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For Yan Xian, Zhao Ming,
and their generation of revolutionaries

Preface

I still remember the day I arrived in London. It was December 27, 1987, the second day after Christmas. I had travelled with my fellow Sino-British Friendship Scholarship awardees from Beijing, stopping at Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, for refueling. The journey took 16 hours. When we arrived at London's Gatwick airport, we could not help marveling at its 'modern', 'grand' and 'luxurious' outlook compared with the small and backward Beijing Capital Airport at the time. That was the first encounter we had with the old centre of world capitalism. People from the Chinese Embassy picked us up and accommodated us at the house occupied by the Educational Section, the famous 51 Ealing Broadway in a London suburb close to the city centre. We enjoyed the mild winter and the greenness of the city. As it was Christmas vacation and the academic term did not start until January, we spent a few days freely touring around London.

In the British Museum, we saw on exhibition the most valuable artifacts and relics from ancient Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and of course China. Facing this collage of historical and contemporary wonders from around the world collected in this museum, we had to ask ourselves if it was true that the winners should take all and if the fittest really survived the best, as Darwin once tried to prove as a natural law of the animal world. Yes, we should be sent to this once most powerful colonial centre to study advanced science, technology, theories and ideas and go back one day to make China a stronger and better off country. In the following few days we continued enthusiastically discussing and debating about all sorts of social, political and historical issues which were in fact quite beyond our capacity to grasp. We were simply struck and stunned by a very different 'first world reality' in front our eyes – huge material abundance and well established public facilities, but also the high cost of everyday living and the beggars we occasionally saw in the city's underground and streets. As a student of social sciences and humanities, I was more eager than anyone else to find out what was hidden underneath this surface of affluence and division.

A few days later, I left London for the East Midlands, where I would study for my doctorate at the Centre for Mass Communication Research in Leicester University, one of the key institutions for critical media studies in Europe at the time. The Centre

was housed in a modest three-story red brick Victorian building at 104 Regent Road, not far from the main campus. There in a top floor attic room I first met my mentor and thesis supervisor Graham Murdock, who turned out to be one of the leading figures in the political economy of mass communications in the English speaking world and a life-long critic of cultural capitalism. His office was packed with shelves of books and I asked him a silly question whether he had read all these books. I cannot remember his answer but I supposed it must have been 'no'. What attracted my attention the most in this office was an army green cap with a red star, once part of the standard uniform for the Chinese People's Liberation Army, hanging on the edge of one of the bookshelves. I remember I made an even sillier remark about the red-starred cap. I told Graham that only young men in China would wear a cap like this, implying that Graham, who was only 41 at the time, with a full black beard and moustache, was already an old man! It was only some time later that I understood the real meaning of this cap for its owner – an indicator of his political stance as a left-wing intellectual who would stand for the Chinese Revolution and China's socialist experiments, a position more usually embedded in the posters of Che Guevara that radical young people in the West pinned up on the walls of their rooms. I was in my early 20s and happened to be the first research student from China's mainland to study for a Ph.D. in the Centre for Mass Communication Research in the latter half of the 1980s. Some misunderstandings seemed to be inevitable.

After some long and tortuous discussions with Graham, I decided to work on children and television in China. I started to read earlier studies in this area and was frustrated by the way quantitative social scientists treated their subjects of study in an absolutely non-critical manner, and found it difficult to understand why they had to spend so much time, energy and money investigating something either obvious, or trivial and insignificant. I soon lost my patience with lazy empiricism, and its more pretentious interpretive alternative. When I came across Critical Theory, in the writings of the Frankfurt School, a group of cultural theorists with a Marxist twist, I was overwhelmed by the power and beauty of their work and determined to make my own study at least both 'empirical and critical'. I often felt inspired and overjoyed reading essays by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, Eric Fromm, Walter Benjamin and others. At a time when Marxism had become a *de facto* scapegoat for the failure of Chinese socialism, I bumped into this twentieth century critical development of classical Marxism, so refined and sophisticated that I could not help but 'fall in love' with them all. I still remember how I was reading their essays passionately late into the night in bed, hoping to find some 'truth' about modern industrial western civilization, which might shed light on the future formation of China's modern society so desperate in its search for wealth, strength and recognition. I started to spend my early and mid-twenties in a search for 'truth' in Critical Theory and critical sociology with a left-wing Marxist orientation. My mind was filled with concepts of freedom, happiness, rationality and emancipation. For a few fears I felt very happy and lucky, paid by a full scholarship to indulge in my favorite theories and ideas and fight wars on paper against all forms of oppression.

While I was enthusiastically engaged with Critical Theory, and reading the various critiques of capital and capitalism then current on British university campuses, China was going through dramatic and painful changes, heading for further opening up to the outside world, and the capitalist West in particular. Deng Xiaoping's coming to power in the late 1970s after Mao died gave rise to a new material pragmatism, thriving on a popular dissatisfaction among the intellectual class with the actually existing socialism under Mao Zedong, which heavily privileged collective efforts at nation-building at the cost of individual freedom and satisfaction. Where post-Mao China, now standing at crossroads, should head for became a key question. Mao's revolutionary romanticism and socialist equalitarianism coupled with proletarian dictatorship all became targets of ideological attack in the new pragmatic market era of Deng Xiaoping, which was increasingly caught up in a frantic search for fast economic growth. The political upheaval of the late spring and early summer of 1989 was, with hindsight, a result of people's initial and intuitive reaction to the divisive effects of a newly introduced market system in a society which still highly valued equality and took equalitarianism for granted. It was Deng himself who encouraged a small minority to become rich first in the hope that they would then lead the great majority onto the road of common wealth as prosperity trickled down the social scale. As time went by however, and the new market economy expanded, one could see that while a minority became rich, or even super-rich, they did not seem to be interested in leading others onto the road of common wealth. On the contrary, many of them managed their initial accumulation of wealth at the cost of others, and tended to do everything possible to maintain and magnify it, including transferring their assets overseas after China became increasingly integrated into the unequal world capitalist economic system.

Against this background my own intellectual pursuits in the late 1980s and early 1990s were very much against the tide of the time back in China. Disillusioned with western capitalism and bourgeois democracy, perhaps first in theory and then in practice, I decided to leave the UK in 1997, after 10 years of studying and teaching in British universities. I could not wait to go back to witness the dramatic changes the country was going through. I handed in my resignation letter on a summer's day to Prof. John Hartley, then head of the School of Journalism in Cardiff University. He put the letter into one of the drawers of his desk and said to me, 'I'll keep this for a while in case you change your mind'. He offered me a one-or-even-two-year unpaid leave since I was at the time 3 months pregnant with my son Liangliang. I was moved by the way he genuinely tried to keep and help a young promising academic. But I was determined to leave the UK and go back to China. I still remember that he was impressed by my enthusiasm for Critical Theory and my left-wing political stance during my job interview a year before when he offered me this rare opportunity of a permanent lectureship in the School right away. But deep in my heart, I knew that my political and intellectual commitment was at the beginning a matter of historical chance and a result of self-conversion as I became easily attracted to beautiful things and ideas. But somehow this commitment became more and more real as time went by. In the following 10 years, I kept my contact with the School of

Journalism and Cardiff University first as an external research fellow and then as an honorary fellow.

I went back to settle in Beijing in September 1997. But I had to wait another few years to see my theoretical critique of capital more closely related to Chinese reality. I became a post-doctorate researcher in the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology at Peking University, rather ironically after teaching media studies for many years in British universities. But I was pleased to be back at Peking University where I did my first degree in English language and literature in the early 1980s. Liangliang was born in February the next year and I started to teach media studies and critical sociology in the same institution in the year 2000. The beginning of the new millennium saw China's Gini coefficient reaching 0.417, signifying a significant gap between people's incomes. This figure was to reach 0.47 in 2005 and is now in 2012 approaching or reaching 0.5. These figures confirm that the social division between the rich and the poor has steadily widened over the past 30 years to such an extent that the Party itself nowadays has become politically divided. China once again finds itself at crossroads, turning further right or starting to move back to left?

The turning point for further liberalizing the economy from state control after the 1989 political upheaval came in 1992, with Deng Xiaoping's gestural 'tour to the south' – know in China as *nanxun* – in January that year, confirming his support for a market economy, which had flourished first and foremost at the mainland's south end – Shenzhen bordering Hong Kong, one of the first four special economic zones. In the following few years, many state-owned enterprises were made bankrupt and their employees 'laid off'. The years around the turn of the millennium saw key areas of the national economy, including education, healthcare, coal-mining, public transportation, and real estate falling into 'the invisible hands' of the market in the name of reform. In December 2001, China celebrated joining the World Trade Organization. As Mao's policy of self-reliance was discarded and abandoned as isolationism, China became more eager than ever to open up and to become a full member of the 'international community' ruled by the major Western powers. A full-blown export-oriented economy emerged, turning the country into a world factory churning out cheap labor-intensive products for the whole globe. Unlike the old European colonial and imperial masters who accomplished their primitive accumulation of wealth partly or largely through exploiting and exhausting their colonies, China has only its own people and land to employ and exhort. Moreover, though often neglected or simply forgotten by liberal economic and social commentators, a basic and complete industrial infrastructure established in the first 30 years of the People's Republic as a part of Mao's socialist construction formed a solid foundation upon which any later economic miracle could rest.

The free market has eventually become the most powerful and prevalent ideology and mythology in today's China. Mainstream liberal economists in China seem to have persuaded people to believe that the bigger the cake, the better. But how to divide the cake never seems to be an issue for them. The market economy has effectively produced a massive amount of wealth, but much of this gain has fallen into the pockets of the few. It has not equally benefited the people who have directly produced it with their own hands – the new working class in China consisting mainly

of those born in the countryside but laboring in factories and construction sites in cities and towns. Efficiency and profit have been substituted for social justice as the central values of this market economic system. Dazzled by the spectacular economic miracle manifested in GDP growth, few economic commentators, either at home or abroad, bother to focus their attention on the huge but sometimes hidden social and ecological costs. A critical commentator, however, should not hesitate to point out that this miracle has only been achieved through severe exploitation of the country's human and natural resources on the one hand and serious pollution of its water and soil on the other. She also has to ask if the gains really outweigh the losses, and who has benefitted from most of the gains and who has paid for most of the losses.

