Unofficial
CHINA

Popular Culture and Thought
in the People's Republic

edited by
Perry Link, Richard Madsen,
and Paul G. Pickowicz

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About the Book

This original and provocative text presents an absorbing view of social life in China today. Through a diverse set of case studies, the contributors—a superb group of historians, literary critics, sociologists, and political scientists—introduce readers to a wide range of issues facing Chinese society as a whole. The underlying theme of state-society ties successfully captures the dynamic interplay that helps shape both popular and official culture. The book's rich discussions of different methods for studying contemporary China will be especially valuable as a tool for introducing students to the study of popular culture.

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Introduction

PERRY LINK, RICHARD MADSEN,
AND PAUL G. PICKOWICZ

Few foreigners anticipated the Beijing Spring of 1989 and the massacre of protesting workers and students that so tragically ended it. Western sinologists were not generally aware that many citizens of China were so profoundly discontented with their government. China scholars did not expect the student protesters to be so determined and well disciplined. Nor did foreign observers predict how vicious would be the Chinese government's repression of the protests. The Beijing Spring taught us how little we knew about the most important aspects of life in China.

In many ways, of course, our knowledge of China has vastly improved in the past decade. As a result of the opening to the West initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, foreign sinologists have enjoyed vastly improved access to data. Impressive advances have been made in the field of history with the gradual opening of central and local Chinese archives. Political scientists can know much more about power structures, both formal and informal, and about the nuances of policymaking processes. Despite some setbacks, anthropologists and other fieldworkers have been gaining access to China's villages. In fields such as economics and demography, the flood of new information has sometimes constituted a methodological problem in itself as scholars accustomed to the detective work of studying fragmentary information have suddenly had to learn "macroprocessing."

Despite this new access, one of the most important parts of life has remained essentially unprobed: contemporary Chinese popular culture. What do people think about? How do they view life? We know much more about administrative structures than about the ideas of the people who staff them and the feelings of the people who are subject to them. We know much more about economic production than about the motivations of producers and consumers.

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. For instance, unless we understand more deeply how people in different situations in China think about the tensions between hierarchy and equality and between social order and chaos, we will never comprehend why the students and workers who participated in the demonstrations demanded democracy so fervently and why some political leaders suppressed those demands so brutally. Unless we have a more subtle understanding of economic motivations, we will not understand why the workers of China have been so profoundly discontented despite an undeniable rise in their material standard of living during the past decade.

The purposes of this book are to probe this large and elusive area of popular culture, including not only cognitive ideas but also feelings, emotions, and moral and aesthetic values, and to offer theoretical and methodological suggestions to scholars interested in continuing this kind of research.

Like so many works of scholarship, this book sprouted from the union of a little money and a few vague ideas. In early 1985, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) sponsored a small brainstorming session at Ann Arbor, Michigan, to help generate ideas on priorities for funding and development of Chinese studies. Participants agreed that one underdeveloped but important area for new research on contemporary China was popular culture. Paul Pickowicz, who was present at the session, volunteered to ask Perry Link and Richard Madsen to join him in a committee to explore this topic. Jason Parker of the ACLS promised some seed money.

The project grew and the ideas became clearer. The committee began tentatively to formulate the theoretical and methodological issues involved and organized an expanded planning session with Matthew Chen, Sherman Cochrane, Deborah Davis, Gail Kligman, and Alexander Woodside. The resulting workshop (sponsored by research grants from the University of California–San Diego and UCLA) eventually led to the publication of this book.

The book's title came from a discussion about the manuscript with some intellectuals in Beijing during the fall of 1988 as the storm clouds that led to the outbursts of the Beijing Spring were already beginning to gather. Someone raised the question, What would be the best Chinese word to describe the manuscript? After a lively discussion, the Beijing scholars narrowed the choice to two terms: *wuguanfang*, literally meaning "unofficial," and *buzhengtong*, meaning "unorthodox," with a connotation of "deviant." It was interesting to learn how closely related in the Chinese universe of discourse are the unofficial and the deviant. This linguistic connection reflects a political system in which government officials consider anything outside their control to be unorthodox and deviant. The courageous advocates of democracy in China have been trying to create a system in which the unofficial would not ipso facto be held suspect but would be respected as the source of China's creativity. We hope that in some small way *Unofficial China* will help foreign readers to better appreciate the cultural challenges that the citizens of China face in their search for political reform.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our project had a fertile intellectual environment in which to grow, based on a conjuncture of two sets of developments—in the West and in China. In the United States and Europe,

