

Popular family television and party ideology: the Spring Festival Eve happy gathering

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Celebrating New Year's Eve has always been a family matter in China. Families get together to have dinner, to leave behind the old and enter the new year wishing one another well. However, with the intrusion of the small screen, especially after 1983 when the first Spring Festival Eve television gala (*chunjie lianhuan wanhui*) was introduced, family gatherings have taken on a distinctively national character. People are consistently reminded that they are in fact getting together with the whole Chinese nation, and indeed beyond. The carefully orchestrated 'happy gathering' on television induces an instant sense of national belonging that transcends both immediate families and narrow localities. The classical Confucian notion of the state as an enlarged family is brought into full play.¹

In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to put on such grandiose happy gatherings, as new and fresh forms of popular entertainment are being exhausted. But the show must go on, for it is of great benefit to political centralism. Quick to realize the great potential of the most popular television programme in China, the party has been keeping it under ideological scrutiny. In it lies a unique opportunity to put into practice its long-standing policy for the media — to educate the masses through entertaining them. However, as market forces continue to penetrate and transform Chinese society and culture at a rapid pace and on a massive scale, party propaganda, though packaged in more attractive forms, is faced with great difficulties in the 1990s.

This article takes a close look at the televised New Year's Eve gala of 6 February 1997, on the eve of the Chinese New Year of the Ox, to examine the ways in which officially sanctioned ideologies are inserted into popular

entertainment. 1997 was a particularly important year for China. Hong Kong was to be returned to the mainland on 1 July. The 15th Chinese Communist Party Congress was to hold its long overdue opening session in September, when major decisions on the top leadership would be taken and made public. The death of China's last charismatic leader dating from the age of the Communist revolution was imminent. Indeed, Deng Xiaoping died on 19 February, just before the 15 days of Spring Festival celebration were over. All of these events, reflected and highlighted in the New Year's Eve gala, were presented as the anticipation of a new era — that of China after Deng, faced with new problems and challenges. Naturally, the overwhelming theme of the evening would be national pride and unity, as pointed out by the chief director of the gala himself (Yuan, 1997: 4).

A family gathering and national unity

The Spring Festival gala, broadcast live by China Central Television (CCTV) on the eve of Chinese lunar new year, was first conceived in the early 1980s, at a time when television was entering more and more Chinese homes. It has been reinvented each year since 1983, and has evolved into a more or less fixed formula, with singing and dancing (*ge wu*), mini-dramas (*xiaopin*) and cross-talks (*xiangsheng* — comic two-person dialogues in the Beijing dialect) as its three 'mainstays'. Over time the gala has been institutionalized as part of the ritual of the New Year celebration, and is regarded as 'indispensable for the Spring Festival culture itself' (Zhou, 1997: 43). The preparation for the gala gets wide press coverage, which subsequently shapes public expectations. Comments and criticisms appear in the press for days or weeks after the event. The 1985 gala held in the Beijing Workers' Stadium, for example, is still remembered as a disaster — lottery tickets were sold there and other overt commercial activities were involved. Under public pressure, CCTV eventually made a public apology during the (prime time) seven o'clock news (Guo, 1991: 211–15).

With the most recent wave of emigration, from the mid-1980s onwards, the CCTV gala is watched by more and more Chinese residing outside China. On 10 February 1994, it was simultaneously broadcast to the Chinese communities in North America and Australia. The 1997 gala, watched by 90.67 percent of families inside China (CCTV Audience Group, 1997), could be technically received anywhere in the world via satellite. To be 'Chinese' in the age of direct satellite broadcasting could mean one more thing — to share the joy of the Spring Festival Eve happy gathering on the small screen.