In China, marketization has gone hand in hand with liberalization and privatization over the years and a peculiar Chinese version of market fundamentalism has managed to become firmly implanted in the nation's collective unconsciousness. Liberal ideologues, through the media, have equated a liberal market economy with personal liberty. As a result, any questioning of the liberal market is seen as an attack on personal freedom and autonomy. In recent times, the remaining state-owned enterprises have come under constant attack for their 'monopoly' status and are put under enormous pressure to be privatized. The old familiar Marxist critique of monopoly capitalism has been turned upside down to harass the only important remnants of actually existing socialism. Popular liberal economists, together with liberal-minded media professionals, have deliberately or blindly, coined the phrase '*min ying*' or 'people's enterprise' to refer to private business, while the old phrase '*guo ying*' or 'state enterprise' has taken on the air of some kind of estrangement from the people. This linguistic sleight of hand demonstrates how words and phrases are coined to hide reality and become part of a systematic dominant ideology in today's China.

With liberalism perennially occupying the centre stage, China's new left has never managed to make a concerted effort to deal with the stark and bleak situation. With little support from the party-state, and unable to relate to the 'masses', many have succumbed to disappointment or despair. When the 2008 financial crisis spread from Wall Street to Europe and then all over the world, China's export-oriented economy was hit hard. In the following few years, China with its huge foreign reserves started to play the role of an international fire-brigade rescuing the burning world capitalist system from total collapse. When Wall Street was occupied by demonstrators protesting against the irrational world capitalist financial system in September 2011, and when the movement soon spread to more than 900 cities in more than 80 countries in October, China stayed conspicuously absent and kept unusually quiet. Has pragmatism really killed off any Utopian imagination in this country?

In the face of all this, I, too, lost my voice. I suddenly did not know what to say anymore. All my theories seemed so pale when faced by this mixed and complex reality. Then, after years of keeping silent, I had this opportunity to publish my work in its original form completed 20 years ago. All of a sudden I felt the urge to go to beyond my original work and in this short preface to sketch out a path for my intellectual pursuits and political commitments in relation to the structural changes

sweeping China and the world. Along this tortuous but consistent path, I went through stages of ignorance, confusion, ecstasy, frustration, disappointment, despair and hope. One thing I never gave up during my years of silence was the habit of reading, observing, and thinking, selectively and critically. Early in 2011, when I saw a picture of my old mentor, Graham, with his hair now completely white, demonstrating in the centre of London, against the greedy financial capitalism, I burst into tears. If he, after all these decades, has not given up, there must be some hope somewhere someday. I too must start from where I have left off.

I will go to the essential concepts of **social justice** and **happiness** and start my critical thinking journey again, asking questions that really matter. How can we bring the concept of social justice back to the core of social thinking and research in China? What are the economic and political premises for social justice? Is social justice a precondition for our happiness? Can social justice be possible in a seriously divided society? Are people really happier now in this new flexible system of market exchanges and legal contracts compared with people living in the old system of state planning and closely-nit work units *cum* community? How much individual freedom does one need to be truly happy? Is the free market the best mechanism to provide for our needs in order to be happy? Or has it created its own needs above ours? When and how did consumerism become a dominant ideology and a desirable way of life in China? And how has material consumption displaced and replaced the search for the true meaning of life nowadays, not only in China but all over the world? And last but not the least, why is it that these questions are more often than not discarded and ignored as purely metaphysical and speculative by mainstream social scientists in the modern world?

At this moment, of course, I have more questions than answers. But these questions will undoubtedly guide my future sociological thinking. When I last went to the UK to visit friends in the summer of 2006, I flew from the brand-new Beijing Capital International Airport, fabulously modern, to London's Heathrow, dark and dull, and in need of upgrading. In the year 2008, an even newer and grander terminal was opened to welcome athletes and visitors for the Beijing Olympics. It seemed to be a peculiar mismatching and reordering of time and space. I suddenly remembered my first trip to London back in 1987. Does this mean that China is beginning to win in the global competition for material and economic power? The future and the past seem to have been disordered, upturned, inverted and reversed. To borrow a famous phrase from *The Communist Manifesto,* we seem to be faced once again with a situation globally in which 'all that is solid melts into the air'. Some fundamental changes are taking place. As Marx once told us, people make history but not under conditions of their own making. To those who have gone through these changes in china, and have contributed actively or passively to make them happen, I really want to know, are they truly feeling happier from the bottom of their hearts?

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Contents

Introduction: In the Name of Modernisation

Understanding the trajectory of modernity continues to be a central project for Western social and human sciences, as well illustrated in Habermas' famous phrase as 'an incomplete project' (Habermas 1981). Outside the West, understanding the impact of Western modernity on the historical formations in other parts of the world has become a key issue for social scientists and historians. This impact is crystalised in the key concept of modernisation – both as an official ideology and a popular sentiment. The urge for modernisation has to be understood as a reaction on the part of the underdeveloped nations to a brave new world restructured by the rise of the West through colonialism and capitalism to world dominance.

Compared with the formation of modernity in the West, which many would trace back to the Renaissance, the process of modernisation in the rest of the world has a relatively short history. This is particularly so in China, since it was not until China lost the two Opium Wars to Great Britain in the mid nineteenth century that she was forced to embark on the course of 'enriching the country and strengthening the arms forces' – the so-called *fu guo qiang bing* purpose of the Westernisation Movement led by top Manchurian bureaucrats to rescue the weakening Qing Dynasty from total collapse.[1] Ever since then, numerous attempts, active or passive, have been made to learn from and catch up with the West. The rhetoric of modernisation has been adopted and repeated by all regimes that have come to power over the last 100 years, regardless of their political orientations or strategies – Left or Right, capitalist or socialist, self-reliant or pro-west. Modernity has become the nation's ultimate goal to strive for. The history of the past one and half centuries in China, as well as in many other underdeveloped countries, can be said to be a history of an official and popular obsession with the modern. This romance with the contemporary is the core around which the old overlaps with the new and tradition interacts with reformation and revolution.

[1] See Jonathan D. Spence's *The Search for Modern China* for a fuller account of this part of Chinese history.

In the first 30 of the People's Republic, official efforts and achievements in modernising the country have been conspicuously recorded and celebrated – from satellite launching and nuclear experiments, to the establishing of broadcasting systems and the erecting of bridges over the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers – all of which are considered as positive signs of building modernity in China. What is often missing from this official documentation, however, is an adequate and meticulous account of people's immediate experience with this formidable process. There are many reasons for this absence, the most important of which is, arguably, the abolition of sociology and other social sciences and their replacement by an all embracive official ideology of Marxism in China under Mao.

This piece of work on children and television in China conducted in the early years of Deng's reforms is meant to contribute to the understanding of people's everyday life experience of the then new wave of modernising policies in favour of the free market initiated in the 1980s. Because children provide a very personal link between historical change and biographical experience, and because television has become a prime focus for struggles around public representations of modernity – the topic of children and television provides a particularly interesting vantage point from which one can record and examine people's frustration and enthusiasm, confusion and resistance. The 1980s turned out to be a decade of ideological anomie from a hind sight. The official ideology of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought was losing its grip over popular imagination, and was considered inadequate to explain the new reality of revived capitalist market. The *de facto* demise of this dominant ideological system, despite the adherence to it in official rhetoric, prompted people to turn to other belief systems – the most popular of which turned out to be materialism, consumerism, and individualism – all rooted in Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic 'cat theory' – it does not matter if the cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat.

The subtitle of the book – a critical inquiry into children and television in China – should therefore be read as describing a focus for social analysis rather than a narrowly bounded field of study. The research is concerned not just with children and television, but with the post-Mao era of modernisation characterised by experiments with a capitalist market economy in socialist China, and their links to and impact on the cultural sphere. The 'inquiry' is meant to be 'critical' for two reasons: firstly, it adopts a classical critical perspective, which examines everyday life in relation to wider structural formations and attempts to trace the relationship between the two; secondly, it seeks to develop a critique both of tradition and of reality, including paternalist values, sex taboos, the new ethics of consumerism and possessive individualism, and the ongoing trend towards commercialisation of culture.

Based on original empirical research I conducted in 1989 in China, the book begins with a survey of previous literature in English in the area of children and television in order to locate the study of Chinese children and television in its intellectual context and to show the need to break with a longstanding theoretical and methodological stagnation in the area. This is followed by a critique of the approaches developed by empiricist and interpretative studies, and an elaboration of the central case for a critical approach to the study of children and television. The fourth chapter

is devoted to an account of the evolution of children's television in China, tracing its movement from overt ideological and intellectual education to the present tendency towards commercialized entertainment with hidden political and economic interests.

The next two chapters present the empirical core of the book. One deals with children's viewing activity in general, with particular attention placed on the modes through which Chinese parents attempt to exercise control at home. The other is a case study of the craze for *The Transformers* cartoon series and for the linked toy range in several Chinese cities. The Transformers craze is analysed and interpreted in relation to the rise of consumerism and its rapid expansion in the space left by the erosion of traditional values on the one hand and disenchantment with the socialist ideology on the other. The book concludes by indicating some new lines of inquiry opened up by this piece of work for further research on China and its rapidly changing society.

Chapter 1
Children and Television: Public Concern and Scientific Research

The development of children and television as an area of scientific investigation with a history of its own, owes more to the persistence of public anxiety about the adverse influence of television on the young than to any possible academic gains the research has generated. This is perhaps particularly true of the controversies over the effects of televised violence. In this opening chapter, the historical trajectory of work on children and television in English will be outlined, and its roots in public worries over the influence of popular media traced back to the late nineteenth century. In the English-speaking world, concern began to be expressed in earnest with the rise of commercial juvenile magazines in Victorian England – the so-called 'Penny Dreadfuls'. It moved through the arrival of cinema at the beginning of twentieth century, and then the panic about 'horror comics' in the early 1950s, to culminate in the advent of television. Charting this history and the research response to it enables us to locate the critical study of children and television in China within its intellectual context, to explore its relation to past and present work in the area.

