popular culture provides an important vehicle to propagate the ideological focus of the day. A neoliberal mentality and the related notions of happiness are recent examples of state dominance in Chinese popular culture. Consistent with a neoliberal mentality that prioritizes individual efforts over structural changes, achieving happiness is framed as an individual's decision to conform to state-sanctioned traditional values. Such state discourses generate co-opting and disciplinary effects on the Chinese public.

The neoliberal-disciplinary complex

The Chinese state has appropriated and promoted a kind of neoliberal mentality that emphasizes individual efforts over structural barriers, which fosters a productive self that is compatible with China's continued integration with the global capitalist economy while deflecting criticisms of the state in creating structural barriers. It constitutes an important way the state penetrates popular culture to reap political benefits. While the content of such a mentality is neoliberal in nature, the way the state promotes it has disciplinary effects. For example, examining the dynamics of gender and the notions of Chineseness, Geng Song (2022, 6) reveals "the disciplinary elements of Chinese television culture, characterized by the self-improvement, self-discipline, and positive attitudes required by the socialist market economy." Chinese young people, born and raised in the reform era, have adapted to the competitive labor market by

cultivating "the enterprising self" that aspires to autonomy, strives for personal fulfillment, interprets its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, and binds meaning in existence through acts of choice (Hanser 2002). In her widely cited book *Desiring China*, anthropologist Lisa Rofel (2007) observes a common theme of desire from the public culture in the first two decades of the reform era. She reveals the intricate relationships between the "political," the "popular," and the "personal" that were "suffused with reimagined possibility of national identity" in light of the gradual dismantling of socialism (Rofel 2007, 33). Popular expressions in public culture, therefore, involve political debates about issues with neoliberal policies while also offering "complicated possibilities for oppositional dreams" (Rofel 2007, 34).

Another state effort to mold ideal citizens for the authoritarian-neoliberal order is the creation of the discourse on "quality," or *suzhi*. According to Andrew Kipnis (2007, 390), *suzhi* "offers a way of speaking explicitly about class without using the word 'class'" and therefore is decidedly unliberal in its assertion of morally justified hierarchies. Because the Party claims the right to declare who has the highest *suzhi*, it can maintain legitimacy by suggesting that raising the population's *suzhi*, rather than institutional reform, will strengthen the nation. In this way, the discursive positioning of individuals as responsible for their own lives is consistent with the neoliberal mentality.

This neoliberal mentality is supported by positive psychology, which "…maps out, with the same measure of scientific precision applied to mental pathologies, the psychological states identified with joy, flourishing, expressive well being and happiness itself" (Binkley 2011, 373). Objectifying happiness, an arguably deeply subjective concept, is the premise of the state's promotion of "positive energy," not only as a descriptor but also as a way of thinking to fit a neoliberal socioeconomic order that generates material wealth to justify the political rule. To be clear, many governments around the world, including Western democracies, promote a notion of happiness based on positive thinking/psychology; also, the literature has been debating if and how neoliberalism applies to current Chinese society (Wielander 2018, 4). Nevertheless, the idea of seeking individualized solutions through self-efforts while diminishing the role of structural problems features prominently in the various notions of happiness in Chinese popular culture.

Official notions of happiness

Gerda Wielander and Derek Hird's edited volume *Chinese Discourses on Happiness* (2018) is a significant contribution that unpacks the intricate dynamics between popular culture and politics. The volume examines various notions of happiness, as embodied by the state, the media, and individuals, and how happiness is conditioned by ethnicity, class, gender, and traditional culture and philosophies such as Confucianism. The broad scope of this volume's inquiry lays bare the role of the state and politics in shaping the fundamental pursuits of people across different social groups. Indeed, a common theme that shows up in various perceptions of happiness in this volume is "an important link between ideology, government discourses, and the way they inform and are in turn informed by discussions, deliberations, and feelings circulated in society" (Wielander 2018, 19). More important, the chapters in this volume collectively point to a reasonably successful strategy that centers state-promoted values on family, which "strike a chord with the wider population" (Wielander 2018, 20). This conservative cultural outlook is compatible with the state's political need for control and dominance. Traditional culture,

therefore, provides an outlet for political expression that reveals the state's cultural logic of rule and the population's cultural character shaped by it.