This joy, however, does not come without strings attached. The audience are exposed to official propaganda packaged and delivered in ever more popular forms. Much has been written about propaganda in China under

Mao from a liberal point of view, focusing on the ways in which the media are used as ideological and political tools (see, for example, de Sola Pool, 1973). The liberal standpoint, which sees the individual as an autonomous being who should by no means be subjected to any ideological indoctrination, still goes largely unexamined in many current writings about the role of the media in China. Propaganda as understood by the Chinese themselves is seldom taken into account. *Xuanchuan*, propaganda in Chinese, is in fact a neutral term free from any derogatory connotations.

First introduced in the 1920s under the influence of the Russian October Revolution, *xuanchuan* has remained a key cultural and ideological strategy for the Chinese Communist Party in its struggle for political power and social transformation. It was not until fairly recently, in the early and mid-1980s, that Chinese intellectuals began to be openly sceptical of the term and its excessive practical implications, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). It was the ‘ultra-leftism’ in those years that finally stretched *xuanchuan* beyond its proper limits and brought it into disrepute.² The rethinking on propaganda is, however, at most a by-product of more general critical reflections throughout the 1980s on Marxism and its fate in Mao Zedong’s China, largely influenced by liberalism earnestly borrowed from the West to correct the wrongs of ultra-leftism. As a result, some have become more cautious about the practice of *xuanchuan*. Outside the circle of intellectuals and critics, however, the term remains neutral if no longer positive. After all, the Chinese do not see why one should not promote a good cause.

Party propaganda has been systematically expounded in the able hands of Chinese journalism theorists. The orthodox theory of journalism overtly defines the role of the media as the mouthpiece, or the ‘throat and tongue’, of the party and the people. The more liberal minded would lay stress on the people against the party as a way to negotiate a degree of editorial autonomy for the media. The more conservative would insist that there is no fundamental conflict between the party and the people since the former represents the ultimate interests of the latter. The people are thus conflated and disappear under the shadow of the party. These are boundaries of the well-known debates inside journalistic circles during the mid-1980s on the so-called ‘party character’ (*dang xing*) and ‘popular character’ (*renmin xing*) of the media (see Gan, 1994). The theoretical quarrel centres on who comes first. But neither side seriously questioned the very basis and nature of party propaganda itself.

After several decades of skilfully manipulating the mass media for ideological and political purposes, based on a systematic theory of journalism, when television was finally made available to ordinary families in the first half of the 1980s, the party saw the immense potential in this new electronic medium for propagating its policies and controlling the mind of the masses. Unlike the official newspapers and journals, which are

more associated with the workplace than with home, or radio, which lacks the visual attraction to become the centre of attention, the new audiovisual medium soon acquired permanent membership in Chinese families and in effect electronically linked families to the central state.

The CCTV galas can be best illustrated as a happy marriage between an ancient Chinese ideal and a modern western technology, whereby happy family gatherings are turned into grand national reunions, and the Confucian dream of 'great oneness' (*da yitong*) is brought to an atmospheric and symbolic realization on Spring Festival Eve. CCTV, as the only state monopoly network nationwide, remains the sole legitimate organizer of the yearly national reunion. In the last three or four years, regional and local television networks began to remove their own local gala broadcasts on New Year's Eve to make space for CCTV to stage the one and only national happy gathering. This can be seen as a deliberate move made to avoid regionalism and localism in favour of centralism. While national unity is the lasting theme for all Spring Festival galas, national pride is its particular theme for the year 1997.

National pride boosted

The first half of the 1990s was marked by a deep sense of ideological apathy in the aftermath of the 1989 Tian An Men event. The actual if not nominal demise of official Marxism in post-Mao China has left a vast ideological vacuum to be filled. Rampant consumerism and extreme materialism are symptoms of rather than solutions to the problem (Zhao, 1997). In a desperate search for new unifying ideologies, the party has turned to patriotism as a rather obvious option. Indeed, modern China by no means lacks the cultural and historical resources for mobilizing popular patriotic sentiments. No other nation has suffered the same degree of humiliation, pain and loss as China did in the hands of western powers in the hundred years following the Opium War with Britain in 1841. The decline and revival of Chinese civilization has been the keynote of contemporary Chinese political and intellectual history.