The Roots of Concern

Contemporary concern over children and television is only one instance of a generalised public anxiety over the mass media's adverse influence on children, whose origins can be traced to the coincidence between the emergence of popular magazines for children and the rise of the modern Western construction of childhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This new conception, which viewed childhood as a time of innocence and vulnerability requiring care and protection, was one of numerous novel social representations generated within the new society shaped by industrialization, urbanization and religious disenchantment – or modernisation in general.

It is now generally agreed that conceptions of childhood have been through radical changes. On the basis of a close examinations of icons, the French historian,

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Philippe Ariés, has argued that the idea of childhood – as we know it – did not exist in mediaeval times, and that children were then both portrayed and treated as miniature adults (Ariés 1962). Despite the disputability of the specific thesis, the underlying claim that the ways in which children are recognized by and related to by adults vary considerably throughout history – is widely accepted. This conclusion is supported for the modern period by the wealth of historical documentation relating to children's contribution to the family economy prior to the industrial revolution and to their participation in that revolution itself. William Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper', intended as a song of childhood innocence, touched upon the misery of child labour in the vivid language of poetry[1]:

> When my mother died I was young,
> And my father sold me while yet my tongue
> Could scarcely cry weep!' weep!' weep!' weep!'
> So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

The various constructions and reconstructions of childhood in Britain, from the end of eighteenth century up to the present, have been usefully surveyed by Hendrick (1990). Each new construction, prior to the First World War, can be presented in approximately chronological order. They are: 'the romantic child' portrayed by poets at the end of the eighteenth century; the 'Evangelical child', propagated by conservative Christians in the early nineteenth century; the 'factory child', of the early and mid nineteenth century; the 'delinquent child' of the mid nineteenth century; the 'schooled child' of the last quarter of the same century; the 'psycho-medical child', constructed by doctors around the turn of the century; and the figure of 'welfare child' which emerged immediately prior to the First World War. To summarise this general development in Hendrick's own words,

> In 1800 the meaning of childhood was ambiguous and not universally in demand. By 1914 the uncertainty had been resolved and the identity determined, at least to the satisfaction of the middle class and the respectable working class. A recognizably 'modern' notion was in place: childhood was legally, legislatively, socially, medically, psychologically, educationally and politically institutionalized (Hendrick 1990: 36).

In the modern West, from 1914 to the late 1950s, two further constructions emerged simultaneously: the idea of the 'psychological child', which increasingly subjected children to professional care and treatment by psychologists and psychiatrists, and the image of the 'family child and public child', which stressed parent-child link within the 'natural' nuclear family, and acknowledged public responsibility for guardianship by governmental or charitable institutions. The years from the late 1950s onwards have seen an extension of this latter conception by way of attempts to incorporate children into civil society through a multi-faceted notion of 'rights'.

Underlying these various constructions and reconstructions however, we can detect a generalised notion of an ideal condition of childhood as requiring protection

[1] The extract was taken from *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, published in 1913 by Oxford University Press in London, p74.

from abuse and exploitation, with the abolition of child labour being perhaps the clearest example of this ideal in practice. This movement has been observed by a number of sociologists of childhood. Ritchie and Koller, for example, have argued that at the centre of the slow and laborious changes in the definition of childhood throughout human history has been a tendency to place an increasing value on children until they have emerged as the familiar objects of concern of modern times (Ritchie and Koller 1964: 6). However, it needs to be added here that protection can be, and often is, oppressive and may become a legitimated form of domination. This is one of the issues addressed by the current movement for children's rights, with its central slogan: 'the child is a person – and not an object of concern'. Concern is not so easily abolished, however. On the contrary, it is nourished by a long and rich history.

Present day concern about the corrupting influence of the mass media on children, can be traced back historically to the rise of cheap commercial juvenile magazines in the late nineteenth century. These so-called 'Penny Dreadfuls', which first appeared in Victorian England in the 1860s, were full of stories about adventurous and criminal young men. They were therefore roundly condemned by contemporary moralists as 'exotic violence plus identification with a hero' (Barker 1989: 508). Indeed, concern reached such a pitch that the police felt able to smash the printing plates of one of the best known 'Dreadfuls' – *The Wild Boys of London* (see Drotner 1988: 72).

Similar concerns were voiced, though more persistently, over the negative effects of films on children, after the advent and popularization of the moving pictures at the turn of the century around 1900, and more particularly after sound was added to the moving images in the late 1920s, when children emerged as among the most devoted viewers. Meanwhile, social investigation in the West, particularly in the United States, equipped with ever more refined empirical techniques, was emerging as a central instrument for coping with social problems. In the name of social sciences, research was increasingly conducted to address issues of public concern and to suggest practical solutions.

The Payne Fund studies on children and the cinema were typical of this kind of problem-oriented research and they exerted considerable influence on later studies of children and the newer medium of television. The general conclusions of the Payne Fund studies were summarised by Forman as suggesting that 'at their best they [motion pictures] carry a high potential of value and quality in entertainment, in instruction, in desirable effects upon mental attitudes and ideals', and 'at their worst they carry the opposite possibilities as a natural corollary' (Forman 1935: 273). Arguably, this conclusion, although reached through the formal procedures of empirical social research, offered little more than any sensible layman's guesswork. But the very fact that it had been produced by 'science', lent legitimacy to the prevailing legacy of concern about the negative power of the mass media.

The panic over 'horror comics' in the early 1950s was fuelled by this same basic view of the anti-social influence of popular media on the vulnerable young. Frederick Wertham's much publicised attack on the comics, *The Seduction of the Innocent*,

represented a straightforward moral charge against what was thought to be their seductively corrupting effect (Wertham 1954). Its publication played a major role in prompting the United States Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency and comic books, and in the construction of the Comic Code, which provided the comic industry with a blueprint for self-censorship. As the pace of technological innovation accelerated however, the debate over 'horror comics' was soon overtaken by concern about the influence of the much more powerful and pervasive medium of television, which was expanding very rapidly in the mid 1950s and early 1960s in the West.

The same conception of children as unformed as far as social and moral values are concerned, which underpinned concern about negative effects, also drew attention to the possible educational role of the emerging medium. This potential was recognised and emphasized from the mid nineteenth century onwards. Hence, at the same time as the commercial juvenile magazines were being condemned, middle-class moralists were launching wholesome periodicals such as *The Boy's Own Paper* and *The Girl's Own Paper*, often supported by religious organisations. Denominational papers for children published and financed by religious groups appeared in countries like France and Belgium, and attempted to reconcile religious considerations with a measure of intellectual development (see Bauchard 1952). Decades later, morally concerned groups – parents, educators, and clergymen – campaigned for specially made children's films to be shown in cinemas, lobbied for controls over the content of commercial films, and demanded restrictions on the age of entry into cinemas for certain shows. They were also instrumental in supporting children's matinees and children's cinema club movement in Britain from the 1930s onwards (see Ford 1939).

This double concern, with the anti-social influence of the popular media on the one hand, and with the educative potential of the new media on the other, which began with the juvenile popular magazines and carried over into the debate about movies in the 1920s and 1930s and about the comic books in the early 1950s, culminated with the popularization of television from the mid-1950s onwards. Television, as a medium which combined the audiovisual impact of the film with the domestic availability of the comic book, intensified and refocused established concerns about the influence of the mass media on the young. In addition, the presence of television as a 'permanent member' in the family gave rise to the particular worries about its possible impact on the organisation and quality of family life.

Television and Change: Before and After

The decades of 1950s and 1960s witnessed the introduction of television into people's home in most Western countries. This provided social scientists with opportunities to conduct the so-called 'before-and-after' studies on the effects of television. Although some investigations into children and television had already been conducted in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Riley et al. 1949; Maccoby 1951),

it was not until the mid' and late 1950s that major research projects were carried out and their reports published. Most of these studies were intended to identify the changes supposedly brought by the introduction of television, and to assess the effects in very broad terms, such as the impact on patterns of everyday life, and on attitudes and behaviours.

The seminal investigation by Hilde Himmelweit and her colleagues remains one of the most comprehensive and refined empirical studies of the effects of television on children. The research, which was conducted in Britain at a time when initial public concern about the effects of television was at its height, adopted a version of the conventional experimental model and aimed to build up a comprehensive picture of the changes brought about by television in children's life (Himmelweit et al. 1958: 4). Most of the research effort was devoted to two surveys: the main survey which was conducted in several English cities including London, in which viewers and controls were carefully matched and compared with one another; and the before-and-after survey which was based in the East Anglia town of Norwich, in which children were tested both before and after their families acquired a television set.

The discussions on the study's design and methods, as recorded in the research report, are particularly insightful, especially when it comes to the explanation of their decision to use written questionnaires rather than personal interviews. As they rightly point out, personal interviews can be more informative and flexible than questionnaires, but only when it is possible to use highly trained interviewers with the necessary time needed to establish rapport with respondents and to clarify their answers by means of supplementary questions. Because these optimal conditions could not be fulfilled by the study, administered questionnaires which would allow for maximum flexibility and spontaneity, supplemented by diaries, were considered to be to the next best choice. To augment the two major surveys, a number of additional inquiries were conducted involving teachers, parents, and young children under 7-year-old. The methods used in these inquiries ranged from questionnaires, intensive individual interviews, discussions, and group observations, to content analysis.

The main findings of the study consisted of: (1) a description of children's viewing activity, including the amount of television they watch and their tastes in television programmes; and (2) a discussion of various aspects of television's impact, including its effects on children's values and outlook, on their general knowledge and school performance, on their leisure activities, on patterns of family life, and on their personality development, on their physical and psychological well-being (sleep, eyesight, anxiety, and fear). The way in which different children react differently to television is assessed in terms of their intelligence, age, gender, class background, and personality.