> popular culture studies have, [in the words of Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson] undergone a dramatic change in the last generation—from an academic backwater, all too often a superficial pursuit of the trivial, to an intellectual hotbed, a theoretically rich and empirically expansive new focus in a variety of disciplines. Anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and literary scholars have mounted impressive intellectual challenges to basic assumptions in their own fields that had previously barred close attention to popular forms.[1]

In China, the "opening to the West" has given Western scholars access to data that allow them to join the ferment in their disciplines by doing meaningful research on popular culture in China. And the reforms in China are producing important new cultural phenomena for both Chinese and foreigners to ponder.

The principal challenge we faced as we cultivated this project was to make connections between the best ideas being discussed in theoretical studies of popular culture and the actual practice of doing research about China. For instance, we had to develop working definitions of our primary terms that could fit the kinds of information we could gather about life in China and that would speak to some of the most salient issues in contemporary Chinese society. For the purposes of this book, then, what do we mean by "culture"? What do we mean by "popular"? What, for that matter, do we mean by "China"?

In our planning sessions and in the workshop, we had lively discussions about all of these topics. Were we to define culture as "mental life," "consciousness," "values," "feelings," "aesthetic understandings"? Was culture something subjective—ideas and/or feelings in people's minds—or objective—symbolic resources like language and ritual or literary texts and dramatic performances that people make use of in the process of thinking and feeling? In the growing theoretical literature on popular culture one can find a confusing array of arguments for defining culture in any of these various ways. For China scholars at this stage of China's history and at this stage of the field's development, which are the best alternatives?

The chapters in this volume represent no simple consensus on these issues. At some level, of course, all would assume that culture has both an objective and subjective dimension: that it consists of shared symbolic resources possessed by communities, handed down by tradition, and embedded in the fabric of institutions; that these resources are constantly being reinterpreted, refashioned, and regenerated by the individuals who make up these communities, participate in these traditions, and live within these institutions; and that the goal of our research should be to capture some sense of the dialectical interplay between these objective and subjective dimensions of

culture. However, the chapters here represent different approaches to the questions of which dimension to emphasize and how to accomplish a sense of the interplay between them.

Some of our authors emphasize the subjective side of the equation. By using participant-observation and depth interviewing, they try to convey a rich sense of how particular individuals under different circumstances subjectively understand common cultural predicaments. They attempt to achieve an insider's knowledge of contemporary Chinese culture. The author who succeeds most fully in this, of course, is Zhang Xinxin—she *is* an insider, and she describes, sometimes in stream-of-consciousness fashion, the feelings of young intellectuals like herself who are going through divorce. But even Zhang Xinxin's chapter is not devoid of a sense of detachment from the subjective understandings of her interviewees. To give perspective to her interviews, Zhang sketches in a broad, if rather impressionistically defined, backdrop of the external constraints—social class relations, mobility opportunities, laws, and traditional mores—that shape Chinese marriage relations.

Zhang Xinxin emphasizes the subjective dimension of the culture of family life in China; David Arkush emphasizes the objective dimension. His account of Chinese ideas about love and marriage, based on a study of the texts of local operas performed in Ding County half a century ago, stands outside of Chinese culture in time as well as place. Yet by conveying an impressionistic sense of how these operas came to be written and produced and how audiences responded to them, even Arkush's chapter manages to suggest how Chinese people subjectively perceived the social rules for family life.

Both Zhang Xinxin's intimate, subjective understanding and David Arkush's detached, objective analysis of Chinese culture have strengths and weaknesses. For a working China scholar, however, a choice between these approaches depends not merely on theoretical desiderata but also on practical necessities. One has to make the best possible use of the resources available to explore a topic. Both Zhang Xinxin's and David Arkush's chapters are commendable because they demonstrate their authors' respective strengths. And together, they provide intellectually provocative, complementary perspectives on Chinese family life: Zhang Xinxin's modern, urban intellectuals are enacting what David Arkush's traditional peasants sometimes fantasized about. Did the old fantasies somehow pave the way for the new realities?

