

The “Affective Alliance”: *Undercover*, Internet Media Fandom, and the Sociality of Cultural Consumption in Postsocialist China¹

Shuyu Kong

We first came together because of *Undercover*, and we got to know each other through this common interest. *Undercover* brought us together here, and even though it has made us sad, it has also strengthened our happiness.

I began browsing the “Making Fun of *Undercover*” bulletin board the very first day it started. It became compulsory reading for me, and eventually I joined the discussion myself. Here, I found joy and friendship that helped me forget my unhappiness and the pain of my illness. My fellow “net bar” posters have sacrificed a lot of their time to pour out their emotions here. . . . Numerous children of the ‘80s and ‘90s have enthusiastically participated after completing their homework, and judging from their responses, it’s clear they have deep and sincere affection for our whole bulletin board family. And net friends who are already working have managed to squeeze out time in the midst of their work and family duties to post contributions and add to our joy. . . . I am deeply moved by all of this enthusiasm.

A few days ago, when I was preparing some statistics on the

¹ I would like to thank the organizers at the School of Journalism, Chinese University of Hong Kong, for inviting me to attend a workshop on Chinese language television drama and for generously sponsoring a one-month visiting scholarship, during which this paper was conceived. I particularly benefited from inspiring exchanges with Anthony Fung, Joseph Chan, Eric Ma, Lili Zhu, Ruoyun Bai, and Zhi’an Zhang. Pal Nyiri, Faye H. Xiao, and Yi Zhou also gave useful suggestions after reading my first draft. I also thank the two anonymous readers for their insightful and constructive questions for revision and Kirk Denton for his careful editorial work. Finally, I would like to thank Colin Hawes, my first reader and at-hand editor for his generosity and patience during the writing process.

number of posts on our “Making Fun” bulletin board, I found there were almost 700 initial posts already, and that doesn’t include the countless appended comic poems, sequels to initial posts, and follow-up threads. There were so many that it was inconvenient to browse through them all. . . . I decided to rearrange and edit the original threads by compiling the best posts into an anthology called “Have a Good Time: The Best of Making Fun of *Undercover*’s Characters.” I present it here for all of you to enjoy—it’s the least I could do for you, my dear friends and fellow members of this net bar.

I welcome all of you, my dear friends, to keep on coming back! Let us continue meeting together in this place, because we all hope to find happiness, and happiness is what we need, so we should learn to enjoy the happiness we find here even more! I hope you will get a big laugh from this selection and that it will prolong your youth forever!

[posted by] Da’aiwubian, Nov. 29, 2009, 9:01 A.M

Written in a lofty style reminiscent of Mao Zedong’s famous speech “Serving the People” (Wei renmin fuwu), this post by a netizen and fan of the Chinese TV series *Undercover* (Qianfu, 2008) is dedicated to a slightly less sublime subject: it introduces a new thread editing the best posts under the “Tiaokan *Qianfu* renwu” (Making fun of characters in *Undercover*) online fan bulletin board. This choice of “sublime” language and rhetoric for a “trivial” hobby such as an online fan club might appear inappropriate to many outsiders—indeed the nostalgic revolutionary expressions of “comradeship” seem incongruous in this context—but it captures the particular mores and sensibility of numerous media fans in general, and this group, the so-called *qianting* (submarines), or fans of the TV serial *Undercover*, in particular.

In fact, for Chinese readers familiar with premodern literati writings such as Wang Xizhi’s “Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection” (Lanting ji xu; fourth century), which describes an informal poetry gathering in the spring countryside, this form of affective engagement also has distant

echoes of “the joys of the ancients.” Yet despite its strange mixture of traditional literati-style self-consciousness and group cultivation with a kind of socialist self-sacrifice for the collective good, this virtual community is characteristic of the kinds of social networks and popular cultural practices that have emerged with the arrival of the Internet and new media in China.

Since the mid-1990s, China has seen an explosive growth in Internet use, and the Internet has profoundly transformed people’s cultural lives and social communication. By the end of 2010, China had more than 457 million Internet users, including 303 million who go online via cell phones (CNNIC 2010a). For the past decade, the most important role that the Internet has played in China is to deliver entertainment and media content. With technologies such as broadband and high-definition digital video improving the environment for online viewing, networked video has become the fastest developing area in Internet media, with users reaching 284 million in 2010, constituting 62.1% of all Internet users. Among these networked video users, 89.3% prefer watching films, and 66.5% watch TV series, whereas only 31.9% of them go to conventional movie theaters and only 24.7% watch television (CNNIC 2010b). Moreover, the Internet has not only changed how media content is delivered but has also had a profound influence on how this content is consumed. Statistics show that networked video users find media content mainly through search engines and recommendations of Internet social networks, with the latter constituting 53.9% of the total. Then through instant messaging (IM) and social network services (SNS), these Internet users immediately forward or share media content with people to whom they are virtually connected. In fact, according to a recent report from the China Internet Network Information Center, the 124 million users of social network services make up almost one third of the total number of netizens, with students and young professionals among the two largest groups, constituting 50.3% and 31.1% of the total, respectively (CNNIC 2009). The interactive features

the Internet provides have resulted in an enormous proliferation of fan websites, discussion lists, and personal blogs (including burgeoning “mini-blogs” [*weibo*], which are more flexible and mobile), and consequently have created new forms of social interaction about and around media texts in an instant and multidirected way not seen in conventional print and electronic media.

Internet media fandom is thus an emerging phenomenon within the context of media production and consumption in contemporary China. By “Internet media fandom,” I refer to individuals or groups of people who are extremely familiar, even obsessed, with certain media texts and who engage consistently and passionately in various Internet activities relating to those texts, such as blogging, posting on BBS boards at fan club sites, and contacting friends and acquaintances via IM and SMS to share their experiences and opinions. In this way, they form virtual communities and create platforms where intellectual interaction and emotional nurturing can occur. This media fandom, I would argue, not only demonstrates a new form of creative energy and interpretative practice among the younger generation of Chinese in the digital age, but also indicates a new kind of social bonding and communication through cultural consumption, in other words, a “participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992) and “collective intelligence” (Levy 1997) in postsocialist China. In this light, the online forums where Internet media fandom takes place become invaluable ethnographic sites for the study of popular culture and public discourse as well as emerging forms of the public sphere in contemporary China.

Scholars of Chinese media and cultural studies have used various approaches to understand the rapid growth of China’s entertainment industry and popular culture, from political economy to industry studies to discourse analysis, and some edited collections have adopted multiple perspectives to explain the role of the media in China’s social and cultural transformation (Donald et al. 2002; Lee 2003; Keane/Moran 2007; Zhu et al. 2008; Zhu/Berry 2009; Shirk 2011). Among the media studied, television

drama—one of the most popular genres and the product of a huge cultural industry—has garnered a large share of scholarly attention. However, most of the existing research focuses either on media practitioners and media texts (Zhu 2009; Zhong 2010) or on the current status and political structure of media production (Yin 2002; Zhao 2008). A crucial aspect of this dynamic of popular culture and mass media—namely, the reception by and interactivity among mass consumers—has unfortunately been left unexamined, and has thus become a neglected area in Chinese television and film studies.

In the following pages, I examine the role of the Internet in new forms of cultural consumption and social communication in contemporary China through an ethnographic study of Internet media fandom of the 2008 TV spy drama *Undercover* (fig. 1).² My ethnographic research utilizes primarily two streams of Internet sources. The first comes from an observational study of online communal interaction over a period of time, focusing on the *Undercover* Fan Club (*wangba*) on Baidu's post bar, one of the largest search engines and social network service providers in China. The second comes from a content/discourse analysis of the discussions and reviews of *Undercover* posted on Douban Net (*Douban wang*), a web-based media and art community highly regarded for the quality, and often controversial content, of its film, TV drama, and book reviews. Whereas the latter demonstrates a more opinion-based fan negotiation and interpretation of the meaning of the TV series, the former provides a broader understanding of the culture of Internet media fan communities based on their ordinary interactions, activities, and stated values/concerns. These two sources are also at opposite ends of the censorship spectrum, with Douban being relatively open and Baidu much more strictly controlled in content.³

In observing and describing the communicative practices and fan interactions that have evolved around *Undercover*, I seek to answer some more general theoretical questions: (1) What makes a media text living and relevant from the perspective of media consumption and reproduction? (2)



Fig. 1 Poster for TV drama *Undercover*.

² The reasons I choose *Undercover* become clear later in the essay. Here I briefly summarize them: first, *Undercover* is regarded as a representative and, to date, the most highly regarded work of spy drama, an extremely popular genre on Chinese television in recent years. Second, the substantial online materials on *Undercover* fandom make it feasible to study its interactive audience responses. Third, the ambiguities in the content and characters of this drama leave a particularly fertile interpretative space for fans to supply their own meanings, through which we infer their deeper concerns about contemporary Chinese society.

³ My role in this ethnographic study is basically that of a noninvolved observer. I have been an occasional reader of both *Baidu tieba* and *Douban wang* for nearly five years, but I began systematically investigating the two specific fan communities on *Undercover*

during the research and writing of this paper from February to July 2011. These two different types of fan groups or ethnographic sites reflect the great variety of virtual spaces in China and the distinctiveness of their respective cultures, an issue that I wish to call to scholars' attention.

⁴ Affect has become an increasingly ambiguous and multilayered term with the recent development of the "affective turn" in humanities and social science research. Here I use "affect" in a similar way to Lawrence Grossberg; it is not simply a synonym for "emotion" and "feeling," but is also a function, among other things, of catharsis and libidinal qualification. Affect is thus the key to "mattering maps," or the maps people construct in order to articulate what matters most to them in their everyday lives: "Affect operates across all our senses and experiences, across all of the domains of effects which

How does media fandom function as a new form of social networking and interpersonal connectivity in contemporary China? (3) What is the role of affect and its various forms in the production of meanings among viewers, in other words, how does affect make certain cultural forms and practices "popular," and thereby create connections, or "affective alliances," both among viewers themselves and between media texts and viewers? I borrow the term "affective alliance" from Lawrence Grossberg, whose concepts of "affective," "articulation," and "conjuncture" provide a theoretical framework for this paper. In explaining the popular culture significance of rock and roll, Grossberg's concern is to describe what happens in the spaces that develop between music and fans, and he argues that rock and roll becomes visible only when it is located within "the production of a network of empowerment." Grossberg (1997: 44) refers to this network as an "affective alliance": "The existence of the Rock and Roll apparatus is then precisely in its production of itself as an affective alliance that is the site of empowerment between the music and the fans. . . . The result is that it locates, for the fans, the possibility of intervention and pleasure." So affective alliance as a network can be described as "an organisation of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms and social experience which both opens up and structures the space of our affective investments in the world" (ibid.).⁴

Before going into the analysis of the web-based fandom surrounding *Undercover*, I first provide brief historical background on "spy drama" (*diezhan ju*) in China and introduce the production context of *Undercover*, which helps to explain why I have chosen the fandom surrounding *Undercover* as my case study.