Some underlying principles which were supposed to help predict possible effects under specific circumstances were laid down. For example, the principles of leisure displacement generalised the ways in which other leisure activities are displaced and transformed by television viewing. The principles underlying television's effects on children's outlook and values indicated the conditions under which maximal effect was likely to occur. The authors also studied children's tastes in television, looking for the principles determining what types of incident aroused fear and emotional disturbance in the young audience. In general, a more sophisticated under-

standing of a cumulative and gradual process of television's influence was adopted to replace an earlier crude 'hypodermic model' that assumes the media injecting influence directly into the young viewers' heads.

Conducted in the mid 1950s, this important study laid much of the theoretical and methodological groundwork for later empirical research in the area. It still provides many useful insights, particularly in relation to its subtle and sophisticated employment of research methods, and its thorough understanding of the advantages and limitations of specific investigation techniques and of how best to combine them so that their strengths get amplified and weaknesses reduced. It is in this sense that the Himmelweit study can be said to be a classic of its kind, whose insights should be incorporated into contemporary research, including the critical inquiry into children and television in China.

In the same year as the British study was published, a major research project was launched in ten communities in the United States and Canada by Wilbur Schramm and his colleagues (Schramm et al. 1961). Their task was once again, to trace the myriad changes in children's life brought about by television. The numerous findings were later classified by Lowery and DeFleur into several general categories: (1) how and when children used television; (2) children's learning from television; (3) reality seeking and social norms; and (4) the effects of television – physical effects, emotional effects, cognitive effects, and behavioral effects (Lowery and DeFleur 1983: 245–270). A functionalist model was adopted to answer the basic question of why children watch television and three basic functions were said to be fulfilled: entertainment, information, and social utility. As its authors admitted, this North American study replicated many of the findings of its British counterpart.

Apart from the two major empirical studies conducted in England and North America, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw several other general studies on the effects of television on children and adolescents conducted in other developed countries, including West Germany, Japan, and Australia. The German study (Maletzke 1959), which concentrated on young people aged between 15 and 20, came to conclusions which in many ways paralleled those of the British and American studies. No conclusive evidence was found to support either the specific argument that television caused juvenile delinquency or the general assumption that television had considerable effects on the social behaviour of youth. The Japanese study (Furu 1962) attempted to specify the differences that television had made to the life patterns of the child audience, and concluded that 'passivity', 'escapist tendencies', and 'nervous tendencies', were no more marked in television children, than in control groups.[2] The Australian study (Campbell 1962) was, once again, intended to identify the changes brought by television in children's leisure activities, family relations, neighbourhood relations, and ego-ideals. Overall, these general studies tended to follow and further consolidate the research trajectory begun by the Payne Fund studies on children and the moving pictures in the early 1930s.

[2] For a more detailed summary of the two non-English studies, see *The Effects of Television on Children and Adolescents*, published in 1964 by UNESCO (prepared by IAMCR).

Opportunities to undertake before-and-after projects decreased with the further expansion of television. The last one of this sort was conducted relatively late, in early 1970s in three hitherto isolated Canadian towns. Its general conclusions stand as a summary, not only of its own results, but those of this genre of studies. Firstly, television affects viewers negatively in a variety of areas of activity by means of displacement. Secondly, the effects of television content are shown in the increase in children's aggressive behaviour and in their sex-typed beliefs about the appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. Thirdly, the effects of television have more to do with its simple presence than whether one channel or four are available (Williams 1986). Despite the fact that it was conducted at least a decade after other similar studies, at a time of considerable innovation in audience research, it in no sense broke away from the definitional and procedural conventions established by its predecessors. Indeed, its belated publication in the mid 1980s can be seen as an invigoration of the empiricist tradition at a time when this approach had lost much a great deal of ground to the new wave of interpretative studies of children and television.

Windows of Vulnerability

With the rapid expansion of television set ownership and the decreasing opportunities to conduct before-and-after research, studies of children and television in the late 1960s and 1970s began to focus on single issues of high public concern, most notably the effects of television violence and commercial advertising. These studies retreated more and more from natural communities into laboratories and school classrooms, and concentrated on looking for direct links of a causal nature between television messages and children's attitudes and behaviour, against the same background assumption of children's particular innocence and vulnerability.

Television Violence

The influence of television violence on children has been the most ardently debated, if not necessarily the best researched, issue of high public concern, to the extent that it has often been equated in popular and political commentary with the issue of children and television *per se*. Much of the relevant research was conducted in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, at a time of mounting social turbulences and violence. These studies interacted with the two United States Congressional hearings[3] on children and television violence held between 1961 and 1972.

[3] Firstly, the Dodd Hearings in 1961; and then the Pastore Hearings in 1972.

A useful starting point for an adequate account for the ferment of research activity in this area has been provided by Rowland in his study of the symbolic and political uses of violence research.

> The rise of violence research must be seen in the joint light of the conditions governing the development of American science generally and of the continuing public anxiety about television – indeed, about all new technologies and modes of communication (Rowland 1983: 291).

In analysing the 'conditions governing the development of American science', he lays particular emphasis on the pragmatic and utilitarian tradition of American science – including social sciences – first and foremost in economics, and later on in psychology and sociology. This tradition lies at the root of the particular American unity between government, industry, and academia, or between politics, economy, and the intelligentsia. The strength of these relations was such that many European intellectuals, who had remained marginal to and critical of their own social systems, when they became academicians in the New World between and after the two World Wars, were comfortably assimilated into the mainstream social research. The history of television violence research therefore, has to be seen as one instance of a general twentieth-century American phenomenon – the massive employment of the intelligentsia in social planning, reform and control.

Three major theories concerning the effects of television violence emerged from experimental studies conducted by behavioral psychologists in the 1960s and early 1970s[4] Social learning theory, derived from the Bozo doll experiments conducted by Bandura and his colleagues, emphasizes television's provision of instructional models for behaviour. Instigation theory, advanced by Berkowitz and his colleagues, argued that exposure to television violence can arouse or cue an aggressive response in the viewers. And the catharsis theory, advocated by Feshbash and Singer, argued, in stark opposition to the previous two theoretical positions, that watching television violence can in fact reduce levels of aggression in the viewers by allowing them to release their aggressive impulses through fantasy.

With substantial support from the United States government, academic efforts to resolve the problem of whether and how television violence influenced children were intensified in the late 1960s, with an ambitious programme of work conducted under the auspices of the Surgeon General's project. The interventions in the selection of members of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee by the broadcasting industry, together with the subsequent controversy among the committee members around the final drafting of the summary report, revealed the essentially political nature of this research initiative and cast considerable doubt on the so-called neutrality, objectivity and value-freedom of its findings. In the cautious generalizations by Liebert, one of the advanced researchers involved with the project, one can have a glimpse of the lack of consensus, and confidence, among individual projects and researchers:

> While each of the projects had its limitations, researchers consistently found some significant relationship between TV violence and aggressive and other objectionable behavior by

[4] For a more detailed account of these theories, see Liebert and Sprafkin (1988).

> children and adolescents. The research made it equally obvious that the occurrence of such behavior always involve many factors (Liebert and Sprafkin 1988: 79).

Despite the unsatisfactory nature of these conclusions, or perhaps because of them, in the years following the publication of the Surgeon General's Report, violence continued to be a major focus for research on children and television. Most of the results obtained tended to argue that there probably was a modest causal relationship, direct or not, between television violence and aggression in children. As a sympathetic overview of 20 years of subsequent empiricist research concluded,

> In the 20 years since the publication of the Surgeon General's Report[5] research into TV violence issue has burgeoned.[6] Laboratory experiments continue to provide evidence of a causal relationship between violence viewing and aggression. The results of nonexperimental field studies and, to a lesser extent, field experiments support the same conclusion. While a few studies have produced ambiguous or negative conclusion, the majority of new investigations suggest that viewing violent entertainment can increase aggression and cultivate the perception that the world is a mean and scary place (Liebert and Sprafkin 1988: 135).

However, by no means all empirical researchers were convinced that this meager yield of 'findings' had justified the enormous research effort and funds devoted to the area. AS Kaplan and Singer argued:

> It is fascinating that so many hours of research and so many dollars have been directed at the possible effects of TV violence on aggressive behavior when it seems most likely that television is not a major cause of human aggression, an activity which considerably antedates audio-visual media…. Instead of castigating the networks it might be more useful to ask why the public is so fascinated by programs portraying violence (Kaplan and Singer 1976: 63–64).

We might also ask why politicians and researchers were so obsessed with this issue of TV violence. Rowland's penetrating analysis of the quadruple interest groups at work – academy, government, industry, and reformers – behind the issue of television violence provides an important resource for understanding the 'non-scientific' returns on the rapid proliferation of literature on television violence. The government and politicians gained by establishing a reputation for being highly concerned with children's welfare and the quality of television programmes without being forced to take legislative action. The industry managed to divert attention from its vast profits and enormous political power by selectively sponsoring certain research projects that demonstrated its concern. The academy, particularly the emerging communication research community in the US, received substantial

[5] There is a noticeable discrepancy here. If the Surgeon General's report was published in 1972, 20 years since the publication will be the year 1992. However, the most recent study reviewed here in this chapter was published in 1986 and this edition of the book was published in 1988.

[6] The word highly 'burgeoned' is questionable here. It depends on the frame of reference. Taken as a whole, the intellectual centre of gravity had clearly moved towards the interpretative approaches to children and television. What is meant here is that the absolute number of studies on television violence has increased compared with the previous decade.

financial and institutional support from the industry and the government. And finally, the reformers were supplied with evidence from scientific research to back up their case for change (Rowland 1983: 292–303).

Television Advertising and Other Issues

Next to the issue of television violence, the impact of television commercials, particularly those shown in between children's programmes, is the second most salient problem on the research agenda relating to television's effects on children in the US and other Western countries. In the early 1970s, voluntary organizations in the US, especially ACT – Action for Children's Television initiated by concerned mothers – managed to focus much public attention on the commercial nature of children's television and its possible impact on young viewers. Yet, research on the influence of television advertising is as complicated an issue as television violence *per se*, in that it too involves politics and split loyalties.