If Zhang Xinxin's and David Arkush's chapters on marriage and family life represent dialectically opposite poles in the tension between the objective and subjective dimensions of cultural analysis, Deborah Davis's chapter represents a kind of synthesis. It conveys a vivid sense—a sense perhaps possible only to an outsider not numbed by constant exposure to the routine of ordinary life in China—of the external constraints imposed on contemporary urban family life by the limitations of housing space. This chapter also shows how individuals, especially women, subjectively perceive these limitations and try partially to overcome them by meaningfully organizing their living space. With varying emphases, most of the other chapters in this book attempt such a synthesis between external and internal, between objective and subjective understandings of contemporary Chinese culture.

Although these chapters represent, at least implicitly, a variety of ways to approach an understanding of "culture," they also represent a variety of ways to define "popular." In our conference and its antecedent planning sessions, we introduced one another to distinctions between such categories as folk culture and mass culture, high culture and low culture, hegemonic culture and counterhegemonic culture. Where do we locate our working understanding of popular culture among these galaxies of ideas?

Each of these distinctions has its origin in different ways of understanding the most basic problems of modern society. The distinction between folk culture and mass culture revolves around the problems posed by the destruction of traditional ways of thinking and living, for example, the erosion of folk religion by the ideas conveyed in modern mass media such as advertising and political propaganda. The distinction between high culture and low culture calls attention to the conflicts between aristocratic groups— people with "good breeding" and superior educations—and the democratic aspirations of ordinary people. The distinction between hegemonic culture and counterhegemonic culture reflects Marxian concerns for understanding the possibilities of class consciousness and class conflict.

The chapters in this book define popular culture in a way that centers around the most salient problem in modern China—the tension between state and society. Again, our chapters represent a variety of approaches within a broadly defined consensus. All of our chapters at least implicitly define popular culture as distinct from official culture, that is, the official ideology of the Chinese state. Popular culture, as the term is used here, consists of ideas, beliefs, and practices that have origins at least partially independent of the state. Each author portrays his or her topic as something that the government has wanted to suppress or sought to discourage (religious practice, described in Helen Siu's and Richard Madsen's chapters; divorce, discussed by Zhang Xinxin; underground literature, studied by Perry Link; and ethnic prejudice against the Subei people, described in Emily Honig's chapter), or pretended to ignore (the private sphere of family life analyzed by Deborah Davis and the aesthetic preferences described by Ellen Laing), or warily tried to co-opt (the new private entrepreneurship, studied by Thomas Gold; the creation of politically critical movies, discussed by Paul Pickowicz; and the use of survey analysis among social science professionals, described by Stanley Rosen). 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.

However, there are also other kinds of tension in China: 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." Individual chapters also deal with different aspects of these tensions and can speak to scholars who are interested in the study of popular culture from these various perspectives.

Besides pondering long and hard what we meant by popular culture, we devoted considerable effort to construct a working definition of China!

Having defined popular culture as nonofficial culture, we were faced with the problem of how to conceive of the unity and diversity of China. Outside of the government and its ideology, which embrace the whole of China, are there any commonalities of experience, thought, values? Or are there many Chinas, many social worlds, defined by particular, idiosyncratic cultures? Many of the chapters deal with small subgroups within the large political entity called China. We do not assume that the pieces of popular culture we study are widely shared. The Chinese Catholics of Richard Madsen's chapter comprise less than 1 percent of the Chinese population, and less than 10 percent of the population (though "fully half" of Zhang Xinxin's college classmates) get divorced. Is there any way meaningfully to think of the ideas and practices of these small segments as a part of larger patterns of thought and practice shared by almost all Chinese? The chapters in this book do not offer clear answers to this question. Most of the authors are careful not to generalize beyond the particular groups whose culture they study. But implicitly, at least, many suggest that the particular fragments of culture they discuss gain meaning and significance from their relationship to a larger whole. For instance, some of the most idiosyncratic twists of plot in Perry Link's hand-copied novels still reflect, if only in mockery, widely accepted Chinese idioms, as in the story of the soldier who is handed a ticking time bomb and has to call in an official report to his superior before disposing of the bomb! Though framed by the particular experiences of specific groups, our chapters all point beyond themselves, offering windows into Chinese culture as a whole. Even when—perhaps especially when— they offer perspectives different from those of the most powerful members of the society or the most numerous segments of the population, these windows onto the culture may show us much of significance about that culture's basic dynamics.