The Revival of Spy Theme TV Drama in the 2000s

In some ways, it should be no surprise that Chinese TV screens have seen the return of spy dramas in the new millennium. After all, the first TV series in postsocialist China was *Diyong shiba nian* (Eighteen years in the enemy

camp, 1981), a nine-episode drama depicting an undercover Communist who infiltrates the Nationalist government for eighteen years (from 1931 to 1949). Conceived as a Chinese effort to curb the prevailing “negative” influence of foreign TV series introduced to Chinese screens in the early 1980s, including the most popular one, *Garrison’s Gorillas* (ABC 1967, Chinese translation, *Jialisen gansidui*),⁵ the production and broadcast of *Eighteen Years* was a fully state-sponsored CCTV project that marked not only the attempt of domestic TV drama to compete with imported dramas but also the official approval of the popular spy genre on the small screen. The TV series was an immediate success and its theme song, “The Dawn Is Coming,” could be heard in towns and cities throughout China in the 1980s.

Like spy movies in the West, such as the James Bond series, which have ideological and social roots in the Cold War period, the Chinese spy genre originated in the late 1940s, when China was split into two distinct political camps.⁶ The genre then matured during the 1950s–1970s, with two main story types: the undercover story in which underground CCP agents hide in the heart of the enemy’s territory; and what could be called an “anti-spy” story, in which Chinese police and state security agents uncover traitorous moles planted by either the Taiwanese Nationalists or the American “imperialists.” In establishing the special set of conventions of the spy genre, imported spy movies and spy fiction from the Soviet Union served as a major ideological source and narrative model.⁷ The spy genre reached its peak in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before the Cultural Revolution broke out. The particular Cold War ideology in China at that time, which is best manifested by Mao’s famous warnings about “subversive imperialist forces” and “never forgetting class struggle,” is deeply inscribed in the genre, and the anti-spy movie became the dominant type in those years. In fact, anti-spy sentiment had such a lasting impact on the social imagination that even during the cultural suppression between 1966 and 1976, a large body of unofficial cultural products, in particular hand-copied literature,

construct daily life. Affect is what gives ‘color,’ ‘tone,’ or ‘texture’ to the lived” (Grossberg 1992: 80–81).

⁵ CCTV’s broadcast of this imported TV series was cut short after its fifteenth episode, and it was never officially released again. However, the fifteen episodes had already created a cult following among Chinese audiences, and many underground/unofficial video halls in the 1980s played the whole series (including the last ten episodes) and used it to attract customers. This *Garrison’s Gorillas* cult didn’t die out until the early 1990s, when a more mature domestic cultural market started to emerge, and more contemporary foreign products, especially American blockbuster films and TV series, became available in China. Interestingly, the original time slot for *Garrison’s Gorillas* was subsequently used for the North Korean anti-spy series *Nameless Hero* (무명영웅, Chinese translation *Wuming yingxiong*), which later also exerted a strong influence on the production of TV spy drama in China: many fans on the *Undercover Net Bar* have pointed out that *Nameless Hero* was a major inspiration for *Undercover*.

⁶ Dai Jinhua (2010) points out that spy films made in the late 1940s by the Nationalist government, such as *Tianzi di yi hao* (Number one in the world), not only foreshadowed the subsequent Cold War ideology between Communism and Nationalism, but also set up a narrative mode for later spy movies, including those from the socialist camp.

⁷ According to Dai Jinhua, during the period when China and the Soviets

were close allies in the 1950s, China imported more than 300 films, of which twenty-nine were spy movies. These films supplied the narrative models for Chinese spy movies (Dai 2010: 94).

⁸ Dai 2010: 95. Some famous examples of hand-copied literature included *A Pair of Embroidered Shoes*, *Plum Blossom*, *Green Corpse*, and *A Lock of Blonde Hair*. Often they made use of generic characters and plots full of suspense, murder, and seductive women, but on the other hand, they also included communist revolutionary slogans and stereotypical Communist Party heroes. For more detailed accounts of hand-copied books and their revival after the Cultural Revolution, see Link 1989 and Nielsen 2002.

was actually a strange “hybrid of the anti-spy fiction/film of the 1950s and popular ghost and horror fiction from the urban culture of the 1930s.”⁸

As already noted, the anti-spy genre also experienced a resurgence in publications, TV series, and film productions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but most of these works were actually delayed republications or remakes of pre-Cultural Revolution works, part of the movement for correcting wrongs committed during the previous ten years. The genre gradually faded from the popular culture scene as Cold War tension was replaced by a more collaborative approach between the previously oppositional camps of West and East, and it didn’t make much noticeable impact again until the turn of the millennium, when the Chinese cultural industry experienced another wave of nostalgic reproduction of “red classics” (*hongse jingdian*) from the high socialist period (Liu Kang 2010).

The first noticeable precursor of the most recent revival of the TV spy genre was *Shiyan wusheng* (Silent vow), a twenty-episode drama broadcast in 2002, which continued the familiar anti-spy narrative tradition depicting state security agents unearthing Nationalist moles who were trying to undermine the PRC’s new submarine project. Although the plot reminds one of 1950s films or hand-copied literature from the 1970s, the change of time and social conditions since then meant that its depiction of the 1960s evoked nostalgic sentiments among viewers for those “passionate years.” Moreover, the drama displays some ambivalent messages and feelings, especially in depicting conflicts between the characters’ loyalty toward the state/country and their personal fate and identity, hinting that they were not the single-mindedly determined revolutionary heroes that appeared in previous anti-spy dramas.

In the decade since then, spy dramas have grown to dominate television screens and create another popular culture craze. From a media production perspective, there were two main reasons why the spy genre shot to popularity so quickly during this time. First, spy drama seems to be a safe choice because it belongs to the broad category of red classics: its whole set

of generic conventions developed during the high socialist period, and the plots are supposed to promote revolutionary heroism and idealism; likewise, the story is set in the past, and thus avoids sensitive contemporary subjects. Thus the empty slots on numerous TV stations that spy drama filled were precisely those left by police/crime dramas when the censors restricted that genre in the mid-2000s.⁹ Yet, at the same time, the genre contains all the desired elements and appeal of good entertainment, such as suspense, plot twists and turns, and good versus evil, which made it an ideal candidate for the kind of popular “edutainment” product that Chinese TV stations were looking for. In fact, recent spy dramas such as *Liming zhi qian* (Before the dawn, 2010) have deliberately borrowed narrative and editing techniques from imported TV genres, especially American action-oriented serials, to meet the demand of young cosmopolitan audiences.

As a result, TV spy dramas flooded the country, both newly created series and remakes of previous spy films or dramas, including the aforementioned nine-episode *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp*, which in 2008 was turned into a 120-episode epic divided into a trilogy. This craze for spy dramas reached its peak with *Undercover*, a drama that managed the unusual feat of topping the TV ratings and at the same time winning numerous official awards.

Interestingly, as exemplified by recent dramas such as *Undercover*, *Before the Dawn*, and *Plotting* (Ansuan, 2006), in the 2000s’ revival of the spy genre the undercover/mole story has replaced the former anti-spy plots to dominate spy TV serials, films, and fictional works; this shift appears to be related to contemporary public sentiment and social emotions, such as the uncertainty of identity and moral anxiety in today’s increasingly confusing world of new technology, ideological conflicts, and transnational flows. I amplify this point later, after a brief description of the basic plot of *Undercover*.

The story revolves around Yu Zecheng, a Communist spy who “lurks” in the Tianjin office of the Military Bureau of Statistics and Investigation,

⁹ During one of the government’s periodic tightening of control and censorship over TV drama broadcasts, SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) decided that the then most popular TV police/crime dramas (*jingfei ju*), such as *Black Hole* (Heidong, 2001), which were so often tied up with themes of the corruption of high officials and other economic corruption, were “having an unhealthy and negative impact on impressionable viewers,” and issued a notice in April 2004 ordering that “all TV stations and their channels (satellite or not) should reschedule their existing crime TV dramas, films, TV films and documentaries to 23:00 or later in the evening” (SARFT 2004). As a result of the lost chance to broadcast during the profitable prime-time slot, it became uneconomical to produce crime dramas, and all such dramas that were being shot or were in preproduction were “voluntarily” terminated. Suddenly a genre that had dominated the prime-time slot for half a decade virtually disappeared from Chinese TV screens.

the notorious Nationalist secret service in the 1940s (better known by its Chinese abbreviation, Juntong). It describes Yu's attempts to assist the Communist cause and remain undetected, while at the same time following his three successive romantic liaisons. At the beginning of the drama, Yu is a loyal core member of Juntong, part of its first group of trainees, and with his assassination of "traitors" in the final stages of the Sino-Japanese war he wins the personal trust of its chief, General Dai Li. However, after the ensuing civil war ruins his dream of a peaceful life with his beloved girlfriend, Zuo Lan, who is a strong believer in Communism, Yu faces a major conflict between his political and personal loyalties. Eventually the idealistic Yu is repelled by the massive corruption of Nationalist officials and secretly joins the CCP, who order him to stay in his position and work for Communism from inside the Juntong. To assist in his underground work and look after his daily needs, a former peasant guerrilla veteran, Cuiping, is sent to live with Yu as his "wife." After initial misunderstandings and awkwardness between the educated and thoughtful Yu and the illiterate and straightforward Cuiping, the two develop true feelings for each other. And when Yu's first love, Zuo Lan, dies while protecting Yu and Cuiping's cover, the two really do get married. During this time, Yu has provided much useful information for the Communists that contributes to their effort to win the civil war. Although Yu's hard work, apparent "loyalty," and low-key attitude win him the personal favor of his director in the Juntong, the jealousy and suspicion of his colleagues and the transfer of a cunning and loyal agent, Li Ya, into his office pose an increasingly dangerous threat to Yu. In the fierce struggle between Yu and Li, several undercover Communists, including Cuiping, are exposed. Cuiping has to flee to Communist-controlled territory, but Yu manages to survive Li's machinations without being exposed. In 1949, Yu reluctantly follows his director to Taiwan, where the latter has already prepared a safe haven for himself by setting up a business and accumulating money through extortion and bribes. The series ends with Yu marrying his new "wife," Wanqiu, who

was once his student in Tianjin, and remaining committed to the undercover patriotic role he has devoted himself to, but he secretly misses Cuiping, who has now given birth to a baby girl and is forced to hide in an isolated mountain village in order to protect Yu's identity.

Soon after it was first broadcast on Tianjin TV in November 2008, *Undercover* received enthusiastic responses from a broad range of viewers, which prompted many other provincial TV stations to rebroadcast it. The result was unusually high viewing rates in the second run of the TV series in April 2009. Although the series was named one of the most influential TV dramas of the year (2009) by the TV Drama Committee of SARFT, won many official awards, including the official eleventh Five Ones Project Award (2007–2009), and has been praised by official media, academics, and mainstream critics for advocating socialist ideas and values and resurrecting the selfless Communist hero-type, it has also been popular among ordinary fans, who have produced provocative alternative readings and controversial responses that differ in many ways from the fulsome praise recorded in the official media. These fans express their opinions and interact with each other mainly through the Internet, mobile phones, and other social network services. In fact, according to some researchers, it was largely due to the enthusiastic response by fans on the Internet that the series stood out and caught the attention of so many provincial TV stations, leading to its rebroadcast. Its popularity is therefore closely tied up with the reputation that it gained on the Internet (Zhu Lili 2009).