China in 1997 occupies a very different position on the world map. Nearly two decades of rapid economic growth have turned the country into a new economic power to be reckoned with by the outside world. This newly found power has boosted a new kind of nationalism resting upon political economics more than on culture and the myth of China's past glory. When Beijing's bid to host the Olympics in the year 2000 failed to materialize in September 1993 by one vote, the whole nation was deeply disappointed. For a few months patriotic feelings were running high. For China, to host the Olympics at the turn of the millennium would have presented a good opportunity to demonstrate to the world the country's

spectacular achievements in modernization within a span of a mere 20 years. The disappointment and frustration turned into a passionate patriotism, permeating the Spring Festival gala of 1994 (Lang, 1995: 29). Meanwhile, within intellectual circles, Samuel Huntington's thesis on civilizational conflicts and confrontations taking the place of the Cold War, expounded in a specific context for a specific audience, received disproportionate attention and evoked heated debate, for it happened to strike a chord with the deeply shared concern for the future of Chinese civilization.

The Chinese are too aware of their unfinished task in 'rebuilding their ancient civilization'. Arnold Toynbee, the late British historian, is widely known in China for predicting that the next century would be the Chinese century. Spurred by this vision, rightly or wrongly attributed to Toynbee, the Chinese are taking the turn of the century extremely seriously. Indeed, they have pinned all their hopes on the 21st century. In an interview, the CCTV gala director illustrated this widely shared 'century complex' when talking about the *leitmotif* of the 1997 gala:

On this special evening, we need to see our achievement and envisage a most wonderful future for China *in the twenty-first century*. . . . Hence the *leitmotif* of the evening has to be national pride, progress, and unity. (Sanya, 1997: 36; emphasis added)

The gala on 6 February 1997 started as usual at eight o'clock sharp, Beijing time. For the first time in the history of television galas, Beijing time was made a motif throughout the evening, embodied in a huge round-faced clock with each hour marked with the year 1997. While Beijing has always been regarded as 'the political, economic and cultural centre' of the country, Beijing time was now promoted as 'the beating heart and pulse' of the motherland, announced three times by a key presenter, at 20:08, 21:08 and 23:56 against a close-up of the clock. Indeed, Beijing time did synchronize a grand national reunion of 1 billion people in front of the television screen on this Spring Festival Eve.

Traditional symbols of the festival were used to start the show — red lanterns, images of oxen and the Chinese character for 'fortune' (*fu*) on a set of red doors.³ Performers then came on set, singing in chorus the song of the grand reunion — 'all sons and daughters of the Chinese nation united always and forever'. Four young presenters greeted the audience thus:

At this time of grand union, we wish the people of all ethnicities inside China, the people of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, and overseas Chinese all over the world a very happy and lucky New Year.

The age-old tradition of the Spring Festival as the most celebrated time of the year provides the Chinese government with a good opportunity to address not only the people of China but also Chinese emigrants all over

the world. This special occasion has long been exploited to establish a 'united front' with Chinese people overseas. This has become particularly important since the adoption of the open door policy and economic reforms in post-Mao China. The significance of overseas Chinese investment for China's fast economic growth over the last 15 years can hardly be overestimated. For most Chinese, blood is still thicker than water.

The meaning of the year 1997 was elaborated by the two key presenters:

A: The spring of 1997 has come. This spring wafts in the fragrance of 5000 years [of Chinese civilization].