Drawing broadly on the theories about popular culture that come out of our various academic disciplines, we have tried to adapt these ideas to the special requirements of understanding contemporary China. We hope that our work will in turn enrich the theoretical discourse of our disciplines. Recent Chinese history offers a host of paradoxes, anomalies that do not easily fit standard academic theories of culture. The most notable among these perhaps is the extraordinary resistance of traditional forms of thought to modernization, as exemplified in the ability of religious practices to revive after being systematically suppressed by a Marxist government for longer than a generation. Notable, too, is the resurgence of aristocratic culture in a society that has publicly propagated extreme egalitarianism. Efforts to explain such paradoxes adequately will surely lead to important innovations in academic theories of popular culture. Scholars interested in popular culture theories should therefore take careful note of developments in China, which are too important to be left to China specialists.

METHODOLOGY

To fulfill its scholarly promise, a project such as ours faces enormous difficulties, of course. With a population as huge and diverse as China's one

must always take care to specify which part of it one is speaking of. Moreover, aspects of popular culture do not only vary with objectively measurable variables such as age, sex, education, locale, ethnicity, occupation, and official status. They can vary as well from public to private contexts (as when a propaganda official criticizes a short story at the office, but supplies it to his daughter at home), and even with the varying moods to which all human beings are subject. Finally, typical ideas and feelings, whether of groups or individuals, can change over time. As a first step to addressing these complex questions, the editors asked each author to identify, insofar as possible, the group whose culture he or she is dealing with.

Even when one's subjects have been reasonably well identified, there remains the larger problem of how, put bluntly, to get inside other people's heads. This is, of course, a theoretical problem for any culture at any time. Fundamentally, it is the philosophical problem of "other minds." You can observe my behavior, but how can you know with certainty what thought accompanies it? You can listen to what I say about my thought, but by what standard can you check the accuracy of my description, which may be misleading whether I intend it to be or not? Such questions, which are only compounded when one deals with foreign cultures, may seem sufficiently daunting as to recommend simple agnosticism about what happens inside the minds of others. Why not simply content ourselves with objective descriptions of speech and overt actions, without trying to plumb to the level of subjectivity?

First, it must be clear that we are *not* assuming in this book that speech and action are somehow separate from thought, nor that they should, as it were, be bypassed as we try to discover what thought really is. Quite to the contrary, what people say and do—as the chapters here show—form the bulk of the evidence for what they think and feel. The extremely complex interplay of thought, speech, and action are theoretical questions beyond our present scope; we employ here only the minimal assumption that a full and satisfying account of life is possible only if *all three* are considered. Everyone has had the experience of acting on an idea without talking about it, of expressing a thought in words without doing anything about it, or of thinking one thing while saying and doing either something else or nothing at all. These simple reflections, added to the safe assumption that human beings in China are no different from human beings elsewhere, should make it plain that the effort to account for thought is worthwhile.

We posit four levels of thought in everyday Chinese life:

1. *Official ideals.* These are the public propaganda goals that are announced by the party leadership and held up for public assent. They are pervasive, relatively uniform, and protected from overt dissent (e.g., "Strive for the Four Modernizations").

2. *Thought as expressed.* Ideas and values expressed in words include official ideals, but also extend far beyond them, especially in private contexts: "Peanut oil is too expensive!" How congruent verbal expressions may be with inner thought is, of course, open to question. The statement, "Since peanut oil is too expensive, we must strive harder for the Four Modern-

izations!" could easily spring from thoughts other than those expressed in the surface meaning.

3. *Thought as acted upon.* Ideas and values that govern behavior may coincide with official ideals or verbal expression, but also may not: high officials sending their children for study in the bourgeois West.

4. *"Silent" thought.* One must always assume, especially in a society with a tradition of state control of expression, the possible existence of thought and feeling that are neither expressed nor acted upon. Research of such thought is inevitably frustrating, limited, as it must by definition be, either to earlier times (about which people *now* may talk) or to speculative extrapolation into the present based on other times or places. Nevertheless, recent history in China has shown that the more accessible aspects of thought—those tied to speech and action—are better appreciated if this silent category is also borne in mind.