An analysis of the reception of *Undercover*, especially among younger fans, and the online interpretative practices surrounding this drama is, therefore, crucial for a deeper understanding of why spy drama has become one of the most popular TV genres in recent years. In particular, it will reveal how new media such as the Internet are playing a major role in creating social networks and public space through their interactive and creative consumption of popular culture products.

The Habitus of China's Post-1980s Generation and Knowledge-Based Middle Class

To contextualize the following discussion on how fans' production of meaning of *Undercover* represents an alternative and occasionally subversive deconstruction of the official discourse on spy dramas, a brief digression on media fans' "socio-emotional environment" (Baym 1998: 116)—in other words, their emotional lives and the social experience in postsocialist China that has shaped their interpretative practices—is in order.

As mentioned earlier, Douban Net is distinctive compared to other social network services because of its active art and media communities and the quality of its user-generated content, in particular its reviews of media products, including music, books, films, and TV series (fig. 2). Douban is not the most popular web portal—it had 30 million registered users in 2010 plus a growing number of anonymous nonregistered users (Ye 2011)—but it has become one of the most influential portals, attracting intellectuals, geeks, and urban hipsters to exchange comments and ideas in forum-like

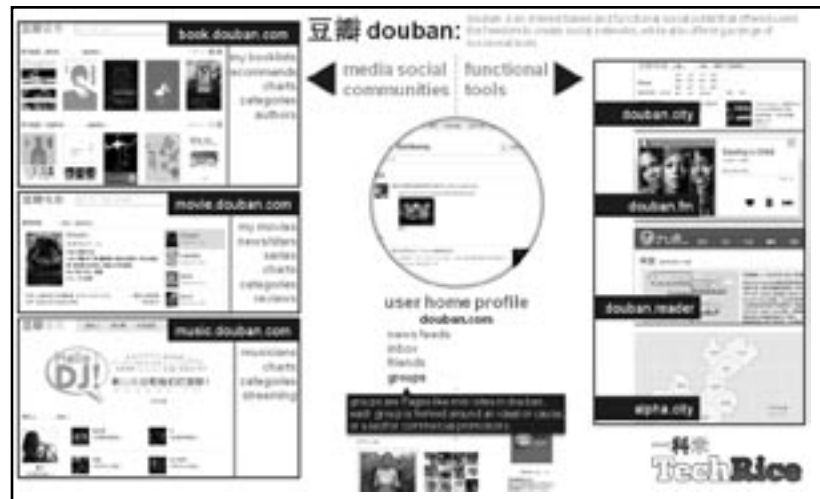


Fig. 2 Douban's online profile page.

groups, and this has more than once landed Douban in controversy and caused it to become a target of government censorship.

Douban's users are mainly urban youth (mostly from Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan, and Chengdu), and they are predominantly male (79%), according to data from the "2011 Social Network Analysis Report," released by Ignite Social Media (Chappell 2011). The predominant age group is 25–34 (71.5%), followed by 18–24 (19.5%). In terms of their educational level, 55% of Douban's users have graduate degrees, another 20% have bachelor's degrees or "some college," and 16% have high school diplomas. Their high educational levels contrast with their income: 80.5% fall into the bottom income group of 0–24,999 yuan per year, whereas 8% of its users earn high incomes of 75,000–99,999 yuan per year. Demographic data thus indicate relatively higher education levels, but lower income and younger age ranges, among Douban users in particular and Chinese SNS users in general, when compared with international/global SNS users on sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook (Chappell, 2011). Another study on the use of the Internet among people from Shanghai also finds that those in the 18-to-25 age group are the most active at using the Internet to express their opinions (Zhang Zi'an 2010: 28).

With these demographic data in mind, I use some of the comments and exchanges about Chinese TV drama on Douban as one important indicator of the dispositions of mind, cultural tastes and ways of thinking and feeling (Bourdieu, 1984. 170) of the post-1980s generation (*baling hou*) in China, especially the so-called emergent "knowledge-based middle class" (*zhishi zhongchan jieji*).¹⁰

In Douban's ratings of the most popular domestic TV dramas, based on votes by visitors to the site (data collected on Jan. 15, 2012), *Undercover* tops all others with a 9.0 rating from 38,287 votes, beating other popular dramas such as *Shibing tuji* (Soldiers' sortie, 2007), 8.9, from 30,915 votes; *Wo de tuanzhang wo de tuan* (Soldiers and their commander, 2009), 8.2, from 10,963 votes; *Woju* (Narrow dwelling, 2009), 7.7 from 44,876 votes;

¹⁰ *Zhishi zhongchan jieji* and *xueli zhongchan jiecheng* are terms frequently used in recent scholarship to refer to the emerging urban middle class whose capital is based on their education or knowledge; they are also known as "urban white collars or professionals," in contrast to those who get rich either through business operations (which in its early stages often involves smuggling and other illegal business practices) or through their personal connections with powerful interests (the so-called "princelings"). This new class has emerged with China's globalization, as well as with the advancement of the Internet and other new technology, and developed some distinctive cultural interests and tastes. See Zhou 2005 and Liu Shan 2010.

¹¹ In using the accumulated number of posts to reflect the popularity and topic-generating quality of certain TV dramas, one must bear in mind the first broadcast date of each drama, which I have included here. Obviously the most recently broadcast drama will take some time to catch up with those that have been around for several years and very likely have released a DVD and been rebroadcast on TV and the Internet.

¹² There is a certain discrepancy between actual TV viewing rates and ratings/rankings on the Internet (Anon. 2008). Part of the reason for this is the different audiences for TV and Internet broadcasts. Many surveys have shown that the majority of Chinese TV viewers are homemakers and retirees, similar to daytime soap audiences in the West. Thus, although spy dramas and soldier dramas do not necessarily have the highest television ratings (Anon. 2008)—because they do not necessarily appeal to the main TV audience groups—such genres are extremely popular among the most educated and Internet-savvy population who is extremely active in web-based communities and who tends to view the dramas online anyway.

and *Fendou* (Struggle, 2007), 7.5, from 62,131 votes. This rating differs slightly from the ranked list of biggest fan clubs for domestic TV dramas on Baidu, but is quite representative of these dramas' overall popularity. According to the accumulated numbers of posts recorded on Baidu by May 13, 2011, the ranking is as follows: *Soldiers' Sortie* (7,265,812 posts); *Soldiers and Their Commander* (1,354,427 posts); *Narrow Dwelling* (864,394 posts), *Struggle* (407,522 posts), and *Undercover* (367,079 posts).¹¹ The ratings and rankings do not necessarily reflect the actual TV viewing ratings for these serials, but there is little doubt that they correspond with and affect the popularity of the dramas to a certain degree, especially among urban youth who are more used to consuming media products via the Internet as well as exchanging their opinions through virtual spaces rather than through traditional forms of communication.¹² Indeed, with the increasing growth in web-based media production and consumption, Internet media fans have played an important role in popularizing certain TV dramas or films. One such example is *Soldiers' Sortie*, a dark horse whose success largely resulted from the enthusiasm and word of mouth "promotion" by Internet fans. The "Internet buzz" surrounding the drama subsequently influenced the decision of several TV stations to rebroadcast the drama and its sequel.

The unusual enthusiasm among the most educated and Internet-savvy population for spy dramas and soldier dramas with military training as their main focus reveals, in my opinion, a survival anxiety prevailing among China's younger generations who have grown into adulthood in an increasingly competitive and harsh capitalist environment with prevalent social corruption and economic inequality. Soldier dramas such as *Soldiers' Sortie* and *Soldiers and Their Commander* often depict a poorly resourced group of regular guys striving to become the best by going through extreme, even inhumane, military training and overcoming all kinds of ordeals, from social discrimination to psychological barriers. They offer inspiration for the emerging knowledge-based middle-class viewers

who aspired to “to live well” (*haohao de huo*) by “not throwing away, not giving up” (*bu paoqi, bu fangqi*), as Xu Sanduo, the main character of *Soldiers’ Sortie*, puts it. The highly disciplined and collective/collaborative culture of military camp also appeals emotionally to these urban youth who find themselves standing alone in an increasingly individualistic and ruthless capitalist society.

In a similar vein, these fans also empathize with the characters in *Narrow Dwelling* and *Struggle*, two contemporary urban dramas that depict the dreams and aspirations, frustrations and despair of urban youth in a free-wheeling, harshly capitalist China. Whereas the “struggle” of youths of the post-1980s generation is a highly individualistic enterprise aimed at improving their “quality” (*suzhi*), seeking self-optimization, and gaining material rewards, this neoliberal dream is often shattered by the cruel reality depicted in *Narrow Dwelling*, an extremely controversial TV drama about how aspirants to the middle class quickly degenerate into “house/mortgage slaves” (*fang nu*) because of high inflation and sky-high housing prices.

That *Narrow Dwelling* was soon officially banned only fueled the national debate about it, especially among netizens. The online discussions of the contrasting strategies adopted by the two sister protagonists to become residents of the “global” city of Shanghai, in particular, reflect the fear and despair felt by many young men that unless they have a certain level of wealth and possessions, they will never be able to attract a suitable wife (Bai 2011). This fear is figuratively embodied in the younger sister’s abandonment of her boyfriend for a richer and more powerful (and, of course, corrupt) official. Young Chinese men today feel seriously threatened in a society where financial inequality and even sexual frustration seem inevitably to result from their poor family backgrounds, their provincial domiciles, and their age, especially when compared with older and richer corrupt government officials and new rich entrepreneurs and their “official kid” and “rich kid” children (*guan er dai, fu er dai*). As one viewer of *Narrow*

Dwelling put it: “Society will not force you to succeed, but it will tell you clearly what it is like to be a failure” (Bai 2011).

Media fans’ affective engagement with *Undercover* has taken place within this charged socioemotional environment. As such, their interpretative practices with respect to *Undercover* should be read in the light of their current “structure of feeling”: on the one hand, they feel a sense of “struggle aspiration”; on the other hand, they suffer from a strong case of “survival anxiety.” In other words, there is a major inner conflict between two powerful interlocking emotions—a desire for the kind of affluent life that they can see others leading, and a fear of losing everything in this extremely competitive and ruthless social environment.

Textual Poaching and Collective Meaning-Making among Fans

The high evaluation of *Undercover* among media fans, as illustrated by the Douban ratings, can be explained by many contributing factors: for example, the tightly wrought plot and pacing, with suspense created in every episode, a rare quality among Chinese TV dramas; the mysterious history of Juntong spies and Communist underground workers, whose stories have always been topics of curiosity and speculation; and the excellent performances, especially the reserved but powerful acting of Sun Honglei (who plays Yu Zecheng) and Feng Enhe, a veteran stage actor who plays director Wu of the Juntong. Yao Chen, whom fans have dubbed the “Chinese Julia Roberts,” also gives Cuiping’s character a touch of indigenous and naïve charm that has won her the affection and stirred the laughter of numerous fans. Yet, the in-depth reading of the reviews and follow-up comments that follows provides further insights on why younger viewers find *Undercover* worth watching and talking about.