B: This spring's breezes open a new chapter in the book of ancient [Chinese] history . . .⁴

A and B: Dear friends, let's start afresh from spring 1997, keep our mind open, hand in hand, heart to heart, to embrace the dawn of a *brand new* century. (emphasis added)

The gala's theme song, 'Hand in Hand, Heart to Heart' was sung twice, at the beginning and then at the end of the gala:

Hand in hand, heart to heart,
We support the Great Wall and our motherland.
Hand in hand, heart to heart,
We embrace the sun and the earth,
To enter a *glorious 21st century*. (emphasis added)

This same 'century complex', repeatedly manifested throughout the evening, made the message clear — to revive the once splendid Chinese civilization for the year 2000 and beyond, the Chinese nation needed to work hard together. This, the party insists, can only be guaranteed by a strong and competent central government. Political centralism is in fact accepted by many in China as a realistic option for maintaining social stability and economic prosperity.⁵ Indeed, it goes well with the Confucian tradition of 'the great oneness (or unity)' (*da yitong*), extended to Hong Kong in 1997, Macao in 1999 (and finally Taiwan?).

Hong Kong 1997

The British Crown Colony's return to the mainland on 1 July was celebrated ahead of time in the gala of February 1997, starting with a Hong Kong pop star singing 'I'm Always by Your Side', a simple love song in the first instance, but ambiguous enough to be interpreted otherwise — implying the blood relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong. This was followed by a brief interview with two model workers serving on the 'three special trains' transporting meat, fruit and vegetables daily from the mainland to Kowloon, showing Mother China's care and love for the child she had been forced to abandon. The celebration reached its climax with the song '1997':

I was forced to see you off one hundred years ago,
And now I am expecting you to return.
Ocean has been turned into cultivated land,
But I am still missing you —
Again and again I cry out for you, 1997.

I am getting closer to you day by day,
And time will eventually stop for us.
Air and sunshine will be filled with love,
And the whole world will hear and cheer me —
Again and again I cry out for you, 1997.

One can hardly fail to see the passion contained in Chinese patriotism here. But the British media always overlook this when handling the issue of Hong Kong. Channel 4's investigative documentary on how Downing Street had sold the colony's fledgling democracy off to the 'Communist dictatorship' in Beijing is a good example (*Dispatches*, 27 February 1997). Such an investigation, however painstakingly conducted, misses a crucial point. It cannot explain why the Chinese government is so 'determined' to 'shatter Hong Kong's hope for democracy'. After all, the Communist Party itself has been going through political reforms towards improved democratic centralism. China's apparently hardline stance on Hong Kong's political future cannot be understood in itself. It has to be looked at with reference to history, the Opium War, which still occupies a prominent place in China's national memory, especially among the older generation of revolutionaries and their heirs, who are now in power. The war concluded with the humiliating Nanking Treaty, which ceded Hong Kong to British rule.

For China, the handover of Hong Kong by the old colonial master means more than a matter of economic and political calculation. It is an ultimate national triumph, demonstrating to the world China's determination to hammer the last nail into the coffin of a hundred years of foreign domination on its soil between 1842 and 1949. Resuming sovereignty over Hong Kong is in this sense a symbolic act. This can be made clearer by the fact that Shanghai is right now positioned to equal, and eventually replace, Hong Kong as a financial centre, simply because Shanghai is more 'Chinese'. This move certainly makes little economic sense. But pure and cold economic calculation is still alien to the Chinese, not yet fully subjected to instrumental reason. Primordial ties and sentiments, largely dissolved or repressed in the process of formal and instrumental rationalization in the West, are still largely at work in other parts of the world, China included.

Among the singers of '1997' was a pop star from Hong Kong, implying that it was the wish of the Hong Kong people themselves to return to the embrace of the motherland. Using pop stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan for propaganda started very early in the brief history of the CCTV Spring

Festival galas. A minor singer from Hong Kong became a household name overnight for singing 'My Chinese Heart' in the 1984 gala. Another singer and film star from Taiwan captured the imagination of the Chinese audience in 1987 for singing 'Clouds from the Homeland', a song about the Chinese diaspora longing for a cultural and spiritual homecoming.