For example, examining the promotion of official happiness through public service advertising, Giovanna Puppin (2018) finds that the focus on chopsticks vaguely chimes with Confucian notions of happiness. "Chopsticks, representative of Chinese culture, play an essential part at every stage of a person's life; the family, representative of the Chinese nation, provides a place of belonging for all those who conform to the promoted values." (Wielander 2018, 14) In these public service advertisements, chopsticks became a symbol for state-promoted, family-centered happiness. Though the notion of family is by no means monopolized by the state, promoting and representing family allows the state to assume a kind of moral authority that resonates deeply with the population. Examining the Confucian self-cultivation of "relational, dialogical, and embodied social practices for developing the 'moral character and inner capacity for happiness' (幸福品格/能力)," Yanhua Zhang (2018) argues that the Confucian project for happiness should be understood as part of Chinese efforts to negotiate an alternative narrative of modernity which can accommodate Chinese cultural sensibilities and mediate the tensions between the existing social formations and the market-based ideologies and practices in contemporary China (Wielander 2018, 16-7).

Meanwhile, ethnic minorities' popular culture shows a much weaker efficacy of the state's propagation of official narratives on happiness. Jigme Yeshe Lama (2018) finds that the CCP's hegemonic discourse on happiness is not accepted in Tibet. Lama analyzes the "official" and "hidden" transcripts about Tibetan happiness through a close reading of various media sources. In contrast with an official depiction of Tibet as a "happy" place linked to liberation, modernization, and economic development, Tibetan spiritual culture, specifically Tibetan Buddhism, counters the official version of modernity and carries great importance with the local population.

2.2 Cultural Governance

In addition to state influence over the substance of popular culture, the field of cultural politics also examines state governance of the cultural industry (Chin 2018). Before the 1980s, politics monopolized the cultural realm, leading to a weak sense of cultural policy (Pang 2011). The Reform and Opening policy saved China's popular culture from extreme politicization, leaving it as a site that needed to be managed administratively by the state through institutional arrangements. The way the state reforms the cultural system reflects the dual pull of market forces and political imperatives. In the late 1990s, the media conglomeration was organized by "administrative fiat," resulting in bureaucratic competition, inefficiency, duplication, and waste (Lee 2003). Catalyzed by the unsatisfactory pace of the marketization of the state media and the fumbling conglomeration of organizations, the government intervened in the early 2000s with a more sweeping, systematic program of "cultural system reform" to accelerate the restructuring of the media and cultural sectors (Zhao 2008).

At the same time, China was being integrated into the world economy and therefore needed "cultural security" and "soft power" (Keane 2013). After joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China needed to build a more robust national media culture to successfully

compete with foreign media; to that end, the government more actively pursued the promotion of China's cultural industries, a key component of cultural reforms in the 2000s. For example, Internet companies have revitalized the Chinese media industry by providing online platforms disseminating television content in China; this practice later became part of the government's digital economy strategy (Keane 2016).

The formal political institutions in charge of cultural governance include the Department of Propaganda and the Ministry of Culture, which spearheaded concerted efforts to utilize cultural resources on behalf of powerful patrons (Kuang 2018; Perry 2017). In the digital age, new state organs such as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) were created to develop a comprehensive system for cyberspace governance, the focus of which include ensuring Internet security, promoting information and Internet economy, and managing all online content (Miao and Lei 2016). In addition to a top-down style of governance, the CAC has been mobilizing various social forces to participate in Internet governance, including opinion leaders, college students, and the "voluntary fifty-cent army," a group of voluntary regime defenders (Han 2018). While the state attempts domination, it has to work with Internet companies to manage and shape online popular culture. The platformization and then infrastructualization of WeChat is an illustrative example of the mutually beneficial state-business relationship cultivated in China's techno-nationalist context (Plantin and de Seta 2019). Meanwhile, the state has learned to use social media to spread "soft propaganda" (Zou 2023), some of which is effective at manipulating anger and anti-foreign attitudes (Mattingly and Yao 2022).

To more systematically delineate patterns of cultural governance, Luzhou Li in *Zoning China* (2019) investigates why the Chinese government regulates online videos relatively leniently while tightly controlling what appears on broadcast television. Li argues that television has primarily been the province of the state, while the market has dominated the development of the online video domain. Thus, online videos became a space where people could question state media and the state's preferred ideological narratives about the nation, history, and society.