According to my own count made in May 2011, on Baidu’s *Undercover* net bar—an online fan club that I discuss in more detail in the following section—around half of the 200 or so threads that have attracted more than ten thousand hits are speculations about the drama’s characters

and their romantic lives. They appear not just as “thoughts after viewing *Undercover*,” but also in the form of comments on the ending and, especially, character analysis. Popular threads such as “Which woman does old Yu love the most?” (25,966 hits), “Deep analysis of Yu’s three romantic relationships” (23,972 hits), “My opinion on whether Yu loves Cuiping” (24,957), “Analysing the tragedy between Yu and Cuiping” (23,827), and “Pictures of the couple Yu and Cuiping” (11,467) highlight the fact that the romantic relationships between Yu and the leading female characters remain the major concern of fans, especially his earthy, “mundane” love relationship with Cuiping, which contrasts with his more romanticized, dreamlike love for Zuo Lan. Although the fans spill out their lighthearted comments about this comic yet convincing depiction of “love not at first sight,” their deepest sympathy is evoked by the unhappy endings of all three romantic relationships: Yu’s painful loss of his beloved Zuo Lan when she is killed for protecting him, his unbearable separation from Cuiping, and his reluctantly arranged marriage with Wanqiu provoke fans to raise issues regarding the manipulative hand of politics on individuals’ lives, the sacrifice of individuals in the name of great public causes, and the morality of revolution.

This conflict between loyalties (to one’s public duties as opposed to private feelings) and loves (for one’s country/people or one’s family/lover) is especially evident in Yu’s and Cuiping’s relationship. Their romance gradually develops in a realistic but humorous way, from misunderstandings to mutual care and trust: Yu teaches the illiterate Cuiping to wear pajamas and to read and write, and the hot-tempered yet loyal Cuiping tries in her own way to “feed” and protect Yu, including expressing her deep jealousy toward their bourgeois neighbor Wanqiu, who is a former student/admirer of Yu. In response to their mutual trust, viewers developed a deep emotional attachment toward these two characters, and thus it is no surprise that many fans became annoyed and saddened when at the end, Yu and Cuiping are forced to stay apart. Cuiping must raise their child alone in an isolated

¹³ Unlike in other countries, where TV drama screenplays are often rewritten as a series progresses to adapt to changing ratings and audience reactions, Chinese TV drama screenplays are usually completed well before production begins and seldom change—unless the censors require it. This is a result of the Chinese official approval system. For the changes made by these two stations, see Anon. 2009b.

mountain village, and Yu is forced to “marry” another woman in order to continue his next secret mission in Taiwan. The last episode, where the newlywed Yu sheds tears before his old wedding photo, became the most provocative scene for fans to discuss the value of people’s happiness as opposed to their duty toward their country and other “higher” ideals. In response to the outcry about the cruel and tragic ending, two TV stations (Shanghai’s Oriental Satellite and Beijing TV, which recorded an extremely high 14% viewing rate for this episode) even changed the original dialogue before the episode was broadcast to leave some hope for a reunion of the two main characters.¹³ Many fans also posted their own alternative “feel-good” endings to the drama, according to a report on *Wangyi yule* (Netease entertainment) on April 15, which is when several provincial TV stations rebroadcast the final episode (Anon. 2009a). For example, one fan posted on the BBS of Sina.net a comment titled: “I can’t help spitting out my own ending for *Undercover*,” and this comment received more than 110,000 hits in one day and more than 200 responses. In this fan’s “therapeutic version” (*liaoshang ban*), Yu returns to Mainland China years later, and after many years of persistent search he finally reunites with Cuiping (ibid.).

It is clear from these and other online responses that fans’ emotional attachment to the characters eventually led to conflicting commitments and even to deep suspicion of lofty ideas such as “sacrificing one’s little self for the great Self” (*wei da wo xisheng xiao wo*), ideas that are constantly promoted in the red classics a genre to which *Undercover* superficially belongs. Many fans raised awkward questions such as: what would have happened to Yu if he had stayed in Mainland China? They then listed some of the sufferings and wrongful deaths of famous CCP secret agents during the Cultural Revolution to prove that Yu would not have been an exception. A post on Douban entitled “Dui’an de wotuobang: xinghao Yu Zecheng qu le Taiwan” (Utopianism on the other side, or Yu was lucky to leave for Taiwan) represents such an interpretation:

The genius of this screenwriter/director (Jiang Wei) is that he found the balance between main melody and historical nihilism. . . . It is difficult to imagine what would have happened to Yu Zecheng—an undercover Communist who never formally joined the Party but had been a long-time Nationalist—during the anti-Rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution. And what would those who sacrificed themselves for their leftist Utopia, such as Zuo Lan, have felt when this political “Utopia” became a reality? It’s better for Yu to stay in Taiwan so Communism can always stay as a Utopia for him. Another example of historical nihilism in this drama is the parallel between the past and the present. The inspiration for the internal fighting in the Juntong’s Tianjin office must have come directly from today’s officialdom. And Cuiping’s condemnation of the Juntong’s massacre of demonstrating students really makes the viewer feel sad. (Li 2010)

Other fans also ironically noted the recent official attempts at “reunion” on both sides of the Taiwan straits to prove the futility and worthlessness of taking one’s political beliefs too seriously and the unpredictability of long-term historical change.

This kind of speculation about characters’ fates or reworking of the drama’s ending is a typical act of fan identification or, in Grossberg’s (1992: 86) words, an “affective investment.” In other words, *Undercover* and its online fan clubs offer places where a fan can locate some sense of his/her own identity and comment on reality through the mouths of the characters. In this light, it is particularly intriguing for understanding the alternative meaning-construction of this drama to see that many fans sympathize and identify with Li Ya, Director Wu, and Xie Ruolin, all of whom would have been typical villains or “antagonists” in traditional Communist spy dramas. Among the most circulated posts are “Collections of the Best Dialogue” (*jingdian yulu*) from *Undercover*, and it is quotations from Director Wu, the corrupt Nationalist spy chief, and Xie Ruolin, the cynical opportunist neighbor of Yu who trades top military secrets for money and is proud of his “flexibility,” that provide most of the examples. A typical list of “the

best dialogue” includes the following descriptions of Nationalist officials and agents:

“If you cut off their money supply, they will cut off your blood supply.” (你断人家的财路，人家会断你生路的)

“Their mouths sprout noble ideas, but their hearts only care about business.” (嘴上全是主义，心头全是生意)

“They have taken so much money, they’d better run away before they get into trouble!” (捞了那么多还不赶紧跑，说不定哪天就倒霉了)

“If it weren’t for these ‘special perks’, who the hell would become an official?” (要不是为这点儿特权，谁他妈当官啊)

“You see these two gold bars: can you tell me which one is clean and which one is dirty?” (你看这里有两根金条，请问哪根是龌龊哪根是高尚的)

“Any government that ignores ‘human relationships’ will be short lived.” (没有人情的政治是短命的)

“All the dynasties in the past, from Qin and Han down to Ming and Qing, were the same, so how will things be any different in the future?” (秦皇汉武，唐宗宋祖，明十七高，清十四朝，哪一天不是这样？将来还会是这样)

Such comments are quoted, linked to, and retransmitted again and again in different messages and contexts, becoming “the lexicon of users’ practice” (De Certeau 1984: 31), and ordinary fans enthusiastically hail them as true comments on contemporary China, its corrupt officials, and degenerate public morality. The following comments from a fan bring to light a fundamental connection fans make between the drama and the lived reality of their lives when they “quote” these pieces of dialogue:

“The screen writer is really awesome. On the surface it is about the history [of the Nationalists], but it has a penetrating power of criticizing the reality [of today]. There is no difference between history and the present: it is just a matter of changing the Party’s name. But SARFT [which regulates Chinese television production] could only swallow its bitterness quietly.

The dialogue in *Undercover* is really worth reflecting on. . . . The biggest lesson it gives is deconstruction . . . those so-called political beliefs are nothing but excuses for the authorities to justify their power and self interest. Both Yu Zecheng and Li Ya are but their hired guns. (Louyuzhiwang 2009)

Indeed, the intriguing impression one gets when reading the reviews and comments about *Undercover* from Douban and other spy drama-related websites is that rather than pondering the plot and its strategic chess match between the Communists and the Nationalists, the discussions typically encompass much broader and more current topics, such as love, faith, idealism, and especially survival tactics in professional and/or political careers (*zhichang/guanchang*). This impression is supported by the work of other researchers: based on a content analysis survey of 114 Internet blogs from Sina.com, China's largest and most influential commercial web portal, during April 8–24, 2009, Zhu Lili found that mainstream/orthodox interpretations of *Undercover* as a story about a Communist superhero constituted only 6.14% of the comments, whereas alternative interpretations made up 11.4%; other interpretations of *Undercover* on blogs claim that it is about "love" (12.28%), "bureaucratic politics" (5.26%), "hidden rules" (3.51%), "office politics" (3.51%), and "corruption" (1.8%).¹⁴

The following excerpt of a review by the cultural critic Wang Gan illuminates these kinds of alternative interpretations:

Undercover is a spy drama, but it is a spy drama that infiltrates into many other issues: thus men see in it echoes of survival in the world of officialdom, women see office politics, and lovers see the battle of the sexes (男人看到官场, 女人看到职场, 情人看到情场) . . . Leaving aside the superficial ideological elements, it is a fictional work about officialdom. . . . In other words, Yu is not only an excellent undercover hero, he is also an expert in power struggles. The drama not only makes you realize how difficult it is to be undercover, but even more how dangerous it is to be

¹⁴ Zhu Lili (2009) draws a distinction between the core "orthodox" (*zhengtongxing*) and the "alternative" (*fei zhengtongxing*) interpretation of the drama. The orthodox interpretation adopts the official historical view and promotes revolutionary heroism; it regards the main characters as revolutionary heroes who loyally uphold their belief in Communism and sacrifice themselves for the great cause of creating a new China. The alternative interpretation, by contrast, represents a much more intellectual discourse on the pros and cons of revolution. It transcends the official ideology and views the

historical tragedy of individuals from a more humanistic perspective. It especially sympathizes with individuals sacrificed in the name of “history.”

an official and the terrible impact of hidden rules. The character of Xie Ruolin is very realistic: his trading information for money exactly reflects the situation of those buying and selling official positions in today’s China.