While the melody of '1997' lingered on, street scenes of the colony appeared on the screen one after another, topped by the red national emblem of China, and followed by a series of film clips summarizing the history of the diplomatic relationship between China and the United Kingdom: Zhou Enlai and Anthony Eden in 1954; Mao Zedong and Edward Heath in 1974; Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher in 1984; Li Peng and John Major in 1991. 'The history of 100 years', proudly claimed a male voiceover, 'will be surpassed in six months'.

Packaged ideologies

In the era of economic pluralism, the party has learned to package and market its ideologies in ever more popular forms. Popular songs (*liuxing gequ*) were officially rejected as the music of 'bourgeois spiritual dejection' when first smuggled in from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the late 1970s and early 1980s when China opened its door to the outside world. Now the same tunes are dubbed using the words of popular propaganda, as is well demonstrated by the theme songs 'Hand in Hand' and '1997'. Other popular songs of the gala evening also tended to contain and convey socially desirable messages. 'True Love Lasts Forever', for instance, glorified stable relationships at a time when the divorce rate among the urban young is soaring; 'Chinese Kids' fabricated a proud national identity based on folklore and mythology which have largely lost their meaning for the young of the 1990s; 'The Great Wall in the Sea' extolled the Chinese People's Navy; 'The Story of Springs' praised Deng Xiaoping for his role in leading the Chinese people on to the road to strength and wealth.

Among so many songs laden with overt moral and ideological messages, 'For You' stood out as a refreshing exception, dealing with a new sense of personal estrangement in rapidly growing Chinese cities:

Passing through waves of sound and fury,
And knocking down walls between chilled hearts,
Hope pierces through the indifferent crowds,
And shatters all worldly obstacles on its way.

Let me heal the wounds for you,
And cure the urban disease of love gone astray.
I will bring you sunshine in winter,
To alleviate all your distress and sorrow.

This kind of lament over the disintegration of the organic social fabric, and all the emotion associated with it, is becoming increasingly common and pronounced with the ever more rapid urban and industrial expansion in the 1990s. Symptoms of the modern urban ‘disease’ — isolation, distress and anxiety — are diagnosed, not so much by social sciences as by literature and arts. The latter have always been the most developed and sensitive ‘nerves’ of Chinese society.

However, not all art forms are equally amenable to ideological manipulation. Rock music, for instance, is inherently more subversive as a form, and is more or less rejected by the party as unsuitable for the Chinese audience, although it continues to find fans and followers in the pluralist cultural market often beyond the reach of the party. The market, with its own logic, churns out light entertainment for its own sake, with little regard to social and ideological values favoured by the party. The increasing popularity of light entertainment, especially among the younger generations, is in effect ‘jamming’ and diluting serious party propaganda. While having to put up with this situation, initially of its own making, the party is by no means willing to abandon wholesale attempts to exert influence over the cultural sphere. On the contrary, it has been trying to retain, and at times tighten, its grip over public channels of communication, especially television broadcasting. The party insists on having the last say in what should go on the public screen. The Spring Festival galas, censored in person by top leaders in charge of propaganda and ideology, is a telling case in point.

Among the popular forms of entertainment made to carry official propaganda for the evening, none is more suitable than that of mini-drama (*xiaopin*). This takes the form of a short play involving a small number of characters with a simple and amusing storyline, developed for television. It can be most readily turned into effective social propaganda conveying clear-cut messages and inducing predictable emotional responses, with little risk of formal subversion as might be the case with popular songs. Not surprisingly, it has been a key component of all television galas since 1987, and was rated the most popular form of entertainment for 1997 (CCTV Audience Group, 1997).

A Second Chance portrayed two newly rich peasants, still single, in their late 20s and early 30s, keeping a rendezvous with each other over their mobile phones — an important status symbol in the mid-1990s. In China, the two would be branded unfavourably as ‘aged youth’ (*daling qingnian*), regarded as a ‘problem’ by their own families and society alike.⁶ With their first chance of marriage ruined by poverty, a second chance comes with their newly found wealth. The drama is in fact an indirect eulogy to the party’s success in rural economic reforms. Blessed by the party’s good policy, Chinese peasants are better off now than ever before.