Cultural elites sometimes play an important role in cultural governance. Examining urban cultural heritage preservation in the local policy-making process, Yuan Yao and Rongbin Han (2016, 304) find that "cultural elites function as the hub of grassroots mobilization. By holding otherwise dispersive social forces together and facilitating resources and information exchange among them, cultural elites empower the preservation movement and make it no longer negligible." This function is based on cultural elites' intermediary position between officialdom and citizenry, which allows them to maximize their influence within both the state and the society.

Celebrities, as a different group of cultural elites, offer us another angle to observe how popular culture is disciplined and co-opted by the state. Analyzing celebrities' social media posts, Dan Chen and Gengsong Gao (2022) find that many celebrities have started to regularly repost official messages on Weibo to signal political loyalty to the state, after a series of crackdowns on celebrities' problematic behaviors, such as tax evasion and sex scandals in the mid-2010s. Celebrities' political signaling is a sign that the state continues to discipline and co-opt celebrities to promote patriotism, foster traditional values, and spread political propaganda (Xu and Yang 2021). Meanwhile, celebrities have played an important role in cultivating grassroots

volunteering communities through their philanthropic engagements (Jeffreys and Xu 2017). However, as the celebrity philanthropy industry continues to develop, its relationship with the state has become more professionalized and organized, enhancing its scope of action and influence to advance state-led development initiatives (Deng and Jeffreys 2019).

3. Hybrid Cultural Emergence

While some state efforts to shape popular culture have created intended effects, other areas of popular culture have become a hybrid space blending traditional culture, state-promoted norms, and globalized modern values. For example, popular rituals, such as funerals and weddings, flourished in the 1980s. Rather than surviving the Maoist purges, Helen Siu (1989, 121) argues that

> ...present-day rituals are new reconstructions of the 1980s and that their meanings are linked to new perceptions of power relations in rural society. The attack on popular culture launched by the socialist state in the 1940s destroyed most of the social bases for popular rituals and replaced their political functions. Rituals related to individual life-cycles were stripped of their wider social linkages and confined within the household. Thus, the resurgence of popular rituals in the 1980s represents the recycling of cultural fragments in a rural society that has been effectively penetrated by monopolizing state power. In Hong Kong and Taiwan the diluting of ritual practices is associated with the secularizing force of the market, but in mainland China the diluting is linked to state intervention.

Popular China (2002) offers a comprehensive overview of the zeitgeist of the 1990s and early 2000s. Migrant workers, the symbol of the state's economic reform, embodied deep contradictions and diverging experiences at the beginning of China's globalization. On the one hand, migrant workers were sometimes literally locked within the walls of their factories and earning very little, leading to a "culture of survival" that tends to disadvantage rural women workers the most, due to reinforced customary family bonds (Chan 2002). On the other hand, despite the alienation of the urban world, some migrants still found personal benefits out of the experience, such as forging new forms of multifaceted identity and finding real satisfaction (Zhang 2002). For example, *dagong*[1] (打工) fictions and poems have been interpreted as outcomes of a creative urge that prompted some migrant workers to "put their sufferings into words, not in spite of, but precisely because of, the lack of intellectual stimulation in their work environment" (Sun 2022, 658). Examining documentary films about China's rural migrants, Wanning Sun (2013) finds a diverse politics of recognition in how the camera mediates the unequal relationship between the filmmaker and the rural migrant subject. This unequal relationship is complicated by the political context of social harmony and the economic context of profit above all else, which create tensions in how rural migrants are recognized.