Secondly, in *Undercover*, both Yu and his rival Li Ya are loyal and hardworking, and they do their best while competing to win the favour of their boss Director Wu. This is what is required in the workplace. Professionals and white-collar workers appreciate the drama not only because they see the wisdom and courage of these characters, but also because they see in it the hidden rules of their own workplaces. (Wang Gan 2009)

Wang’s reading, which became one of the most popular comments on the series and was linked to and circulated by thousands of websites and bloggers, was reminiscent of many other “alternative” readings that interpreted the drama in pragmatic ways. As another blogger put it: “The experience of Yu is absolutely relevant for us: it teaches us how to survive in a sinister workplace environment which is much more dangerous than Yu’s. We are all small potatoes working undercover in a turbulent time” (Lu 2009). Indeed, fans such as Lu Qi find *Undercover* so “penetratingly insightful” and “useful” that he compiled a twenty-point list of “hidden rules in the workplace” (*qianfu zai bangongshi guize*) based on the drama (ibid.). Likewise, in posts such as “The Philosophy within the Dialogues of *Undercover*,” the “villains,” Director Wu and Xie Ruolin, with their clear eyes and cunning skills in bureaucratic politics, have become new models for how to survive in the cutthroat Chinese society today.

However, not all fans approve of this utilitarian and cynical reading of *Undercover*, and in fact one of the most popular online topics, after romantic love, is the faith and idealism of characters in the drama. One review from the netizen Blue Moon with the title “Is it because of its pragmatic usefulness that *Undercover* has become a hit?” exemplifies this suspicion about the “hidden rules” readings. Blue Moon argues: “If Yu tried purely to win power and status without having faith in his cause, he would

soon get depressed, just like the character that Tony Leung plays in *Infernal Affairs*." He then makes the plea: "Don't debase this drama to a list of survival tactics and hidden rules; this is the worst misunderstanding of the drama" (Blue Moon 2009). Another review, titled "The Sisyphean Struggle of Li Ya" (Chaiguweidao 2009), also explains the great popularity of the character Li Ya from the perspective of his sincere belief in the Nationalist cause, a belief that he maintains even in the face of the inevitability of the Nationalists' defeat, in sharp contrast with his cynical colleagues who fight only for power, money, or their own survival.

Indeed, the director/screenwriter Jiang Wei claims that "faith," or "belief," (*xinyang*) was the dominant theme when he conceived this drama; at the same time, he found that he could not use the simplistic ideological framework of the spy genre to create his characters: "What moral criteria can you choose to judge them?" he asks, pointing to their complexity (Meng Jing 2009). This theme of a faith that goes beyond simple political beliefs has certainly resonated strongly with younger viewers. In a thoughtful review entitled "Belief in the Limits of Pure Emotion, or Anti-Belief Disguised as Belief," Zuo Mingqing suggests that people need belief, though not necessarily political belief: it can be based on universal desires of humanity, kindness, and hope, or on the simple wish to live a stable life with one's beloved, as Yu Zecheng manages to do (although temporarily) in his everyday life with Cuiping. Zuo adds that "whenever belief and politics are joined together, heroes will only die of broken hearts," that political belief "often makes people kill," and that "it is only when belief is separated from manipulation by power that it can exert real force and value" (Zuo 2009). In interpreting their favorite characters and the values they represent, *Undercover* fans project into the drama their own forms of social criticism, moral reflection, and political ideas. In the process, they must engage in a complex negotiation of meanings and expropriation of concepts. On the one hand, these fans express a surprising cynicism or moral nihilism in discussing a world in which survival is the only objective; on the

other hand, the passionate debates themselves show a persistent search for meaning, faith, and idealism, complicated by a nationalist admiration for heroes who sacrifice themselves for the nation.

Through sharing their aesthetic and viewing experiences, the fans of *Undercover* find a way to publicly discuss the politically sensitive topics of social injustice, corruption, public morality, and ultimately the meaning or meaninglessness of revolution. Media texts such as *Undercover* become “resources for the production of meaning” (Jenkins 2006: 144). This activity is what Jenkins refers to as “textual poaching,” which he defines as “meaningful encounters with texts” that “broaden . . . the field of meanings that circulate around the primary text” (140). Unlike in dramas on contemporary subjects, such as *Narrow Dwelling* and *Black Hole* (Heidong, 2001), where the characters directly voice social frustration and anger, the textual poaching the *Undercover* fans practice takes a more subtle and circuitous route, but in the end it is equally powerful and confrontational. *Undercover* fans do not simply accept the orthodox meaning of the text; instead, they appropriate and hijack its content to inject alternative meanings into its mainstream frame. In this crystallizing process of turning fan talk into a public forum, TV drama has become one of the most productive sites of discourse in contemporary China. Yet this reinterpretation of TV drama content is not the only focus of such online fan clubs, and to fully understand the appeal of these fan net bars, we must broaden our discussion to other, even more popular, social functions.

“Submarines” and the Creation of Social Pleasure in the *Undercover* Net Bar

In a study of the early U.S. computer-mediated television fan group Usenet’s R.A.T.S, Nancy K. Baym suggested that

the question of what practices are crucial to a particular fan group’s social interaction is . . . an important one for understanding the purposes met in fans’ relationships to texts and to one another.

Furthermore, it is an empirical question that cannot be adequately answered through survey, interview, or text-analytic methods, though each of those approaches can offer insights. The nuanced practices of fan interaction reside in the ordinary interaction fans have about shows. (Baym 1998: 126)

Baym thus calls for detailed observational approaches to the ordinary interactions among fans and believes that over a period of time these online fan discussions provide the most precious and accessible materials for such observational approaches. In the final part of this essay, I use the online *Undercover* net bar on Baidu to examine different kinds of communicative practices of web-based fandom and the social connections they have created. The purpose is to understand more clearly what binds fans of a media text/genre, and more broadly, how social communication operates in China in the digital age.

To understand the affective investment that fans make into media texts and the new interactive virtual communities they build around these texts, one cannot ignore Baidu, China's largest commercial web portal. Baidu offers a search engine for websites, audio files, and images, and hosts numerous keyword-based discussion forums and film/TV series fan clubs in the form of "net bars," or "post bars" (*tie ba*). Baidu's net bars provide users with query-based searchable communities for exchanging views and sharing knowledge and experiences. They are connected to Baidu's search service, which, like Google, can link up to an enormous and ever-enlarging network. It is in these net bars that millions of fans of TV dramas and films find self-styled "families" (communities) to share their interests with. To locate them is as easy as typing the title in the post bar window.

In the case of the "*Undercover* Net Bar" (*Qianfu ba*), you can either browse in chronological order through all the threads listed on the main page, or you can focus on specific area topics listed in the right margin: for example, digital magazines, videos, or pictures related to *Undercover* (fig. 3) and links to information about members of the cast and crew; or the



Fig. 3 Content page of a digital magazine *Qianfu*.

“best” (*jingpin*) threads, which are usually selected by the “net bar master” (*bazhu*). To participate in the activities and make yourself visible are also simply a matter of clicking on “post a message.” Anyone can start a thread and follow it by posting a message, which might range from a single word such as *ding* (“great, bravo”) to a sophisticated digital video. With such a simple procedure, it is not surprising that thousands of messages/posts are generated every day, and some of them receive tens of thousands of hits. The sheer amount of traffic and the creative interaction between users make these Internet fan clubs an extremely active social space.

The first thread on the “*Undercover* Net Bar” appeared on Dec. 4, 2008, and the net bar experienced a sudden surge in traffic in spring 2009, during the second run of the series. Since then, hundreds and thousands of fans have met online, some of them almost every day, and those who see themselves as devoted fans of *Undercover* have taken to calling themselves “submarines,” playing on the homonym *qianting* (*qian* also means *qianfu* [undercover] and *ting* “boat” or “support”), with some extremely active members referring to themselves as “battleships” (*zhandou ting*). At one point, there were so many controversial comments and even disputes among the fans that the webmaster, whose net moniker was Wanderer’s Mighty Sword (*Langzi xuanyuan jian*), had to post “Rules for the Bar” on June 27, 2009 and started a thread where members could send complaints and suggestions regarding which posts should be recommended as “best” and which should be deleted for damaging community spirit. The position of net bar master, someone who is supposed to solicit messages and regulate the bar if necessary, is voluntary and constantly changes. As I write, the bar is managed by a team calling itself the “*Undercover* Bar Office” (*Qianfu ba wuchu*).¹⁵ The amount of web traffic reflects the intensity of the fans’ interactions: in less than thirty months, some 23,715 initial threads were posted, among which more than 200 threads have received ten thousand or more hits. There are also about two dozen initial threads that have inspired more than one thousand replies each, making them into, in Chinese net

¹⁵ The *Undercover* Net Bar, like other clubs hosted by Baidu, is relatively strict regarding content control, especially when compared with sites such as Douban Net, but this means that the kinds of content and interactions that do appear there are more representative in reflecting the Internet life of the majority of netizens in contemporary China.

jargon, stunning “skyscrapers” (*gai lou*) over 1000 “stories” high.

Careful observation of the threads reveals much variety in both the creativity and the interactivity of the fans. Besides the different forms of activities already mentioned, this variety can be observed in the content of the threads. Among the 23,715 threads, the eleven most popular (with more than 100,000 hits each) reveal some of the major themes and characteristics of the fans’ interactions:

1. Making fun of/Joking about the characters from *Undercover* (调侃“潜伏”人物) (1,242,399)
2. Best of making fun of the characters from *Undercover* (调侃《潜伏》人物精编) (519,909)
3. Selected pictures making fun of the characters from *Undercover* (调侃楼图乐汇) (462,345)
4. Cartoon scenes from *Undercover*: Li Ya in white interrogating Sheng Xiang (漫画: 李涯同学白衣审盛乡) (335,775)
5. Director Wu: His acting is awesome (吴站长演技太牛啦) (327,845)
6. Something to say about the ending of *Undercover* (潜伏结局不吐不快) (179,410)
7. *Undercover* by Longyi (龙一: 潜伏) (160,644)
8. *Secret Service Weekly* covers: The first 200 (保密周刊封面赏析: 前200期汇总) (147,055)
9. Laughs about *Undercover* characters (《潜伏》人物暴笑版) (120,390)
10. Who is Emeifeng? (谁是峨嵋峰) (118,781)
11. Selected works of Longyi: *Undercover* (龙一小说精选: 潜伏) (102,685)

The top three most visited threads involve humorous treatments, or *tiaokan*, of the characters from *Undercover*. They constitute mainly lighthearted, comic short situations or reworked pieces of dialogue based on the stories or characters from the series, such as the awkward relationship, because of their sharply different personalities and educational backgrounds, between Cuiping and Yu Zecheng. Here are a couple of short examples:

“Cuiping is raising three hens and three roosters. Yu reminds her: one rooster is enough, as they won’t lay eggs but only waste the food. Cuiping answers irritated: “Is that what you want, to let three hens fight for the favour of one rooster. No way!” (Comment by the follower: I can imagine the tone and expression of Cuiping when she says this, and Yu’s wordless response.)

“Wan Qiu asks Cuiping: “Can I borrow some vinegar from you as we are eating crabs for dinner?” Cuiping answers: “Can we borrow some crabs, as I am drinking lots of vinegar tonight.” [“Drinking vinegar” is an expression in Chinese meaning a wife or lover’s jealousy] (Comment: This is Cuiping’s style.)