Firstly, there is the work conducted by researchers affiliated to or funded by the advertising and other industries. This aims to discover the most effective way of making commercial propaganda to young consumers, and to gather evidence, including that provided by non-industry-affiliated researchers, to support the case for advertising on children' television as a whole.[7] The following justification for advertising, given by the representative of the Toy Manufacturers of America, at hearings before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Communications, illustrates the ease with which 'scientific opinion' can be exploited by the industry:

> Is television advertising harmful to children? According to expert scientific opinion, toy commercials have few effects, if any, either helpful or harmful, on the mental health or emotional development of the viewing child. Further, the right kind of advertising can add some positive values to viewing. Children, like adults, enjoy good TV commercials (quoted in Liebert and Sprafkin 1988: 165).

Secondly, there are studies conducted by behavioural and social scientists, which focus on some narrowly defined problem concerning children and commercial advertising. The issues addressed here include: children's understanding of television commercials – that is whether they can distinguish commercials from television programmes and recognise the selling intention of commercials; the effects of advertising tactics on children's perception of commercials; and parental mediations of perception. The 'findings' of these studies are often deployed as evidence by social reformers advocating the regulation of commercial advertising on children's television. In the new general climate of deregulation of the 1980s, and the subsequent increasing aggressiveness of commercial activity on children's television, research

[7] For a better idea of the arguments supporting television advertising, see Liebert and Sprafkin (1988), p. 165.

effort has also been devoted to developing curricula to teach children about the television business and commercial advertising.

Wherever their political and academic location, these narrowly focused studies and research projects, made no attempt to ask broader questions concerning how advertising in general functions as the major mechanism for disseminating a consumerist ideology and life-style and consolidating a consumerist culture, or how commercials on children's television help to interpolate children as consumers of commodities with choices, rather than as future citizens of a political and social formation, with a range of rights and responsibilities. However, one study, by William Melody, provided a notable exception. As the subtitle 'the Economics of Exploitation' clearly suggests, he set out to probe the political economy of the American media system in search of a solution to the problem of children being by continuously exploited by advertisers and manufacturers in Western capitalist societies. In this account, children and advertising are no longer studied in isolation from the broader socio-economic context – the commercial television system in this case. The study concludes that the only solution to the problem of the exploitation of child viewers by commercial interests through television advertisements, is to find alternative financial resources for children's programmes. This in turn, Melody argues, requires structural changes in the commercial American television system, and a decentering of the core project of packaging audience for sale to advertisers.

Besides television violence and advertising, the other issue of public concern that has attracted substantial research attention is the stereotypical images portrayed on children's television, particularly in the areas of gender, ethnicity, and old age. Quantitative content analysis of television programmes is almost the only research method used in these kinds of studies. Almost invariably the conclusion is reached that children's television presents a distorted view of the real world, as far as gender roles, ethnic characteristics and old age are concerned and that women, ethnic minorities, and elderly people are often unfavourably portrayed with regards to both recognition and respect.[8] Studies of this kind can be regarded as critical only in a way the discovered 'facts' are interpreted. Otherwise researchers involved in such studies are too often preoccupied with counting the number of appearances of certain predefined stereotyped images on television. As a consequence, they tend to arrive at narrow conclusions which take little account of wider social contexts. Hence the findings are rendered vulnerable to triviality and superficiality. Here as elsewhere in the field of children and television, the reason why so little is revealed after so much effort is to be found in the research style of abstract empiricism that has dominated this area of study for decades.

Findings from studies of children and television will always remain fragmented and superficial as long as they are detached from any analysis of the broader social structure. We can illustrate this point by looking at the under-representation of women

[8] A typical study of this kind is *Images of Life on Children's Television* by F. Earle Barcus, published in1983 by Praeger Publishers. The study also provides a comprehensive review of pertinent literature.

on television. Arguably, this is better understood as an accurate manifestation of the real-life underprivileged status of women in a male dominated world, rather than as a deliberate conspiracy or a careless mistake on the part of television producers and broadcasting executives. By the same token, what is generally regarded as misrepresentation of minority racial groups on television could be regarded as a reflection of the prevailing social reality in which minority groups are often disadvantaged and oppressed and subject to institutional and popular racism. The roots of stereotyped portrayals can never be found simply within the media institutions. They have to be located elsewhere outside the media within the broader social and cultural structures that provide resources for, and meanwhile constrain, popular representations.

The Home and the School

As we noted earlier, the educative and instructive potential of the mass media has been recognised and stressed ever since the expansion of the commercial print media in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the launch of morally uplifting magazines for children in Victorian England. What distinguishes television, as a modern electronic medium, is that it is often thought to be more effective than previous media in either corrupting or elevating the child. This assumption of television's unique power explains the intensified concern over the negative influence of television violence and advertising on children on the one hand, and the higher expectation of television's teaching potential and the efforts put into realizing these possibilities on the other. The conversion of television into an educative tool, located within the home, has been a major objective for those concerned with children and television ever since the early days of television broadcasting. The determination to tame the 'new' medium was well expressed in the final remark of one early study on children and television:

> None of the suggestions which we have made in this chapter is new, and none is spectacular…. [B]ut our research findings show that, with the coming of television, it is even more imperative that these particular measures should be instituted and extended. In this way we shall not merely curb the harmful effects of television, but use this new and important medium for the healthy development of our children and adolescents (Campbell 1962: 128).

The US-made children's programme *Sesame Street* provides the best documented illustration of this developing emphasis on the educative capacity of the television medium. The educative potential of television was, as the received history of educational television has it, explored in order to alleviate the educational crisis of the 1950s as manifested in over-crowded schools and the shortage and poor training of teaching staff. However, the early educational programmes, made in the 1950s, lack visual excitement and were often characterized by a large talking head or the appearance of a teacher in front of the blackboard. Sesame Street was widely seen as a major advance, by combining entertainment formats with educational goals. Among its supporters, the significance of this innovation was even compared to the conquest of space – 'in 1969 two significant events took place: Neil Armstrong set foot in the moon, and Sesame Street went to air' (quoted in Palmer and Dorr 1980: 5).

The arrival of Sesame Street had a great impact on the television industry. Educational programmes with similar formats, such as *Electric Company*, *Villa Alegre*, and *Big Blue Marble*, soon appeared on both public and commercial television in the years that followed, and existing children's entertainment programmes, like *Captain Kangaroo*, made an effort to incorporate educational messages.

A considerable volume of research was generated, with the aim of evaluating the effectiveness of *Sesame Street, Electric Company* and the other educational programmes of the 1970s. Early research concentrated on identifying the programme attributes which helped to attract and hold children's attention (e.g. Rust 1971). Summative evaluations of *Sesame Street* by Educational Testing Service concluded that overall, the programme did accomplish its goals (e.g. Ball and Bogatz 1970, 1971). However, this optimistic conclusion was criticized by other researchers, who arrived at a more modest evaluation of the effectiveness of the series, and further argued that it might have helped to increase rather than decrease the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Cook et al. 1975).[9]

Alongside these formative and evaluative studies on educational programmes, there was a noticeable increase in the amount of research done on the potential of television to teach children prosocial behaviours and related attitudes. Much of the research on *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* and other educational programmes, for example, was not intended to assess the effectiveness of the programme but to test hypotheses about the ways in which children might learn prosocial behaviours from television (e.g. Stein and Friedrich 1972, 1975).[10] Once again, the instrumental nature of modern social research is clearly evident in studies of this kind.

The establishment of the Prix Jeunesse Foundation is another instance of the attempt to mobilize television for educational purposes. The Foundation was intended to contribute to, in its own official language, 'the meaningful development and utilization of television for the benefit of the young, to deepen the understanding between nations and to increase the exchange of television programmes on an international level'. Besides engaging in research relating to children's programmes, the Foundation also sponsors a competition to find the best children's programmes every 2 years, holds seminars, symposia and information weeks on current topics concerning children and television, and conducts training courses in collaboration with UNESCO and Goethe-Institut in Third World countries. Studies conducted under the auspices of the Foundation on Prix Jeunesse prize-winning programmes are almost always carried out on a multi-national basis.

Most of the studies of children and television reviewed up to now are, consciously or not, based on the assumption that television is doing something to children. Effects, influence and impact are the key words in these empiricist studies. Children are conceptualized, though often implicitly, as more or less passive receivers of

[9] For a more detailed summary of research on *Sesame Street*, see Palmer and Dorr (1980), pp. 51–55.

[10] For a brief summary of research in this area, see John P. Murray (1980), pp. 44–45.

television messages. In contrast with this positivist approach, the interpretative turn in the study of children and television that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s started to take children seriously as active viewers.

Taking Children Seriously: The Interpretative Turn

The interpretative approach to children and television, which became something of a new orthodoxy in the 1980s, reconceptualized the child audience as actively interacting with television and with other viewers in the process of making sense of what they watched. Although the 'uses and gratification' approach had also stressed the 'activeness' of the child audience, as expressed in the famous metaphor – 'the cafeteria sets the food out; the children take what they want and eat it' (Schramm et al. 1961: 2), this version of activity was widely seen by interpretative researchers as different from, and inferior to, the new version because it assumed a set of self-justifying essentialist human needs and underplayed the situational flexibility of response. Even if we leave aside the often pretentious and exaggerated claims made by some advocates of the interpretative approach, it is still fair to say that by recognising the child audience as actively creating meanings out of their viewing activity, it represents a significant advance on empiricist approaches.