In urban areas, traditional norms reappeared when the state retreated from people's cultural lives. For example, the dream of home ownership for urban residents led to male dominance in decisions regarding interior decoration and furnishing, reflecting long-held traditions of male

[1] A possible translation is "work to earn a living", and it is often tied to migrant workers.

privilege (Davis 2002). For sexual minorities, the traditional familial expectations about marrying and having children continue to create great stress and anguish (Geyer 2002). Meanwhile, new and hybrid forms of feminine ideals emerged, accentuating a "strong yet elegant educated lady" who has advice about how to reconcile with a world still dominated by male privileges (Andrews and Shen 2002). The globalized notion of a strong, intelligent, and independent working woman has replaced the dedicating and muscularized woman image promoted in the socialist era. Other interactions between traditional and modern cultural values are shown in how urban feminists recorded and amplified the voices of rural women (Pickowicz and Wang 2002). However, the kaleidoscope of urban life is represented in popular media such as tabloid newspapers in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the middle-class and the laid-off workers (Zhao 2002), exhibiting a kind of "social Darwinist neoliberalism that is the dominant ideology of the global market economy." (Link et al. 2002, 7)

Politically, people's complex reactions toward corruption reflect how the initial two decades of the reform era have shaped people's perceptions about how politics operates, including where power is and how to access power. The simultaneous resentment and envy felt regarding corrupt collusions between business entrepreneurs and government officials show how profoundly the political culture has evolved since the utopian ideals of the Maoist era (Levy 2002).

4. Alternative Norms, Subversion, and Ambivalence

The intersecting boundaries of class, gender, region, and ethnicity have created oppressive forces in society, but popular culture has always been a place for subversive voices challenging these boundaries (Jin 2023; Ling 2023). For example, writer Han Han's (韩寒) rise in popular culture in the early 2000s reflects a social process of meaning-making. Han's sharp views on political and social issues form and evolve through an interactive process where he listens to his readers and incorporates their perspectives, suggesting a collective negotiation process with the state regarding the boundary of political discussion in public discourse (Yang 2013). Indeed, non-state-sanctioned, alternative norms and even subversive views have always existed in popular culture, though they evolve constantly and are often accompanied by more ambivalent voices regarding state power (Hu and Shao 2022).

For example, in analyzing the parental support narratives for LGBTQ children in the film media, Elisabeth Engebretsen (2018) finds that parenting practices and ideals are undergoing a transformation in China, where affective articulations are key. Analyzing an online forum hosted on a queer lifestyle portal, William Schroeder (2018) finds many posts that refuse definitive accounts of what happiness is and instead use the concept as a foundation for creating contexts in which joy becomes imaginable. These alternative norms regarding happiness deviate from the mainstream discourse rooted in traditional values and expand the space where new ideas could emerge and spread.

Even state-produced cultural products can offer a glimpse into the political discourse of the time. Examining how "country bumpkins" have been portrayed in the skits on China Central Television's (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala from 1983 to 2022, Hongjian Wang (2022, 558) finds that from the 1980s to the 2000s, these characters have been presented as "at once timid and

candid, clumsy and witty, unsophisticated and insightful." Such skits thus "represent a platform upon which the populace can confront the state in a playful way, and the platform's existence itself brings the audience a cathartic relief." (Wang 2022, 560) Criticisms expressed through the country bumpkin characters include government bureaucracy, extravagance, waste, and corruption. However, the sudden disappearance of country bumpkins from the CCTV gala since 2013 indicates a dramatic shift in which the negotiation between the populace and the state has been severely curtailed. Meanwhile, a popular dating show launched by Jiangsu Satellite Television, *Are You the One?* (非诚勿扰), negotiated with state censors in the early 2010s regarding the discussion of social issues and continued to display diverse opinions among the millennial generation, which created a new form of civic engagement that centers on "lifestyle politics" through self-representations and self-expression in a globalizing society (Kong 2013). Earlier in the reform era, the state-run popular music industry and burgeoning underground rock music subculture were instrumental to the cultural and political struggles that culminated in the Tiananmen movement of 1989 (Jones 1992).

If these studies show the influence of alternative norms in Chinese popular culture, the more subversive energy sometimes comes from Western cultural influences brought by market forces and globalization. For example, the cultural imaginations of basketball fans, who immerse themselves in a world of flashy NBA players, aspire to an energetic attitude towards life that has the "flamboyant, aggressive self-expressiveness of the slam dunk star" (Morris 2002). For the most part, however, the subversive energy in Chinese popular culture is specific to the Chinese context, such as in Internet culture and youth culture that are part of the "comparatively independent and uninterrupted development of the entertainment-oriented popular culture." (Li 2001, 37)

4.1 Internet Culture

The rise of the Internet has led to a culturally dynamic online space in China. Though numerous political science studies have examined the patterns of China's Internet censorship (e.g., Hassid 2020; King et al. 2013; 2014; 2017), looking at online culture would allow us to further understand how netizens react to online censorship and other political issues. In fact, "censorship in China is also a creative force." (de Kloet and Fung 2017, 86) While the political control remains constant, the grassroots subversive energy has also been continuous in the online space.