These messages might appear “trivial” or “vulgar” to outsiders, especially those seeking more “meaningful” or “profound” comments on the deeper meanings of the text. For ordinary fans, however, such playful jokes and silly remarks enhance the shared sense of pleasure and fun for those familiar with and fond of the characters in the drama. The popularity of this genre is very clear from the fact that items 1 and 2 on the preceding list of threads are actually based on the same content, but the latter is simply an edited version of the former accompanied by selected followers’ comments. Fans thus draw pleasure not only from the initial creative making of comments, but also from the subsequent interactivity, which allows them to feel involved and engaged in a community. Through this playful and harmless joking around, fans express affection for and appreciation of the characters and their fellow fans; their interactivity keeps the characters alive in their imaginations.

This kind of playful appropriation or reworking of media texts—mobile texting, Twitter-type messaging, online spoofing—for comic effect is a common practice in digital communication among the younger generation in China. Most online social communication in China is not in the form of serious protests about social injustice or sober comments on social problems but rather of mocking or playful quips on topics including Internet censorship, social corruption, or even disastrous events such as the SARS

outbreak in 2002–2003 or the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008. Although some critics attack this tendency as evidence of a general cynicism in society, others have argued that this *tiaokan* aesthetic or “entertainment approach” is a pragmatic way to maneuver around censorship and to express new social attitudes or collective emotions that sometimes have subversive potential (Liu Xiaobo 2012; Meng 2011; Yu 2009; Yang 2009). In contrast to traditional reviewers’ serious discussions about the meaning and significance of the work, the vast majority of fan posts on *Undercover* seem to be in this playful and mocking mode; some fan comments may contain hints of social commentary and social satire, but most seem designed mainly to show off the author’s wit and cleverness to their online community of like-minded followers.

But there is great creativity at work too. Although most fans come to the Baidu post bar to share information and speculate about the characters and story of *Undercover*, some are inspired by the series to produce highly original artistic works that they share with their fellow fans. *Secret Service Weekly Covers* (fig. 4) is such a case. Created by a twenty-one-year-old fan whose net name is Shangsuancaicaizi, it is an ambitious project consisting of some 200 self-designed covers for an imaginary magazine titled *Secret Service Weekly* (Baomi zhoukan). Each cover is a collage listing the main content of the “issue” and illustrated with cover pictures. Although most of these cover pictures are stills from *Undercover*, many are reprocessed with touches of style and artistry. There are also behind-the-scenes and promotional pictures, apparently collected from other fashion and media magazines or websites. Later covers also include drawings, cartoons, and original woodcut artwork by other fans, whom Shangsuancaicaizi acknowledges as “special art editors” (*teyue tubian*). Besides her obvious talent in photo collage, the aspect of this unusual project that most clearly reveals the devotion and seriousness of this fan toward her work, however, is the titles of the imagined stories/articles listed on each cover. Just like real magazine covers, these include regular columns, such as “Stories of



Fig. 4 Cover of *Secret Service Weekly* Volume 82.

Secret Agents,” “Display of [Spying] Skills,” “Fashions of Secret Agents,” “Lectures on Officialdom,” and even “Ideas for Wives [of Spies].” When drafting the specific topics for each issue, Shangsuancaicaizi displays great familiarity with both the content of fan discussions of *Undercover* and current trends in popular culture in general, as well as admirable talent in bringing them together effortlessly with a humorous and playful tone. To give just one example, the title of the imaginary article “Xu Sanduo reveals that he learned his mastery of ‘climbing walls’ from Boss Qiu’s grandchildren” (许三多倾情讲述: 翻墙绝迹是秋掌柜后人教我的), from vol. 92, not only brings together characters from two popular TV dramas, *Soldiers’ Sortie* and *Undercover*, but also hints at the subversive online culture of “climbing over” the “great firewall” (i.e., getting around Internet censorship). Shangsuancaicaizi’s devotion and talent won great admiration and encouragement from her fellow “submarines,” who unanimously labeled her a “great battleship.”

Like Shangsuancaicaizi, who expresses emotional attachment through a creative act, many other fans have used *Undercover* as fertile soil in which to cultivate their imaginations and creativity—and they proudly show off their works on the *Undercover* Net Bar. More often than not, their fellow fans generously acknowledge their efforts and support their work by responding with their own contributions or simply adding compliments and words of appreciation. Number 4 on the list “Cartoon Scenes from *Undercover*” demonstrates how this interactivity is actually crucial for, and in some cases constitutes the essence of, web-based fandom and sociality. This discussion thread started with a fan named “Xiong Xiaoyuan” posting a spoof cartoon of the scene in which Yu Zecheng’s nemesis, Li Ya, interrogates Sheng Xiang by using opera to torment him. In her own comment on this post, Xiong claims that after reading other fans’ posts, she came to see Li Ya as a comic figure, and for this reason she decided to create her cartoon. Xiong’s cartoon immediately elicited ten encouraging posts from fellow fans, including one that suggested she draw a whole

series of cartoons. Thirty minutes after receiving this suggestion, Xiong posted her second cartoon; others followed. Xiong's thread has been consistently selected as one of the "best works," and each successive cartoon has generated hundreds of responses in the form of suggestions, compliments, and links to other fan bars such as the "Zu Feng Bar" (a fan club named after the actor Zu Feng, who plays Li Ya), thus attracting more admirers to the *Undercover* Net Bar. All this enthusiasm and encouragement have led Xiong to produce a series of 114 cartoons depicting numerous characters and situations from *Undercover*; this thread has become one of the most popular and interactive, with a total of 336,000 hits and 2373 separate posts in just one and a half years. In her final cartoon, dated Jan. 25, 2011, a couple of days before Chinese New Year, Xiong sent to her fellow fans a New Year's message in the form of a cartoon depicting a "big reunion" of the major *Undercover* characters eating dumplings, each with a humorous blurb reflecting their typical tone and expression (fig. 5). In the same message, Xiong expressed her affection for and gratitude toward her virtual family: "The series has continued for so long and received so much support from my good friends. I am so touched. . . . I love everyone here who has accompanied me along my journey."

The cases of Xiong Xiaoyuan and Shangsuancaicaizi demonstrate an active fan culture-producing community where "reciprocal exchange of information" takes place (Jenkins 2006: 136) and "collective intelligence expands a community's productive capacity" (139). Though voluntary and temporary, this knowledge community is defined "through intellectual enterprise and emotional investment" (137). The reason these posters are willing to devote so much time and effort to the net bar (often during lunch hours or evenings after work or school) is that they feel a deep need to express in public their appreciation for what *Undercover* has given them. At the same time, they are doubtless spurred on by the constant encouragement of other net users. After spending a whole night posting a complete collection of her 200 magazine covers, Shangsuancaicaizi



Fig. 5 Cartoon by Xiong Xiaoyuan depicting a Chinese New Year gathering of characters from *Undercover*.

explained, with obvious affection, that she worked more than a month on editing the collection and that during the process she felt overwhelmingly happy and purposeful. She also mentioned that in real life she is a sensitive, even quick-tempered girl, who is dissatisfied with her flawed character; however, with the love and encouragement of her fellow net fans, who have often praised her for being “sunny” and humorous, she feels at peace with herself and can “live well and do meaningful things.” She then listed more than 200 names of net fans who have been deeply involved in her project and expressed her gratitude to them, including those whose work she used for the covers; the personal exchanges demonstrate the familiarity and affection built up between Shangsuancaicaizi and her fellow fans, who responded by expressing their appreciation for the time and creative energy that she has put in, with their enthusiastic words often accompanied by cute symbols of kisses. One fan calls her “the most photogenic, the most popular, the kindest and most hard-working, and the most persistent of all.” In this *Undercover* affective community, making other fans happy and entertaining them provide meaning, a deep sense of connection, and an appreciation built on a shared passion. Through this collective sentiment and affective interactivity, the pleasure of a popular media text is enhanced and crystallizes into a deeper sense of social connection.

To sum up, the threads on the *Undercover* Net Bar at Baidu constitute a form of extended social interaction, mixing a variety of communicative practices that reveal a complex set of implicit and interwoven goals. These goals include releasing fans’ creative energy and showing off their performative enthusiasm; discussing and debating with fellow fans the meanings of the series while extending the discussion to topics that directly affect their lives; and sharing their pleasure and appreciation of beloved characters and clever dialogue. All these practices add up to a sense of community/family to which they devote significant time and energy and in which they discover a sense of belonging and connection.

Conclusion: Web-Based Fandom in the Making of Popular Media in China

This “virtual ethnographic” study of Internet media fandom has provided concrete evidence of a new interactive and communicative social space where certain media texts such as popular TV dramas and films have become “links” bringing together people from various walks of life and from different places; these texts act as catalysts for sharing their creative energy and for debate on meanings and values. Seen in this light, the recent revival of interest in the spy genre, not just on TV but in film and fiction,¹⁶ is not simply a revival of popular nostalgia for cultural products from the Cold War. It is true that most recent Chinese spy films and TV dramas are set during the Sino-Japanese war or the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, and the producers have obviously taken advantage of this classic patriotic or revolutionary narrative to gain approval for broadcasting. They have also exploited the popularity of the established niche market for Hollywood-style suspense and detective stories and translated it into the Chinese context by utilizing the spy genre. These are pragmatic decisions based largely on commercial factors. Yet for the viewers, these dramas do much more than evoke nostalgic socialist sentiments such as heroism and idealism; rather, the moral ambiguities and existential dilemmas depicted in the dramas allow viewers to actively re-create their own meanings through a “radical contextualization”: voicing their emotional reactions of frustration, indignation, anxiety, and disillusionment about their everyday lives in a state-controlled capitalist society, but also a solidarity and shared playfulness in the face of life’s difficulties. It is in this emotional and cultural matrix between past and present, fantasy and reality, the serious and the playful, the heroic and the quotidian that TV spy drama has tapped into a much deeper social need and gained such enormous popularity.

More than three decades have passed since China entered the reform era. Although economic progress has greatly improved the material lives of many people, the economic reforms and consequent decline in socialist

¹⁶ There is clearly mutual fertilization among different artistic mediums in the promotion of the spy genre. For example, both *Undercover* and *Plotting* were adapted from works of fiction, by Longyi and Mai Jia, respectively. These fictional works, although they had already won a high reputation among spy fiction cognoscenti, became much more popular after the TV dramas were broadcast, and the authors are now in high demand for further TV dramas and films: Mai Jia subsequently wrote the screenplay for the blockbuster film *Fengsheng* (The wind, 2009), and Longyi was the screenwriter for a new TV spy drama, *Jieqiang* (Borrowing a gun, 2011), with Jiang Wei as its director. Spy films also became popular on the big screen, even giving martial arts costume dramas a run for their money, with recent hits including *Qiuxi* (2010) and *Dong feng yu* (East wind rain, 2010). In both of these films, Liu Yunlong, who made his name through his performance in the TV spy drama *Plotting*, was the director and the leading actor.

institutions have also caused enormous upheaval and disrupted the social fabric. Chinese society is rife with class stratification and social conflict. The decline in traditional forms of social belonging (such as work units, membership in the CCP, and other social and political organizations such as neighborhood committees) and a corresponding increase in individualized leisure activities (especially watching TV and surfing the Internet) have raised concerns about collapsing social connections and civic virtue. How to build new social networks and strengthen the social fabric against these challenges is a crucial issue both for the Chinese government, which is desperate to maintain social stability, and for Chinese citizens who wish to create a civic society in a more fragmented world that is less tightly controlled by the state. Digital media that encourage participatory culture have provided both a challenge to and an opportunity for promoting these contrasting agendas.