The rise of interpretative approach can be attributed to the growing dissatisfaction with behavioural psychology's domination of audience studies. Discontent with this situation was expressed not only by social scientists from other disciplines but also by psychologists themselves. Grant Noble attempted a constructive critique of conventional scientific methodology adopted by psychologists in their research on television's effects on children. He questioned the established ways of doing research in the area on four grounds: Why is research done? Where is research done? How is research done? And how are research results presented? In answering these questions, he rejected the conventional behavioural approach, and launched 'a wholly justified attack on the traditional method of psychological enquiry, and a search for alternative methods of discovering and evaluating the subject-matter of psychology – namely the way people think and behave' (Noble 1975: 26). Another attempt to break away from behaviourism was made by adopting, partially or completely, elements of cognitive psychology, and placing the emphasis on the interactive nature of social cognition. This interactionist tendency is best illustrated by the call for a constructivist perspective, based on American sociologists Berger and Luckmann's general account of the social construction of reality. This perspective emphasizes the way that individuals select and interpret the raw materials provided by television (Dorr 1986: 21).

Recent studies in the interpretative tradition be can classified into two broad groups according to the research methods employed. The first consists of work based on recorded in-depth interviews and focusing how on children make sense of television programmes. Noble's early attempts (1975), Hodge and Tripp's semiotic approach (1986), and Buckingham's study of responses to the *Eastenders* (1987) all

belong to this stream. The second strand employs naturalistic observations of children's viewing, usually in a family context. It concentrates on how the activity of television viewing is structured by observing what children actually do in front of the television set and how parents intervene to organize viewing. Patricia Palmer's study of the 'lively' audience (1986), James Lull's collection on world families watching television (1988), and David Morley's study on family television (1986) come under this heading.

According to proponents of the interpretative turn, the behaviourist approach suffers from two major fallacies. Firstly, related to the underdeveloped understanding of meanings by empiricism, children are regarded, explicitly or implicitly, as passive receivers of television massages containing more or less fixed meanings. To this, interpretative studies, particularly the semiotic approach advocated by Hodge and Tripp, raised the objection that plural meanings generated by the same text were always possible. Secondly, children's viewing activity is studied in isolation from the natural social context in which it takes place. Against this, an interpretative understanding of the way children interact with and make sense of television within concrete social settings is seen as sufficient to overcome the deficiencies. Unfortunately, this argument ignores the limitations inherent in the interpretative 'turn'. Two are particularly important for the argument advanced here. Firstly, the social contexts analysed by interpretative studies are mostly confined to the family and other immediate social milieu where television viewing takes place. Secondly, children's activeness in interacting with television often tends to be overstated in order to counter the popular vision of passive zombies glued to the set. To address these inadequacies, we need to develop a critical approach which holds on to the main gain of the interpretative tradition and at the same time goes beyond it.

Towards a Critical Perspective

The main gains of the interpretative approach are firstly, that it takes children seriously as accomplished social actors generating a complex web of meanings from their interaction with television, and secondly that it contextualises children's television viewing within everyday social settings. However, the contexts considered are usually limited to two aspects – the situational and the intertexual. The former deals with the way viewing activity is structured by the dynamics within the family and other immediate social milieu. These include the resources possessed within a household, such as the available space, and the social and political structure of the household including the surveillance of children's watching by parents. The intertextual context addresses the fact that children's involvement in a television programme is no longer confined to what is shown on the screen but mobilises a variety of other texts and gets extended in time by way of, for example, the comic books and toys based on television shows.

Two other indispensable aspects of relevant context – the historical and the cultural – are therefore missing from interpretative accounts. Incorporating the historical context involves being sensitive to the ways that the specificity of a certain

historical period leaves its vestiges on children's viewing. As we shall see, in the case of China, both the particular generational experiences of the parents and the current one-child policy have had an important impact on children's viewing experiences and parents' attitudes to it. A consideration of the wider cultural context, points us in the direction of the relations between television viewing and deep-seated cultural patterns. This is particularly relevant to China, since both television technology and many of the programmes popular with children have been imported from outside the country, the United States, Japan, and Europe in particular. Hence the question arises – how does the world view represented by a non-indigenous audiovisual system interact with traditional Chinese cultural values, and with the new ethic of possessive individualism developed under the new liberal market oriented policies of the late 1980s.

A critical inquiry needs to take account of all the four aspects of context outlined above – the situational, intertextual, historical, and cultural. A dialectical negation of the interpretative approach requires not that it be abandoned but that its insights absorbed and its inadequacy overcome. Among the major gains offered by interpretative approach is its understanding of television programmes as complexly structured fields of meanings which can be interpreted in various ways, and its understanding of the audience as actively creating meaning through their interaction between the resources made available by television programmes and the cultural and individual resources they bring to their viewing. What distinguishes the critical approach is its insistence on the need to relate the interaction between viewers and televisual texts to all the four aforementioned dimensions of context.

Chapter 2
Positivist Approaches and Interpretative Alternatives: Critical Reappraisals

This chapter links the preceding review of past studies and the following argument for a critical perspective by reappraising the two major approaches to the problem of children and television. It starts with a reconstruction of the concept of childhood, with special attention accorded to its bearings, often more implicit than explicit, on previous research. This is followed by a critical examination of empiricist approaches, as their 'hidden' nature as an instrument for social control is highlighted. With its subtler understanding of the interactions between active viewers and polysemic messages, the interpretative turn undoubtedly marks a substantial step forward over its positivist predecessors. However, it shares a similar empirical ethos of fact accumulation at the cost of deep analysis. Such a deep analysis, it is argued, can only be achieved through adequate contextualizations, at both the situated and the structural level. Although the key task of these critical reappraisals is to locate deficiencies of previous approaches, this does not imply that nothing insightful can be found in them. On the contrary, it need be stressed here that the critical perspective developed in the following chapter is based on a dialectical negation of previous empirical and interpretative studies. It should retain the useful insights of previous studies while going beyond their limitations. The insights have been so much assimilated into the new perspective that they have in a sense become 'invisible'.

Childhood: Controversies in Conceptualization

Few studies on children and television make any sustained attempt to understand the 'living' part of their subject matter – that is, children. The crucial question of what constitutes childhood is seldom explicitly raised and squarely faced. The main reason for this neglect is that in most cases a commonsense definition of childhood, grounded on biological and psychological features, is taken for granted. Hence, in much research on children and television, the notion of childhood as a social institution which is culturally defined is rarely interrogated, whereas childhood seen

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as a 'natural' state of physical and psychological immaturity is widely implied. To counteract this prevailing tendency, of which many researchers remain unaware, the opening section of this chapter is devoted to a brief discussion of the different theoretical approaches to the understanding of childhood and to their implications for both behaviourist and interpretive studies of children and television.

The Conventional Notion

The conventional conceptualization of childhood, initiated by developmental psychology and later on imported into functionalist sociology, follows the essentially evolutionary pattern, which is very much a part of modern Western social thought. Within this perspective, childhood is defined in terms of becoming rather than being. The central concepts of development, and socialization, are bolstered by a cluster of secondary notions such as assimilation, accommodation, adaptation, culturation and accretion. The proper end result of development and socialization is the transformation of the child world, seen as irrational, illogical, and incomplete, into the rational, logical and accomplished adult world, which is in turn regarded as both necessary and desirable. This 'adult-centric' and teleological definition of childhood denies the interior meanings of childhood. This disregard is most explicitly expressed by Durkheim:

> The essential function of this age, the role and purpose assigned to it by nature, may be summed up in a single word, it is the period of growth, that is to say, the period in which the individual, in both the physical and moral sense, does not yet exist, the period in which he is made, develops and is formed (Durkheim 1979: 150).

As the above quotation clearly indicates, this conventional notion of childhood as an inferior preparatory stage in moral development rests solidly on a kind of naturalness bestowed by biological and psychological immaturity. The physical features of childhood are conveniently translated into psychological and social terms. The apparent 'naturalness' of this notion partly explains its capacity to commandeer both the academic study of childhood, and commonsense thinking, by way of its wide application in child rearing practices and education in modern times. Piaget's account of the child's cognitive development has been particularly influential in developmental psychology since 1930s. His schema postulates four stages of cognitive development which are linked in progressive fashion, with each achieving and maintaining its own dynamic equilibrium between cognitive structures and the environment. The last stage – that of the formal operation, marks the child's acquisition of the logical-competence, required for his or her entrance into the adulthood.

The main project of developmental psychology was imported into structural functionalist sociology with an accompanying shift of emphasis from the individual to the person within society. According to Talcott Parsons' influential theory for example, the ultimate goal of system equilibrium can only be achieved through effective socialization and social control. This denies the existential experience of

childhood in a way parallel to developmental psychology, which defines childhood as the process of being successfully integrated into the established order. In this way the magnificent edifice of socialization successfully abandons the child to the dictates of the social system (Jenks 1982: 19). Underlying this conventional notion of childhood is a kind of 'adult-centrism', which perpetually places the child world in the shadow of the adult world through the metaphors of development and socialization. In the process of drawing insights from mainstream social theories, studies of children and television have undoubtedly inherited this bias.

In line with the logic of socialization theory, the rise of the mass media was seen as a potentially powerful (de)socializing institution which posed serious challenges to conventional socializing agencies such as schools, churches, and families. In response, moral crusaders have made repeated attempts to reduce the anti-social, impact of the mass media (through censorship and control) and to promote their educative potentialities. Eliminating the anti-social and enlarging the pro-social influence of the media are two sides of the same coin, and both are aimed at facilitating, rather than hindering, the process of socialization. Research on children and mass media has played a central role in this project by finding out what anti-social effects the media may have towards their elimination, and meanwhile by discovering their prosocial effects towards their promotion. As Williams points out, since socialization, defined as learning the ways and becoming a functioning member of society, has to occur in all societies, it easily becomes a natural concept which confers normality and legitimacy when applied to any real social and cultural processes (Williams 1974: 120). It is in this sense that we say that, the empiricist studies of children and television embrace the dominant value system of the societies in which they are conducted, and that they are instrumental to their legitimatisation.

Alternative Visions

The major bases of the conventional notion of childhood – its apparent naturalness and universality – were first seriously questioned by the work of the French historian, Philippe Ariés in the early 1960s. His radical thesis about the eclipse of childhood in mediaeval Europe, though very much debated, successfully rescued childhood from the condescension of historical scholarship. This, combined with renewed interest in earlier social anthropological works on the diversity of child rearing practices in different cultures, served to relativize contemporary western conception of childhood and to undermine assumptions of naturalness inherent in childhood.