For example, Weiming Ye and Luming Zhao's (2023) recent study of the "sensitive word culture" reveals that Chinese netizens are far from passive receivers of censorship; instead, their online linguistic practices exhibit everyday resistance. The online political satires of "river crabs"[2] and "grass mud horse"[3] are illustrative examples of what criticism of the state and censorship looks like (Wang et al. 2016). Disguised in vague or coded phrases, online political satire offers both political criticism and emotional bonding for netizens (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Meng 2011; Rea 2013). Some scholars even find that "practices of online political satire at their most political moments are not only critiques of power, but popular mobilizations against power" (Yang and Jiang 2015, 216). Although the threat of censorship causes political satirists to self-

[2] A homophone of "harmony" in Mandarin, referring to Internet censorship where one's words are deleted or "harmonized."
[3] A homophone of a profanity word, expressing subversiveness toward political authorities.

censor, political satire still exhibits strong vitality thanks to collective action, such as the anonymous production, distribution, and sharing of work on Chinese social media (Luqiu 2017).

Furthermore, coded words are also used by the nationalistic "Little Pinks" to express pro-government feelings, suggesting that "Sensitive Word Culture is not just a censorship coping strategy, but is also a linguistic resource around sensitive words" (Ye and Zhao 2023, 8). Similarly, when a new "netizen language" emerges—new words, new characters, and even new grammar, such creativity is not only to avoid censorship but also to assert their distinctive cultural identities (Link and Xiao 2013). In fact, the "netizen language" has spread widely and has been used by liberals, ultra-nationalists, and even the state media, which dilutes the resistance normally shown in sarcasm. Therefore, besides political criticism, online popular culture can also evolve in a pro-government direction.

What has received less scholarly attention is the popular culture of ethnic minorities in China. Examining a popular Uyghur online sketch comedy series, *Anar Pishti*, produced and performed by a team of young Uyghurs and Kazakhs based in Ürümchi, Vanessa Frangville (2020) finds the characters are constantly negotiating their occupation of and circulation in the streets while laughing off their security fears and frustration, as more and more streets in Ürümchi have been placed under state surveillance. "The representations of social interactions in collective spaces like markets, streets, and roads, subjugated to multiple controls, stand as allegories for limited individual agency in everyday practices" (Frangville 2020, 128). Uyghur language community forums have been found to create an oppositional consciousness of Uyghur cultural identity that emphasizes collective injustices suffered by Uyghurs, and to build solidarity and mobilize everyday acts of resistance (Clothey and Koku 2017). Uyghur blogs and comments often use metaphors, sarcasm, and humor to express subversive political communication in an indirect way (Clothey et al. 2016). Indeed, the Internet has provided online communication and communities that promote intra-ethnic interaction through the use of the Uyghur language and texts (Light 2015).

4.2 Youth Culture

Youth culture in China is "characterized by the constant oscillation between control and being controlled, between technologies of the self and subjection" (de Kloet and Fung 2017, 180). Comparing three historical points—1968, 1988, and 2008— Paul Clark (2012) finds a common thread of seeking non-official, alternative forms of popular culture among Chinese youth, whose search often ends with indigenizing Western cultural forms, such as rock and hip-hop. In the 21st century, Chinese youth still possess "an insuppressible desire for self-expression and critical engagement with social intervention and organized activism augmented by the ongoing digital revolution" (Xiao 2020, 10). Fundamentally shaped by "neoliberalizing subjectivification," Chinese youth face up to the challenges of economic polarization, diminishing job security, dispersing institutional support networks, social stratification and fragmentation, intensified competition for opportunities and resources, and rising risks of downward mobility through reinvented forms of cultural innovation, anti-establishment politics, and social transformation (Xiao 2020). Indeed, the theme of creativity that often dispenses anti-establishment and subversive energies has been consistently observed by scholars of Chinese youth culture.