In recent years, scholars have investigated Internet communities and online activism (Yang 2009; Zheng/Wu 2005), e-government and Internet control (Li 2009, Kalathil/Boas 2003), and the overlap and intersection between public and private space on the Internet (Yu 2009; Hu 2008); these studies point to the potential for cyberspace to stimulate and consolidate the formation of civil societies, while at the same time noting the layers of contention and struggle online among different social forces and agents. All of these studies stress the importance of the Internet as a newly emerging social space of communication and a site for civic discourse and even collective action. Yet although they offer convincing accounts of the Internet's increasing importance in Chinese citizens' political lives and social engagement, much less attention has been paid to the Internet as a site for cultural production and consumption, and to the broader cultural implications of the kinds of social interactions taking place in virtual communities of Chinese "fans."

Although it is true that Chinese netizens have used the Internet and other new digital tools for political mobilization and to expose social

corruption and injustice, occasionally leading even to changes in laws and limited reform of political institutions (Liebman, 2011), the Internet is much more commonly used for the kinds of new forms of social communication and creativity discussed in this essay. In this light, contemporary Internet fandom is not unlike literati poetry exchanges and garden gatherings in traditional China; though the style and media are of course different, fans on the Internet seek fellowship, a sense of belonging, and a concrete experience of being part of a social network through creatively consuming and reworking cultural texts.

In today's China, especially among the post-80s and post-90s generation who constitute the majority of active Internet users, most popular cultural products such as music, TV, and films are accessed (viewed or downloaded) through the Internet rather than through conventional transmission vehicles such as radio, TV, or cinemas. Consuming such media content in this way entails a process of socializing and networking, a constantly interactive flow of real-time communication with other users. This communicative network provides a public space for passionate debate and discussion of the meaning of the media content, a space that would not be available in more traditional media venues: "A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation, but a man with two machines (TV and a computer) can belong to a community" (Sella 2002).

Indeed, changes in the media environment, especially the spread of the Internet, seem to have had more profound social consequences in China than in the United States or Europe. This is not only because the Internet has to a certain extent undermined the gate-keeping and censorship functions of traditional media, but also because it has given users access to a participatory culture where ordinary netizens can practice as media makers by exercising a kind of interpretative activism. Although this study focuses only on "submarines," the communicative and interpretative practices they engage in are common to those of other fan clubs and literary communities, such as the web-based women's popular fiction site Jinjiang Literature City

(Feng 2009), and all of the most popular television reality shows such as the dating show *Feichengwura* (If you are the one) as well as blockbuster movies such as Jiang Wen's *Rang zidan fei* (Let the bullets fly, 2010). Chinese popular culture is thus witnessing an increasingly participatory environment where ordinary consumers are able to reconfigure their social identities and reconstruct their social networks by actively consuming and creatively re-producing media texts.

My study raises many questions that I have left unanswered, including: how do new social media such as the Internet interact with and influence the content and style of conventional media? What kinds of broader cultural activities and social bonds (besides social and political movements) does the Internet facilitate and nourish in the "real" world? And what role do demographic variables, in particular gender differences, play in the formation of different modes of "interpretative activism" online? But my research does allow me to make a few conclusions. First, the Internet has become one of the most important sites for consuming media texts, and the responses from Internet fans can directly influence the popularity and ratings of a TV drama or movie. Second, the fans' discussions of the characters and thematic content of these media texts open up a public forum for moral issues and even some politically sensitive topics such as the ethics of the Communist revolution and the political and ideological manipulation of ordinary citizens. It may well be that the creators of TV spy dramas intentionally hid some of these alternative messages within the sophisticated layers of discourse in the screenplay; but it is only through the discussion and "discovery" of these hidden meanings by fans that these intentions are realized. In Chinese TV broadcasting, where censorship and official approval still set limits on subjects and topics, this strategy of leaving the interpretation up to the viewers becomes particularly powerful when the viewers can interact together via an online community. Moreover, in many instances, fans have created their own controversial and "farfetched" interpretations that go far beyond what the creators of the media text

may have envisioned or intended. In this way, the fans enhance and create new pleasure and meanings from the text, and its layers of narrative and social significance can be fully appreciated only once we understand the “affective articulation” by the virtual community that turns spy dramas into a stimulus for public discourse on social issues. Yet third, and finally, the fans constantly use media texts such as *Undercover* as a springboard to create their own texts and engage in extensive social bonding. Online fan clubs such as the *Undercover* Net Bar are self-organized groups defined through their members’ common interests and emotional devotion to certain media texts. Although certainly they do participate in many serious—and, for media researchers, valuable—discussions on the themes and meanings of these texts, at the same time we cannot ignore that fan clubs are largely a social space where people with a common interest play games, make witty jokes, and show off their talents. The sheer numbers of online posts in this style are evidence of its significance for fans. And this social space is highly infused by affective energy based on a sense of friendship or comradeship where people recognize and acknowledge their common passions. Words loaded with affect, such as *qin* (dear) and *ding* (bravo), underline the emotional foundation of this sense of solidarity and connectedness. The fans’ posts “go beyond particular characters” in the media texts and extend into the participants’ personal lives, a phenomenon that Geraghty has observed in American soap operas and their female fans; the characters and their situations in the drama are just “emotional representatives” (Geraghty 1991: 74) through which fans can articulate their private feelings in a public forum.

So what are the implications of this interactive audience behavior and participatory online culture for researchers of Chinese media and cultural studies? First, the Internet and new media are increasingly becoming an integral part of the process of cultural production and consumption. This not only takes away some of the sting of censorship on the part of producers and regulators but also makes it possible for mass consumers

and amateurs to participate in media practice and cultural production. The active, frequently “playful” reproduction of media texts and remixing of audiovisual content will profoundly change the dynamics and power relationships of cultural production and consumption. Second, we need to shift our attention from content analysis and examine the realization of media content in its reception among mass audiences and the agency of individual fans in producing influential meanings or interpretations of popular media. In particular we need to recognize the “murmuring voices of societies” (De Certeau 1984: 5); in other words, we must pay more attention to “the ordinary interactions fans have about shows” (Baym 1998: 126) and the routine activities of Internet communities, instead of relying mainly on “significant” media events or politically active websites. Bourdieu (1977) argued that the locus of community or culture is in the ordinary practice of its members; it is their habitual ways of acting that support, maintain, and continually re-create a group’s norms, values, and belief systems. By focusing on such community members, we may gain a richer understanding of both the diversity of ways in which viewers engage with the media and the complex and multifaceted functions of popular culture.

Third, in understanding how media texts become “resources for the production of meaning” (Jenkins 2006: 144) in addition to considering the ideological intentions of the producers, we also need to acknowledge the function of affective investments, which are closely related to socioemotional environment of audiences/viewers. As Grossberg (2010: 310) reminds us, only through discerning the affective articulation by these media fans, among themselves and between texts and their lived reality, can we begin to address the problematic encapsulated by Raymond Williams’s concept of “structure of feeling,” a crucial part of human experience that cannot be fully addressed by determinist views of the role of ideology.

Glossary

<i>Ansuan</i>	暗算
ba zhu	吧主
baling hou	八零后
Baidu	百度
<i>Baomi zhoukan</i>	保密周刊
Cuiping	翠平
Da'aiwubian	大爱无边
diezhan ju	谍战剧
<i>Diying shiba nian</i>	敌营十八年
ding	顶
<i>Dong feng yu</i>	东风雨
Douban wang	豆瓣网
fang nu	房奴
<i>Feicheng wurao</i>	非诚勿扰
fei zhengtongxing	非正统性
<i>Fendou</i>	奋斗
Feng Enhe	冯恩鹤
<i>Fengsheng</i>	风声
fu er dai	富二代
gailou	盖楼
guanchang	官场
guan er dai	官二代
hongse jingdian	红色经典
<i>Heidong</i>	黑洞
<i>Jialisen gansidui</i>	加里森敢死队
Jiang Wei	姜伟
<i>Jieqiang</i>	借枪
jingdian yulu	经典语录
jing fei ju	警匪剧
Juntong	军统
<i>Lanting ji xu</i>	兰亭集序
Langzi xuanyuan jian	浪子轩辕剑
<i>Liming zhi qian</i>	黎明之前
Li Ya	李涯
liaoshang ban	疗伤版
Longyi	龙一
Mai Jia	麦家
<i>Qianfu</i>	潜伏
<i>Qianfu ba</i>	潜伏吧
<i>Qianfu bawuchu</i>	潜伏吧务处

qian guize	潜规则
Qianting	潜艇
Qiuxi	秋喜
Rang zidan fei	让子弹飞
suzhi	素质
Sun Honglei	孙红雷
Shangsuancaicaizi	上酸菜菜子
Shiyan wuheng	誓言无声
teyue tubian	特约图编
Tianzi di yi hao	天字第一号
tiaokan	调侃
tieba	贴吧
Wang Gan	王干
wangmin	网民
Wanqiu	晚秋
weibo	微博
Wuming yingxiong	无名英雄
Wuju	蜗居
Wo de tuanzhang wo de tuan	我的团长我的团
Xie Ruolin	谢若林
xinyang	信仰
Xiong Xiaoyuan	熊小源
Xu Sanduo	许三多
xueli zhongchan jiecheng	学历中产阶层
Yao Chen	姚晨
Yu Zecheng	余则成
zhandou ting	战斗艇
zhengtongxing	正统性
zhichang	职场
zhishi zhongchanjieji	知识中产阶级
Zu Feng	祖峰
Zuo Lan	左蓝

Bibliography

Anon. 2008. “*Shibing tuji juji huojiang wushu, shoushilü que bugao*” 《士兵突击》剧集获奖无数 收视率却并不高 (*Soldiers’ Sortie* series wins countless awards, but ratings are not so good). *Beijing shangbao* (March 31).

Anon. 2009a, “*Fensi buman Qianfu beiju jieju, zibian liaoshangban*” 粉丝不满《潜伏》悲剧结局 自编“疗伤版” (Fans not happy with the tragic ending

of *Undercover*, create their own therapeutic version). *Wangyi yule*. URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://ent.163.com/09/0415/17/56V7HK6400033A26.html>.

Anon. 2009b. "Beijing weishi *Qianfu* jieju gai liang chu, shoushi chuang lishi zhi zui" 北京卫视《潜伏》结局改两处 收视创历史之最 (The ending of Beijing satellite TV's *Undercover* is changed in two places, and ratings reach historic highs). *Beijing yulexinbao*. URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://ent.163.com/09/0415/17/56V7HK6400033A26.html>.