The arrival of interest in the interpretative tradition within social sciences in the 1960s also helped to lead the study of childhood in a new direction. In psychology, this re-orientation can be traced back to the early 1960s when Merleau-Ponty articulated his methodological critique of the dogmatic rationalism,

embraced by studies of child perception, language and morals, which construes the child world as pre-logical and waiting to be replaced by the objective adult world (see O'Neill 1982). Incorporating a conception of childhood as socially constructed into the psychological enterprise meant that individual psychological process had to be located within a social context. Accordingly, more and more emphasis was placed on the reciprocity of child-adult interaction rather than on a one-way relationship, with the adult forever teaching, instructing and educating the child.

Within sociology, children's life worlds began to be studied on their own terms and in their own right. In accordance with interpretative sociology's bias towards agency as against restrictive structure, children were reconceptualized as actively participating in their own 'growth' in all its aspects. It is this vision of the active child that has been embraced and further elaborated in the recent ethnographic studies of children and television, which will be examined later on in this chapter. It should suffice here to point out the connection between the alternative vision of childhood provided by interpretative sociology and the ethnographic portrayal of the lively children in front the television screen.

In their defence of this new paradigm in the sociology of childhood, James and Prout identify its key features as follows: (1) Childhood is a social construction. (2) Childhood is a dimension of social differentiation, which cannot be entirely divorced from other dimensions such as class, gender, or ethnicity. (3) Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspectives and concerns of adults. (4) Children must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, rather than as passive subjects of social structures and processes. (5) Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood since it allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data. (6) Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present (James and Prout 1990: 8–9). These key features can be grouped into clusters. Features (1) and (4) are epistemological statements about the nature of childhood. Feature (3) endows the existence of childhood with an independent meaning. Features (2), (5) and (6) are statements about appropriate methods for a sociological study of childhood. Even if we accept James and Prout's general case, one major question remains to be answered: What is the relationship between children as active participants in the construction of their social lives and children as differentially located within particular societies at a particular time? This question is of course a version of the central sociological dilemma – that is, the dialectical relationship between agency and structure.

While it is important not to reduce children to the status of passive subjects of social structures and processes, it is equally important to recognize the existence of social formations and the restriction they impose on the children's daily activities. The 'new' paradigm for the sociology of childhood outlined by James and Prout has a tendency to endow children with a degree of autonomy they in fact do not possess. Any overestimation of children's autonomy and freedom of action runs the risk of

rendering critiques of domination, oppression and exploitation of children by grownups redundant and unfounded, whereas such critiques are in fact still highly relevant to modern societies.

One area where the unequal power relations between children and adults are immediately evident is in physical relations. In the process of displacing the biological basis of conventional notions of childhood, the 'new' interpretive sociology of childhood had, more implicitly than explicitly, constricted all biological features of childhood as irrelevant. It is of course a mistake. For it is precisely the physical features of childhood – smaller in-size and weaker in strength – that render children vulnerable to manipulation and abuse, which are still prominent features of the institution of childhood in many modern societies.

Accordingly, the notion of childhood guiding this present study of children and television in China is one that sees childhood not only as socially constructed, and culturally and historically defined, but also as physically mediated. The relationship between autonomy and constraint in children's social lives is explored within the specific context of contemporary China, when the traditional formation of paternalism has been threatened and eroded in the 1980s partly as a result of the adoption of the one-child policy. The twin questions that wait here to be answered are: (1) how does a socio-cultural formation, which is traditionally hostile to children's autonomy but is in the process of transformation, impinge on children's activities, and particularly on television viewing? And (2) how do children actively participate in and contribute to the transformation of parent-child relations? Closely related to these twin questions are a number of concrete problems: How and to what extent do children retain their relative autonomy in their everyday activities such as television viewing? What restrictions are imposed on them by whom and why? To what extent do children internalize these restrictions and thus no longer feel them as such, and to what extent they fail to internalize them and thus have to negotiate and cope with them in their own way? These questions will be touched on directly or indirectly later on in chapters that follow.

Positivist Approach: An Instrument of Control?

The positivist approach to the study of children and television, consisting mainly of the behaviourist effects studies which dominated the area from the 1950s to the 1970s in the US, has arguably acted as an instrument of social control. This instrumentality arises first from their unquestioning acceptance of an adult-centric notion of children on the one hand, and then in their abstracted empiricist research style on the other. We will then take a close look at their research style to see how they turned out to be an instrument for social control to sustain North American capitalist social structure.

The Research Style

The research style of abstract empiricism, memorably satirized by C. Wright Mills in his seminal collection of essays – *The Sociological Imagination* (1970), dominated and inhibited research on children and television for two decades. Its hold over investigation and debate can be illustrated by the fact that articles that did not conform to its tenets were explicitly excluded from the authoritative 1964 UNESCO bibliography of studies concerning the effects of television on children and adolescents. As the principle compiler, the powerful leading figure in this area Wilbur Schramm, explained:

> The bibliography which follows is intended to represent all the significant behavioural research dealing with the effects of television on children…. Therefore, we have not included articles of criticism and commentary not based on research. Many of the critical articles, of course, are rich in wisdom and insight. But in the last decade a phenomenal number of persons have set down on paper their thoughts on television; and to separate out the wise and the insightful statements from the others would require a set of personal judgments that would inevitably be questioned and could not be defended (Schramm 1964: 5).

The hidden message here is rather clear: anything which did not follow conventional empiricist social scientific research procedures with their results shown in statistics and even better in correlations, should be ignored as metaphysical and opinionated.

As Mills' critique already pointed out, the studies which conform to the abstracted empiricist style are first and foremost characterized by their narrow definition of relevant research problems. They often concentrate on questions such as the effects of the sound-track on children's attention to the television set; the influence of advertising tactics on children's perception of commercials; and the effect of parental instruction during the viewing time on children's comprehension of television programmes.[1] This restricted focus is often a natural corollary of methodological inhibition – a situation where the ability to deploy a particular range of approved research methods comes to determine the problems investigated. Since substantive questions raised at a broad social and historical level tend not to be susceptible to investigation by these research methods, they are avoided and ignored. Conversely, the 'facts' discovered by these methods often turn out be relatively trivial and remain as isolated and disconnected pieces of information with no theorized relation to the larger social formation.

This produced somewhat banal generalizations, as illustrated in the following much quoted statement by Schramm and his colleagues from their major study of the late 1950s:

> For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be

[1] See John P. Murray (1980) to find examples for this kind of research.

> beneficial. For most children, under most conditions most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial (Schramm et. al. 1961: 1).

This is more or less a repetition of the then fashionable thesis of minimal media effects, which had displaced the earlier 'magic bullets' theory as a result of the relatively peaceful advancement of capitalism in the US and other Western countries from the end of the World II to the mid 1960s (see Gitlin 1978: 209).

Abstracted empiricism is so called because the empirical research is abstracted from any general conception of the society within which it is conducted. In the case of the Schramm study, the key notion of 'condition' is reduced to conveniently measurable variables such as age, gender, intelligence and socioeconomic position. The more general but crucial variable – historical location – is conspicuously missing. In this way, the specific social and cultural dynamics of the United States and Canada, at the time the research was done are rendered invisible, and children's television viewing is thereby decontexualized at the macro level. This tendency towards a kind of decontextualization within mainstream effect studies was accurately detected as an ideology by the pioneer of British cultural studies, Raymond Williams, as he writes,

> Since television became a popular social form there has been widespread discussion of its effects. The most significant feature of this discussion has been the isolation of the medium…. Some part of the study of television effects has then to be seen as an ideology: a way of interpreting general change through a displaced and abstracted cause (Williams 1974: 119).

Moreover, the unquestioned use of categories like 'harmful' and 'beneficial', by Schramm and his colleagues, conceals their ideological stance. There are very few effects which are unambiguously beneficial or harmful. As James Halloran rightly pointed out, one man's media meat can be another man's media poison (Halloran 1970: 11). The question is who set the criteria for judging whether certain effects of television are deemed beneficial or harmful. In Schramm's case, the values of upwardly mobile middle class suburbia are embraced as the sole basis for establishing such criteria. Mills' general argument, that in abstracted empiricist research, 'the thinness of the results is matched only by the elaboration of the methods and the care employed' (Mills 1970: 63), apply particularly forcefully to the Schramm study and its likes.

An Instrument of Control?

The ultimate purpose served by empiricist research into children and television reviewed in the previous chapter, whether the researchers involved intend it or not, is to help ensure children's compliance with the established social order. This is particularly true of studies in response to public concern or expressly designed to inform government policy making. It is in this sense that they can be said to be intrinsically instrumental and conservative, or rather administrative in the language of the debate taking place in the field of mass communication.[2]

[2] A heated debate on critical versus administrative research took place in a special issue of the US based *Journal of Communication*, Summer 1983.

When the dichotomy between administrative and critical mass communication research was originally delineated by the advocate of American positivist social sciences Paul Lazarsfeld himself, he naively hoped that they could one day be integrated into a more holistic research practice (see Lazarsfeld 1941). This, of course, has not happened. Indeed, these divergent approaches to investigation rapidly became a 'battle-field', where the proponents of two vaguely defined 'schools' of communication research fought for supremacy. The style of administrative research pioneered by Lazarsfeld came under constant attack from researchers in the critical camp, and despite the recent trend towards a degree of convergence (see Gurevitch et al. 1982: 15), there is still a substantial gulf between supporters of the two styles. This is scarcely surprising, as Melody and Mansell pointed out, that the division is at root not procedural, but political (Melody and Mansell 1983: 109). Administrative researchers, they argue, are 'entrapped in a methodological quagmire that permits support only of the status quo' (ibid: 107). Smythe and Dinh envisage an even deeper ideological cleavage between the two approaches, which reveals itself in the almost total divergence in the problems chosen for investigation by the two schools (Smythe and Dinh 1983: 117).