Other mini-dramas in the gala tended to express a longing for greater social consciousness in the mid-1990s when the new market ethos had been

eroding traditional values still cherished by many. One told the story of a newly-wed housemaid who chose to stay and care for a sick old man living on his own, rather than going home to be with her own husband and family for the New Year. A rather banal story in itself, it could nevertheless touch the feelings of millions, at a time when market forces are transforming human relations beyond recognition. The traditional sense of solidarity and loyalty is being displaced by a new sense of rational contract. With the natural human bonds based on family, locality and community rapidly disintegrating, a nostalgia for the 'good old days' when human relations were closer, warmer and less tainted by money, has prevailed.

This nostalgia, misplaced as it might be, found expression in most mini-dramas broadcast that evening. One dealt directly with the tension between money and morality in the context of the market economy of the 1990s. *Shoe Nails* portrayed an elderly street cobbler refusing to sell three shoe nails to a wealthy young man regardless of the amount of money he was willing to pay. It turned out that the cobbler was about to lose his stand to a car market opened by the young man himself. The drama ended with the young man being moved to tears, accepting three nails offered free of charge. Money was made to pale into insignificance before superior moral power. These carefully plotted moral dramas can no doubt be emotionally moving. But to what extent they can be socially effective is open to question, especially to the more cynical, younger generations whose expectations from life are very different.

Ideologies dissolved

The young generation in the 1990s presents a real problem for party propaganda. These young people, in their late teens and early 20s, cannot relate to the experience and memories of the elder generation of revolutionaries. They understand neither the old China before 1949, socially divided, politically weak and often forced to concede to western privileges, nor the Communist revolution waged allegedly to eradicate these ills. It is too remote a past, quite irrelevant to the present age of the market and consumption. As the first generation of mass consumers, these young people have more in common in outlook and aspirations with the young from China's more affluent Asian neighbours than with their own older relatives. They have no patience to look to the past to appreciate the present. Instead, they look to the outside world for frames of reference.

Growing up under the invisible hand of the market rather than the iron fist of the party, surrounded by commercial advertisements rather than ideological propaganda campaigns, today's youth have turned out to be more materialistic and individualistic than their elders could ever dream of. A nationwide campaign for patriotic education was clearly targeted at them

in 1994, but with little visible effect. The problem is less that they are resistant than they are indifferent to ideological indoctrination, be it patriotism, socialism, Confucianism or Marxism. They are much more interested in blue jeans, branded trainers and fun. Grand ideologies for them have all 'melted into the air'.

With improved living standards, greater purchasing power and easy access to images from the outside world, a consumer culture for the urban young has emerged and taken shape. Culture, once an all-powerful ideological tool in the hands of the party used for radical transformation of Chinese society, albeit with disastrous consequences at times, is now mass produced for daily consumption. Today's young are among the most enthusiastic, discerning and sophisticated consumers of commercial popular culture. Their sense of fashion and taste for music are becoming increasingly 'global', often beyond the approval and comprehension of their elders (see Zhao and Murdock, 1996). The generation gap, a topic for debate in the 1980s, is a reality to be confronted in the 1990s.

The musical tastes of the young had to be catered for in the 1997 gala. CCTV, ideologically controlled by the party but financially dependent on the market, could not afford to ignore their powerful young audience-cum-consumers. 'The Season of Youth' represented an effort to make contact with this segment of the audience, and consisted of a series of songs and dances to a light-hearted modern beat performed by teenagers. Their performances stood out as exceptionally free-spirited in comparison to other acts heavily burdened with ideological and moral overtones. The song 'Rainy Afternoon' would certainly appeal to any young girl of the 1990s:

Another rainy afternoon,
I won't stay in to feel alone.
[I have] never been a sentimental girl,
Why [do I] have to be in control.