Bai, Ruoyun. 2005. "Media Commercialization, Entertainment, and the Party-State: The Political Economy of Contemporary Chinese Television Entertainment Culture." *Global Media Journal* 4, no. 6. URL (accessed 2/26/12): <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/sp05/graduatesp05/gmj-sp05gradinv-bai.htm>.

———. 2011. "*Snail House* as a Middle-Class Construct." Working paper for workshop "Television Drama in Chinese Speaking World," School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Baym, Nancy K. 1998. "Talking about Soaps: Communicative Practices in a Computer-Mediated Fan Culture." In Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, eds., *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*. New York: Hampton Press, 111–129.

Blue Moon. 2009. "Nandao ci pian da huo jiushi yinwei ta de xianshi yiyi ma" 难道此片大火就是因为它的现实意义吗 (Is it because of its pragmatic usefulness that *Undercover* has become a hit?). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://movie.douban.com/review/2325165/>.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chaiguweidao 拆骨为刀. 2009. Li Ya yige ren de Xixifu 李涯一个人的西西弗 (The Sisyphean struggle of Li Ya). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://movie.douban.com/review/2051210/>

Chappell, Brian, 2011. "2011 Social Network Analysis Report—Geographic—Demographic and Traffic Data Revealed." URL (accessed 1/12/2012): <http://www.ignitesocialmedia.com/social-media-stats/2011-social-network-analysis-report/>

CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center). 2009. "Erlinglingjiu nian Zhongguo wangmin shejiao wangluo yingyong yanjiu baogao" 2009年中国网民社交网络应用研究报告 (2009 research report on social network service use of Chinese netizens). URL (accessed 5/25/2011): http://www.cnnic.cn/research/bgxz/spbg/201102/t20110222_20351.html.

———. 2010a. "Di 27 ci hulianwang fazhan tongji baogao" 第27次互联网发展统计报告 (The 27th statistical report on the development of Chinese Internet, Dec. 2010). URL (accessed 5/25/2011): http://www.cnnic.cn/research/bgxz/tjbg/201101/t20110120_20302.html

———. 2010b. "2010 nian Zhongguo wangmin wangluo shipin yingyong yanjiu baogao" 2010年中国网民网络视频应用研究报告 (2010 research report on Chinese Internet digital video use). URL (accessed 5/25/2011): http://www.cnnic.cn/research/bgxz/spbg/201102/t20110222_20351.html.

Dai Jinhua 戴锦华. 2010. "Dieying chongchong: jian die pian de wenhua chuxi" 谍影重重间谍片的文化初析 (Layers of spy shadows: cultural analysis of spy movies). *Xinhua wenzhai* no. 10: 94–96.

De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Donald, Stephanie, Michael Keane, and Yin Hong, eds. 2002. *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis*. London and New York: Routledge.

Feng, Jin. 2009. "'Addicted to Beauty': Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese *Danmei* fiction in Jinjiang." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2: 1–41.

Geraghty, Christine. 1991. *Women and Soap Opera*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gong, Haoming and Xin Yang. 2010. "Digitized Parody: The Politics of Egao in Contemporary China." *China Information* 24, no. 1: 3–26.

Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

———. 1997. *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2010. "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual." *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed., Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 309–338.

———, ed. 1996. "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall." In David Morley and Kuan-hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 131–150.

——— and Liu Kang 刘康. 2007. "Guanjian shike de yujing da chuanlian: guanyu wenhua yanjiu de duihua" 关键时刻的语境大串联: 关于文化研究的对话 (Articulation at a juncture: dialogue on cultural studies). *Nanjing daxue xuebao* no.11: 75–81.

Hu Yong 胡泳. 2008. *Zhongsheng xuanhua: wangluo shidai de geren biaoda yu gonggong taolun* 众声喧哗: 网络时代的个人表达与公共讨论 (The rising cacophony: personal expression and public discussion in the Internet age). Nanning: Guangxi shifan daxue.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2006. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Ji Tao 吉涛. 2011. "Chengshi paishui: cong ma guhua dao zhao lezi" 城市排水: 从骂规划到找乐子 (City sewers: from cursing city plans to seeking entertainment). *Sohu pinglun* no. 401. URL (accessed 5/25/2011): <http://star.news.sohu.com/s2011/paishui/index.shtml>.

Kalathil, Shanthy and Taylor Boas. 2003. *The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba and the Counterrevolution*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Keane, Michael, Anthony Y. H. Fung, and Albert Moran. 2007. *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Lee, Chin-chuan. 2003. *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*. London and New York: Routledge.

Levy, Pierre. 1997. *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: Perseus.

Li Yonggang 李永刚. 2009. *Women de fanghuoqiang* 我们的防火墙 (Our great firewall: expression and governance in the era of the Internet). Nanning: Guangxi shifan daxue.

Li Yuanyuan 黎远远. 2010. "Dui'an de Wutuobang: xinghao Yu Zecheng qu le Taiwan" 对岸的乌托邦, 幸好余则成去了台湾 (Utopianism on the other side, or Yu was lucky to leave for Taiwan). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://movie.douban.com/review/3024306/>.

Liebman, Benjamin L. 2011. "Changing Media, Changing Court." In Susan L. Shirk, ed., *Changing Media, Changing China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 150–174.

Link, Perry. 1989. "Hand-Copied Entertainment Fiction from the Cultural Revolution." in Perry Link et al., eds., *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thoughts in Socialist China*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 17–36.

Liu, Kang. 2010. "Reinventing the Red Classics in the Age of Globalization." *Neohelicon* 37: 329–347.

Liu Shan 柳珊. 2010. "Meijie miqun yu Zhongguo zhongchan jiecheng de jiecheng rentong: yi Meiguo dianshiju Yueyu de Zhongguo wangluo shequn wei ge'an" 媒介迷群与中国中产阶层的阶层认同 – 以美国电视剧‘越狱’的中国网络社群为个案 (Media fandom and identity of the Chinese middle class: the case of *Prison Break* on Chinese Internet). *Chuanbo yu shehui* 14: 75–102.

Liu, Xiaobo. 2012. "From Wang Shuo's Wicked Satire to Hu Ge's *Egao*: Political Humor in a Post-Totalitarian Dictatorship." In Liu Xiaobo, *No Enemies No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 177–187.

Louyuzhiwang 漏鱼之网. 2009. "Xiaojie zhengzhi xinyang de shensheng" 消解政治信仰的神圣 (Deconstructing the sacredness of political beliefs). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://movie.douban.com/review/2033412/>

Lu Qi 陆琪. 2009. *Qianfu zai bangongshi* 潜伏在办公室 (Undercover in the office). Changjiang wenyi.

Meng, Bingchun. 2011. "From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: Egao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet." *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1: 33–51.

Meng Jing 孟静. 2009. "Qianfu: youguan xinyang" 潜伏: 有关信仰 (*Undercover: about belief*). *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* (Apr. 12).

Murphy, Rachel and Vanessa L. Fong, eds. 2008. *Media, Identity, and Struggle in Twenty-First-Century China*. London: Routledge.

New Youth (新青年 Xinqingnian). 2009. "Ni budebu fu qianfu zai Qianfu li de yixie dongxi" 你不得不服潜伏在潜伏里的一些东西 (You have to think about the things that lurk within *Undercover*). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://movie.douban.com/review/1604297/>.

Nielsen, Inge. 2002. "Prized Pulp Fiction: Hand-Copied Literature from the Cultural Revolution." *China Review International* 9, no. 2: 344–356.

SARFT. 2004. "Guanyu jiaqiang she'an ju shencha he bochu guanli de tongzhi" 关于加强涉案剧审查和播出管理的通知 (Notice on strengthening administration on the approval and broadcasting of TV crime drama) (April 19).

Sella, Martha. 2002. "The Remote Controllers." *New York Times* (Oct. 20).

Shangsuancaicaizi, 2010. "Baomi zhoukan fengmian shangxi:qian 200 qi huizong 保密周刊封面赏析: 前200期汇总" (*Secret Service Weekly covers: the first 200*). URL (accessed 5/25/2011): <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?z=623701981&ct=335544320&lm>.

Shirk, Susan L., ed. 2011. *Changing Media, Changing China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wang Gan 王干. 2009. "Qianfu shuo de shi guanchang qianguize 潜伏说的是官场潜规则 (*Undercover is about hidden rules in official life*). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_47458e650100cw20.html.

Ward, Pete. 2005. "Affective Alliance or Circuits of Power: The Production and Consumption of Contemporary Charismatic Worship in Britain." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9, no. 1: 25–39.

Xiong Xiaoyuan 熊小源. 2009. "Manhua: Li Ya tongxue baiyi shen Sheng Xiang" 漫画:李涯同学白衣审盛乡 (Cartoon scenes from *Undercover: Li Ya in white interrogating Sheng Xiang*). URL (accessed 5/23/2011):<http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=581136384>.

Yang, Xiaobin, 2009. *The Power of the Internet in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ye, Sunny. 2011. "Inside Douban, China's Truly Original Social Network." URL (accessed 1/12/2012): <http://techrice.com/2011/08/11/inside-douban-chinas-truly-original-social-network/>.

Yin, Hong, 2002. "Meaning, Production and Consumption: The History and Reality of Television Drama in China." In Stephanie Donald et al., eds. *Media in China*. London: Routledge, 28–40.

Yu, Haiqing. 2009. *Media and Cultural Transformation in China*. London: Routledge.

Zhang Zhi'an 张志安, 2010. "Shanghai shimin shiyong wangluo meiti de tezheng, dongji ji pingjia" 上海市民使用网络媒体的特征, 动机, 及评价 (The characteristics, motivation and evaluation of the use of Internet in Shanghai). *Chuanboxue* 104 (Feb.), 23–28; 122.

Zhao, Yuezhi. 2008. *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Zheng, Yongnian and Guoguang Wu. 2005. "Information Technology, Public Space, and Collective Action in China." *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 5: 507–536.

Zhong, Xueping. 2010. *Mainstream Culture Refocused: Television Drama, Society and the Production of Meaning in Reform-era China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Zhou Xiaohong 周晓虹, ed. 2005. *Zhongguo zhongchan jieceng diaocha* 中国中产阶级调查 (Investigative report on China's middle class). Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian.

Zhu Lili 朱丽丽. 2009. "Yujing bianqian, fuhao zhuanyi yu mi qunti: guanyu Qianfu mi de wenhua fenxi" 语境变迁, 符号转译与迷群体: 关于潜伏迷的文化分析 (Contextual change, sign transference and fan communities: a cultural analysis of the fans of *Undercover*). *Dangdai chuanbo* no. 6. 26–33.

Zhu, Ying. 2009. *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market*. London, New York: Routledge.

—— and Chris Berry, eds. 2009. *TV China*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

——, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, eds. 2008. *TV Drama in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Zuo Mingqing 左明情. 2009. "Danchun qinggan xiandu nei de xinyang, huoda zhe xinyang qizhi de fan xinyang" 单纯情感限度内的信仰, 或打着信仰旗帜的反信仰 (Belief in the limits of pure emotion, or anti-belief disguised as belief). URL (accessed 5/23/2011): <http://movie.douban.com/review/2103144/>.