The positing of these four categories does not imply that every thought falls neatly into one of the four. Obviously an idea can be both expressed and acted upon—and in accord with official ideals as well. The present project aims to skip over level 1 and look at levels 2, 3, and (where possible) 4. We choose this "unofficial" emphasis not from a bias that unofficial China is the only real China, or that official ideology is merely superficial; we view both official and unofficial thought as fully real, and indeed complexly interrelated.

The chapters that follow explore unofficial thought in a wide variety of ways. Scholars from several disciplines (history, literature, art, sociology, anthropology, political science) use various materials and methods (field observation, interviews, surveys, fiction, film, painting, opera) to explore ways in which contemporary popular thought can be discovered and studied.

Although each chapter will speak for itself, we can offer some general observations on the efficacy of our several methods, which can be organized roughly into four categories: (1) interview and field observation, (2) inference from cultural artifacts, (3) inference based on continuities with earlier times, and (4) use of surveys.

Interview and Field Observation. Most of our chapters use interview and observation to some extent; those by Honig, Siu, Davis, and Gold use it primarily. The strengths and weaknesses of the interview method for the China field are well known, having been intelligently discussed by earlier researchers such as Martin Whyte,[2] Andrew Walder,[3] Anita Chan,[4] and Anne Thurston.[5] One problem widely discussed in the past has been whether émigré interviews in Hong Kong adequately reveal life in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The reopening of China eliminates that question only superficially. The two basic worries that underlay the question of Hong Kong interviews—representativeness and reliability—remain as problems.

The researcher still needs to estimate how representative a particular view is, and among what group. This requires, fully as much as it did in Hong Kong, that one consider the background and viewpoint of the interviewee, and that one cross-check differing accounts. While direct access to China

allows greater immersion in the details of a specific location, and hence greater confidence about it, the danger grows commensurately that one's conclusions will not be generalizable to other places. There remains a need for careful delineation of the populace of whom one speaks.

The question of reliability—sometimes called veracity—persists as well. How does one know when a respondent is offering a "correct" answer rather than a frank opinion?[6] How does one gauge the biases that can arise because an interview might be audited by others, or because of its formal context, or because the interviewer is a foreigner?

Theoretically, it is always possible to doubt an answer on such grounds, just as it is possible—theoretically—to say that blood is actually green and is only perceived as red when viewed by the human eye. But, unless one espouses such extreme skepticism, there are reliable signs by which to recognize candor and escape excessive doubt. For example, Anne Thurston was able to note points at which interviewees switched unmistakably from "recitation of the prevailing orthodoxy" to detailed accounts of "their own personal stories."[7] Thurston and Andrew Walder, both advocates of an open-ended interview structure, found stories that popped up unexpectedly, bristling with concrete detail, to be not only beyond reasonable doubt but persuasive enough to induce them to alter and refine their research questions.[8] Thurston and Anita Chan both were able to dispense with much doubt after developing personal relationships that made their informants into friends.[9] Chan even found defensiveness and embarrassment—normally barriers to frankness— to be interpretable data in their own right.[10]

In short, when one knows an informant long and well enough to observe him or her in various moods and contexts, systematic doubt about sincerity becomes unsustainable. Can a person continue to dissemble when angry? Exhilarated? Frustrated? Exhausted? To do so would require nearly super-human efforts, and at some point the burden of proof must shift to the skeptic who imagines such efforts to be at work. What might be called contextually rich interviewing has become much more possible with the opening of China, and with it suspicions of artificial answers must also diminish.

Moving farther along a spectrum that begins with the highly structured interview and proceeds to open-ended and contextually rich interviews, one comes to actual field observation and participation. Thomas Gold, in his research on individual entrepreneurs in Shanghai, used a method of participant-interview whereby he listened and asked questions while actually employing the services of the people he sought to understand. Cantonese-speaking Helen Siu, in the Guangdong delta, was able to use methods both of trained ethnographer and daily-life participant. Zhang Xinxin, whose chapter on divorce is based on cases she knows well from her own life context, represents, in a sense, the unstructured extreme of a spectrum of interview methodologies.

Inference from Cultural Artifacts. This method is exemplified in the chapters by Ellen Laing, David Arkush, Paul Pickowicz, and Perry Link, although each author uses other methods as well. It is important to understand