[Let me] open the windows and doors,
And stop pretending to be sad and miserable.
I will dance alone in the rain,
And feel the embrace of trickling pearls.

I want to be carefree on this rainy afternoon,
Tomorrow's problems will be dealt with tomorrow.

Lyrics like these would once have been considered socially problematic, openly advocating irresponsible individualism. Yet this song was performed on the most prominent stage of the 1997 Spring Festival Eve gala. This alone points to interesting changes in the party line on entertainment. The party can no longer afford give today's young a poker-faced lecture. With the gradual and inevitable weakening of all established authority by the liberal market, the party has to learn to tolerate a commercial youth

culture obviously uninterested in grand ideologies and moralities. One may add that the 'end of ideology' is merely the expression of another ideology — that of the consumerism pioneered by America and the West and catching up with the rest of the world.

The urge to live for the moment was also blatantly articulated in 'The Youth Bird',

Fly with me now,
For the thrill of this moment;
Dance with me now,
To the beats of flame and fire.
Rejoice with me now,
For the fun of the moment;
Sing with me now,
To the colours of a splendid kind.⁷

Indulging in the pleasure of the moment in a rapidly changing world is a message readily accepted by many young people today. The pleasure of consumption is real, whereas lofty ideals look increasingly imaginary in the age of market economy and rampant consumerism. The days of revolutionary zeal, together with its utopian dreams, have been discarded by the young as the follies of their grandparents and parents. Faced with this generation of cynical and sceptical young consumers, one cannot help but wonder what exactly will happen to the China of the 21st century.

Families wired to the state

The 1997 gala, to the great relief of its director and CCTV, was considered more or less a success by professional commentators and lay audience alike (Fan, 1997; Shen, 1997; Xu, 1997; Peng, 1997; CCTV Audience Group, 1997). As the novelty value of the gala has waned, the audience is becoming increasingly difficult to please. If subjected to the strict law of the market, the institution would probably have either petered out or taken on a very different form. The imperative of the party-state, however, has kept it going. In it the party has simply found the best opportunity to convey social and ideological messages simultaneously to the widest audience possible. The Spring Festival Eve can thus be seen as a unique situation in which families are wired via television to the central state. The ancient Confucian ideal of the state governed like one huge family suddenly appears more real than ever.

CCTV, therefore, has to try harder and harder each year to fulfil the more and more formidable task of orchestrating the national happy gathering on the small screen. For the sake of quality control, a competitive bidding system was put in place in 1993 for the selection of the gala's director. But cultural populism, or the mass line, remains its unchanging

guiding principle, reiterated once more by the director of the 1997 gala when summarizing his task:

CCTV's creation of the yearly gala is meant to tap the cultural significance of the traditional Spring Festival. . . . Key talents behind the show have come to the same realization that 'the leitmotif with a strong political overtone has to be couched in the joyous and happy atmosphere of the Spring Festival in order to be acceptable to the audience at all'. (Yuan, 1997: 4)

The mass line was made the basis of the party's cultural policy as early as the Yanan period in the late 1930s.⁸ It set the political and ideological tone for revolutionary literature and performing arts, which subsequently played an important part in mobilizing popular support for the Communist revolution and the final victory in 1949. The policy of the cultural mass line, however, soon fossilized into a set of rigid principles, and in the first 30 years of the People's Republic from 1949 to 1979, bound creative energies to mass political movements and fettered writers and artists to the loyal service of the state. Literature and the arts were regarded as no more than propaganda tools wielded by the party. To be socially and politically effective, the party demanded they be popular and acceptable with the masses in the first place: hence, little formal experimentation, no 'art pour l'art', no avant-garde and no modernism. Artists and writers were not regarded as creative individuals, but were instead organized into units of cultural workers serving whatever the political and social cause of the party was at the time.