Meanwhile, we should not overlook the diversity of political expression among Chinese youth. Having to navigate between the official and the non-official, the formal and the informal, and the local and the global, youth cultures "are not necessarily countercultures: they can be agents for change, or, just the opposite, recreate a status quo," (Frangville and Gaffric 2020), as existing studies have emphasized (Kwong 1994; Rosen 2009). For example, observing the belief systems and behaviors of Chinese youth after 30 years of Reform and Opening, Stanley Rosen (2009) finds that Chinese youth have developed an internationalist outlook while being very pragmatic and materialistic; meanwhile, their nationalist impulses have been manifested not only as defense of China against Western criticism but also as love of country and self-sacrifice in support of those most in need. Investigating the phenomenon of *fenqing* (angry youth), Lijun Yang and Yongnian Zheng (2012) differentiate the three types of angry youth: nationalistic, China-critical, and resentment-venting, suggesting the diversity in the makeup of these groups, the causes of their anger, and their targets.

Rather than venting discontent and anger, some Chinese youth engage in a *sang* 丧[4]culture that is characterized by feelings of defeatism and loss. Expressing disenchantment with the current official discourse on "positive energy," Chinese youth share *sang* memes on social media to express an inchoate feeling of loss rather than political resistance (Tan and Cheng 2020). However, the nature of countering official rhetoric is similar between the *sang* culture and the earlier Internet culture of *e'gao*, or online parody (Meng 2011; Rea 2013). More recently, the term "lying flat," as a youth subculture and Internet meme showing a Chinese TV character from the 1990s, who was remembered as lying down on a couch rather than seeking work, has become viral and emerged as yet another youth counter-narrative in the reform era. The term indicates a sense of submission by not responding to life challenges and social expectations; it champions a lifestyle of limited desire and little motivation toward working hard and material gains (Zhang and Li 2022).

On the other hand, Chinese youth culture has imported Western forms known for their subversiveness, such as rap and standup comedy. However, the political expressions in these cultural forms are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the creative energies that negotiate cultural boundaries, but also the disciplinary forces of the state, the capital, and traditional cultural values.

Rap became mainstream popular in China after the web-based show *Rap of China* debuted in 2017. However, this art form was introduced to China through the Chinese diaspora in the 1980s (Wu 2020), but failed to achieve popularity until the 2000s (de Kloet 2007). Despite the state-induced self-censorship as a common strategy (Khan 2009), rappers still try to embody the spirit of hip-hop and frequently address social issues, a central theme of which is inequality along the lines of class, region, gender, education, language, although not so much ethnicity (de Kloet 2007). For example, many rappers have incorporated local dialects in their lyrics, which has been interpreted as asserting "an oppositional, counterhegemonic voice against the Chinese education system, high official culture, and mainstream discourse." (Liu 2014, 266). Furthermore, Chinese rappers strategically use localizing strategies, such as referencing the traditional cultural framework of *jianghu* 江湖, to express "resistance to structures and circumstances that can't be

[4] A possible translation is "mourning."

addressed directly due to political circumscriptions." (Sullivan and Zhao 2021, 288) However, rap's popularity and impact among Chinese youth propelled the state to first crack down on and then recruit hip-hop artists to support state propaganda (Amar 2018). As a result, rap's mainstream status in Chinese youth culture comes with the condition that rappers "tone down their superficial mimicking of their Western counterparts' outward aggressiveness and find more voice in the Chinese cultural traditions." (Wu 2020, 61) Nevertheless, the state's co-optation of popular culture has limitations due to compromised authenticity (Zou 2019). The localization and evolution of rap in China highlight the importance of popular culture as a site to observe the various ways political power is manifested, interpreted, and negotiated.

Standup comedy, another Western import, has become mainstream popular among Chinese millennials and Generation Z since the mid-2010s. Centering on "negative emotions," Chinese standup comedians sometimes explore politically charged topics such as traditional gender norms and neoliberal work culture. Analyzing jokes from a popular web-based standup comedy show, Dan Chen and Gengsong Gao (2023) find that standup comedy coexists with but also diminishes the hegemonic rhetoric supported by the state. While the show aligned itself with the "positive energy" discourse based on humor and laughter, the standup comedians who participated in the show transgress the "positive energy" discourse through non-confrontational yet powerful comedic tactics, such as subversive affirmation, self-deprecation, ambiguity, absurd fantasy, and irony, presenting marginalized alternative voices on prevalent social issues. Other forms of humor in Chinese popular culture are also outlets of political expression. Examining the Chinese verbal art of *xiangsheng* 相声, David Moser (2017) finds that, although *xiangsheng* was co-opted by the state to become a tool for education and indoctrination, satire remains the core of this art form, sometimes falling afoul of the censors.