This situation changed in China after Mao, initially with the officially sanctioned 'thought liberation movement' of the early 1980s, and then with the more autonomous intellectual ferment known as the 'second enlightenment' or the 'cultural craze' which lasted from the mid-1980s to the summer of 1989. After two years of silence in the aftermath of Tian An Men, the intellectual elites active in 'the cultural craze' of the late 1980s recovered and returned in spring 1992 to find their platform already taken by a more powerful and prevailing force — that of the free market. Commercial popular culture churned out for mass consumption coexists with, and to some extent dissolves, both the official culture and the autonomous culture of the intellectual elites. Not surprisingly, cultural criticism for the last five years or so has been focused on the market-led commodification of culture on the one hand, and on how intellectuals should respond to it on the other. Faced with this unintended 'cultural pluralism', the party has been trying hard to retain ideological control over the public media and officially sponsored cultural events.

In short, throughout the 1990s, television has been further replacing and marginalizing other media — the press and radio — to become the most powerful influence on Chinese society. 'The little magic box' fits in easily with the family-centred Chinese way of life, and is naturally favoured by

the party as the most effective and powerful propaganda tool. The party has been most keen to see its rapid development over the last 15 years. The modern gadget invented in the West has found itself fulfilling a particular social function in China. It helps to strengthen traditional family-centrism on the one hand, and to unify families into the 'imagined community' of the Chinese nation on the other. The role television has played in consolidating a shared national sentiment and identity in post-Mao China is hard to overestimate, as has already been illustrated by the case of the 1997 gala. With television, people's everyday cultural activities are redirected to the locus of family, to centre around the small screen remote-controlled by the state. It is in this sense that one can speak about the case of television in China as the 'electronic bridge' connecting families to the central state. Whether or not this will change in the future is a different matter. But for the time being, it seems that the classical Confucian ideal of the great unity has found a most handy modern implement.

Notes

1. *Jia*, family, is contained within *guojia*, the state, in the Chinese language. But *guojia* is a rather broad and vague concept. It can mean the state (the political), the country (the geographical) or the nation (the people).

2. During the Cultural Revolution, the practice of *xuanchuan* was carried to the extreme. All art forms and literature without exception were turned into tools of banal and hollow propaganda. Forced social and political conformity was such that any cultural and symbolic products subverting, challenging or simply not concerning the norm were banned, eliminated or nipped in the bud. The control over the cultural sphere in those years was so tight and pervasive that, once lifted in the early 1980s, the pent up energies erupted like a volcano, as expressed in the literature of 'the wounded', literature of 'critical reflection' and in the early exploratory films made by the so-called fifth generation of film makers.

3. Red is traditionally the colour for happy occasions, especially for weddings. But with more and more influence from the West, this has also been changing. For instance, it is becoming commonplace for young couples to have their wedding photos taken in studios, dressed up in hired western suits and white wedding dress.

4. The 'new chapter' clearly refers to Hong Kong's return to the mainland and the 15th Chinese Communist Party Congress.

5. Many in the West prefer to see political centralism in China as an atavistic legacy of the country's imperial and Maoist past, which will sooner or later be surpassed by 'History'. Comforting as it may be to well-intentioned western liberals, this is not the case.

6. Changes in this respect are noticeable in cities, where more and more young people are getting married in their late 20s and even early 30s — too late by the standards of their parents. But in rural areas, pressure is still great for people to get married in their early 20s and grandsons are expected immediately to carry on the paternal family name.

7. All songs appearing in the text are not necessarily translated verbatim for musical and lyrical effect.

8. Mao gave his important speech at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942, which laid down the basis for the party's cultural mass line. Yanan (Yenan), situated in the north-western province of Shaanxi, was the Red capital from the end of the Long March in 1934 to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. The speech had been taken as a departure point for literary and art theory in China until the 1980s. Mao defined the task for revolutionary cultural workers as follows:

The two [revolutionary writers and artists and the masses] must be completely integrated if we are to push ahead with our revolutionary work. The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting, educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help people to fight with one heart and one mind. (Mao, 1965: 70)

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