In addition to the art forms, the literature on political humor also focuses on the content of jokes (Ding 2013). Analyzing political jokes about national leaders spread on the Internet and through social gatherings and hearsay, Howard Choy (2017) argues that the subversive and antisocial characters of political jokes can help prolong the regime by allowing a catharsis in light of deep anxieties arising from the socioeconomic transformations in the reform era. Examining jokes about gender relations from the Internet, Sharon Wesoky and Ping Le (2017) acknowledge the political implications of satirizing gender roles and marital relations, which often contradict socialist feminism's radical gender equality; meanwhile, they argue that such jokes are primarily an expression of cynicism and political passivity when both the state and the market are identified as responsible for corrupted gender relations. Together, these studies show hesitation and reluctance, if not resistance and challenge, in people's cultural reactions toward the dual disciplinary forces of politics and capital.

5. Authority in Popular Culture

The field of Chinese cultural politics has great potential to offer critical and regenerative insights to further our understanding of China. The above review provides a preliminary reading based on selective works from this vast literature. It finds that while state domination characterizes many areas of Chinese popular culture, subversiveness remains. By understanding how state domination is manifested in popular culture, we can reveal how political power sees itself. For example, through the strategy of co-opting the traditional cultural value of the family, the state

has shown an intensive effort at assuming moral authority in deciding the right and the wrong, the good and the bad, in public discourse and behavior. Meanwhile, popular culture's continued resistance and challenge show its creative and subversive energy to seek and make new symbolic spaces for value change, despite an intrusive and ambitious state. Recent examples include the online satire of "grass mud horse" and the youth counterculture of "lying flat." These dynamics also reveal that capitalist and traditional cultural forces have been on both sides of the state throughout the reform era, suggesting fluid alliances and shifting dynamics in the symbolic realm.

These trends in Chinese cultural politics in the reform era point to new questions for future research. While the state has kept up with and managed to dominate various cultural spaces, Chinese popular culture remains fragmented, vigorous, and transgressive, actively responding to changing political and socioeconomic conditions. How can we explain the simultaneous advancement of state control over popular culture and the cultural creativity in political expression? More specifically, what drives the continued vitality in Chinese popular culture when it faces concurrent disciplinary efforts from political, market, and traditional cultural forces?

To address these questions, a potential contribution from political science would be to focus our attention on the dynamics of power struggles in the symbolic realm. In particular, normative and empirical notions of authority, conceptualized by Weber (1947), Arendt (2006), and Raz (1990) and critically examined and built upon by other scholars, may offer a promising framework to analyze the competing forces in popular culture and the sources of cultural power. Authority often originates in other forms of power and requires social legitimation (Blau 1963), which will allow incorporation of existing power structures in the material realm while accounting for possibilities of challenge in the symbolic realm. If we conceptualize the struggles among political, market, and traditional cultural forces as a competition for authority in popular culture, then we can begin to explore the reasons why the state has yet to monopolize popular culture and why transgressive voices continue to be vigorous. Through examining the creation, manifestation, and decay of authority, we can illustrate the dynamics of cultural power.

For example, we can conceptualize the competition between the state and transgressive cultural entrepreneurs as a competition to create authority for their respective cultural narratives. We can also conceptualize the domination of official messages in the online public discourse as an attempt at creating authority, rather than a manifestation of it, primarily because the insertion of official messages is achieved through state demand rather than voluntary desire. In contrast, we can conceptualize the popularity of rap and standup comedy as a manifestation of authority. More importantly, the various stages of authority, from its creation, manifestation, to decay, can serve as a theoretical framework that points to the nature of power struggles in the symbolic realm. This dynamic view of authority will advance our understanding of the competing forces in popular culture, the sources of cultural power, and the potential for political change. More broadly, future studies should continue to document and theorize the role of popular culture in idea formation, value change, and political development.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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