More illuminating and pertinent than these very general strictures is Gitlin's detailed criticism of what he calls the dominant paradigm in media sociology, as represented by the two-step flow model of communication.[3] This paradigm is characterised, in his view, by the search from specific, measurable, short-term, individual 'effects', and nothing beyond them (Gitlin 1978: 224). Its roots are first traced to the administrative point of view, by which he means, 'that in general it poses questions from the vantage of the command-posts of institutions that seeks to improve or rationalize their control over social sectors in social functions' (ibid: 225). In the case of research on children and the media, the relevant 'command posts' are to be found in the institutions of socialization – schools, churches, welfare agencies, and – above all, government bodies, whereas the 'social sectors' to be controlled are of course, children themselves and their viewing activities. According to Gitlin, the underlying rationale of administrative research is to generate predictive theories of audience response, converged with the interest of the centrally located administrators, who need adequate information in order to make decisions that affect their overall domain with a good idea, of the possible consequences (ibid: 211). In this way, research sustains the administrative project of 'human engineering', a distinctively modern practice of social control backed by systematic social investigation instead of 'trial and error' or vernacular knowledge in more traditional societies.

In the field of communication research, work on children was one of the first areas to employ social sciences to assist the practice of social control. Although, as

[3] Two-step model of communication derived from Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's influential work in the 1950s, *Personal Influence: the parts played by people in the flow of mass communications*, 1955, The Free Press, New York.

we saw in the previous chapter, concern about the adverse influence of mass media on the young can be traced back to the rise of the 'Penny Dreadfuls' in Victorian England, it was not until the advent of the cinema that social scientists began systematic studies. Their engagement with the problem of children and the mass media coincided with important development in quantitative research methods since 1920s when sampling, measures of central tendency, correlation, and probability began to be widely used to study human behaviour (see Lowery and DeFleur 1983: 31). For the first time in history, human engineering could claim powerful backing from apparently scientific research techniques. As C. Wright Mills later remarked, observing the result, among the slogans used by various schools of social sciences, none is as frequently as "The purpose of social sciences is the prediction and control of human behavior", (Mills 1970: 127). This project of social control has proved the major impetus, albeit often more implicit than explicit, for much empiricist 'effects' research on children and television.

The role of research as an instrument of social control perhaps is most evident in the laboratory studies of television's potential for teaching children pro-social behaviours, conducted in the 1970s. During the experiments, children were given stimuli in form of various screen messages, and were expected to respond in one way or another. Their responses were recorded – usually through a one-way mirror – and measured for analysis. In his article 'The Decline of American Intellectuals' in contribution to a collection on cultural politics in contemporary America, Russel Jacoby traces the phenomenal transformation of independent, marginal, critical intellectuals into professional academics employed by universities or hired by government bodies and private corporations (Jacoby 1989). Indeed, it was members of this new social strata of professional 'academics', in replacement of the original independent 'intellectuals', who produced the bulk of behaviourist literature on the 'effects' of television messages on the young.

The practice of human engineering has its roots in the rise and prevalence of the modern instrumental reason, as was charted by the theorists of the Frankfurt School. Taking max Weber's concept of rationality as a starting point, the critical theorists of this school of thought analysed the development, and final domination, of the means-end rationality, which they dubbed as, instrumental reason. The extension of this form of reason from the sphere of man's control over nature to the sphere of man's control over man leads, so they argued, to the scientization of human engineering, which assumes that everything in human society, like everything in nature, is potentially amenable to 'sicentific' control. Social scientists were employed to facilitate the process of human engineering by providing information that was as detailed and exact as possible, without raising fundamental questions about the social, political and economic orders within which the subjects of these information gathering exercises lived and existed. With the rise of instrumental reason, there has developed 'a set of truth values which hold good for the functioning of apparatus – and for that alone' (Marcuse 1941; quoted in Held 1980: 67). Concomitantly, critical thought and alternative truth values have been displaced to the margins of academic and political debate.

Interpretative Alternative: A New Empiricist Ethos?

The interpretative turn in the study of children and television, which has gathered momentum since the late 1970s, has to be seen as part of a more general upsurge of interest in qualitative and ethnographic studies in mass communication research, both in the study of cultural production and in audience research. Within this interpretative tradition, two distinctive groups of studies involving the problem of children and television can be identified. The first group consists of studies which continue to focus on children and their television viewing activity (e.g. Hodge and Tripp 1986; Palmer 1986). The second group adopts a broader perspective of studies, placing family viewing at the center of analysis, and considering children as part of the domestic audience (e.g. Morley 1986; Lull and Sun 1988). This apparent shift of emphasis, from individual response to family viewing, is part of a general shift in research methodology away from quantification and towards ethnography, to which family viewing is said to be naturally amenable (e.g. Lull 1990: 12–13).

By the same token, interpretative studies of family viewing or children's television activity are subject to many of the limitations of phenomenologically inspired approach more generally. These include an anti-structural orientation; an overemphasis on individual autonomy and freedom; and a qualitative empiricist ethos, manifested in the self-justifying 'thick descriptions' of much recent ethnography. A critical review of the interpretative studies of children and television therefore, needs to address these deficiencies, particularly, their inadequate contextualization of viewing activity; their romanticized vision of the 'active' child audience; and above all, their new empiricist ethos of thick description for its own sake.

The Interpretative Turn in Audience Studies

The positivist domination of social sciences in the first half of the century was seriously shaken in the 1960s by what can be generally labeled the anti-positivist alternatives represented firstly by symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and other interpretative approaches, and secondly by critical social analysis, then identified with various versions of Marxism. The social and political turbulences of the 1960s posed direct challenge to positivism's claim to be an adequate philosophical and epistemological foundation for the social sciences. The heated academic debates about the status of social disciplines reflected a concern with some deeper and more general social issues. As Richard Bernstein has argued in his effort to restructure social and political theory,

> When individuals sense that they are living through a period of crises, when foundations seem to be cracking and orthodoxies breaking up, then a public space is created in which basic questions about the human condition can be raised anew (Bernstein 1979: xiii).

It was indeed within this 'public space' of the academy that alternative perspectives on social knowledge, previously marginalized by the overwhelming dominance

of positivism, took on a new vitality. Interpretative work, which rejected outright the positivist quest for general causal laws under which social phenomena and human actions can be subsumed, consists of several variants. The most influential of these derives from the phenomenological tradition of continental Europe which holds that social reality is a product of the meanings that social agents negotiate in the course of their everyday social interactions.

The field of mass communication research however, lagged somewhat far behind this general movement towards phenomenologically informed analysis. In this event, the decisive break with the mainstream positivist tradition which had dominated the field for decades, was achieved, not by phenomenology, but by critical work grounded in Marxism. The late arrival of interpretative research in media studies is particularly true of the area of children and television, where positivism had found one of its strongest articulations. Here again, alternative approaches, were first initiated from within the critical tradition of social inquiry (e.g. Melody 1973) It was not until the 1980s that phenomenologically informed work managed to establish a secure presence in this area.

Schutz's conception of the 'common-sense world' as a phenomenon worthy of study in itself, together with his definition of the basic concern of empirical social science as the description of the everyday activity of the social actors and of their taken-for-granted 'natural attitude', has exerted a major influence on contemporary sociology. In line with this general enterprise, Hans Kepplinger has argued for a 'fundamental paradigm change' in the field of mass communications research, which he believes, has unduly skipped the first phase of every 'normal' science – the description of its phenomenon – by proceeding directly to the search for 'effects'. He therefore concludes that:

> The advances made in mass communications research, paradoxically, to a certain degree, lie in a step backwards to the foundations of scientific development, the description and analysis of its phenomenon (Kepplinger 1979: 175).

Implicit in this argument is the belief that mass communications research, once complemented with the missing stage of phenomenon description, may advance to the status of a 'normal' science. This kind of argument was attractive to many researchers, particularly at a time when the positivist paradigm had proved to be problematic and therefore lost much of its credibility.

Ethnographic work became something of a vogue in media studies in the 1980s, particularly in the area of audience research. These typically consist of thick descriptions of television viewing in natural environments, the family in most cases, and semiotic analyses of television programmes. Ethnographic studies of audience activity are alleged by their practitioners to be a superior alternative to conventional effects studies. However, despite their habitual criticism of positivist studies, many of these phenomenologically inspired researchers actually share with their opponents a similar concern with the accumulation of discrete observations coupled with a similar disregard for the dynamic interplay between immediate situations and macro contexts. Even so, in its insistence on the active creation and negotiation of meaning, the interpretative turn, marks a

substantial step forward, whose gains need to be fully integrated into the critical perspectives we advocate here. Their values emerge particularly clearly if we look again at one of the well worked themes of effects research – the impact of children's cartoons.

The 'Active' Child Audience

In order to debunk the popular vision of cartoons as overly simple, researchers have mobilized semiotic analysis to demonstrate the complexity of these forms, and thereby rightly support the argument that children are in fact sophisticated readers of complicated televised text (Hodge and Tripp 1986). More generally, ethnographic studies of children's television viewing have granted, in one way or another, the title of the 'lively audience' to young viewers (e. g. Palmer 1986). The word 'lively', according to Palmer, was consciously chosen not only in opposition to the conventional notion of 'passive audience' but also in contradistinction to the notion of 'active audience' that underpins the uses and gratification approach. As James Curran has observed, this routinised criticism of uses and gratification studies by ethnographic researchers has now become an almost obliging rhetorical preliminary to their claim to superiority (Curran 1990: 150). Ethnographic work has also fed into recent studies, which are less original than summative and have argued a strong case for the positive virtues of children's television viewing, as explicitly articulated in the title of Maire M. Davies' book *Television is Good for Your Kids* (Davies 1989). Such studies take sides with interpretative research in debunking the negative evaluation of television viewing popularized in books such as: *Television: 20th Century Cyclops* (Tindall et al. 1977), *The Plug-In Drug* (Winn 1977), and *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman 1983). Here again, we see how the topic of children and television has become an ideological battlefield where contending moral and political positions fight against one another, each claiming to be motivated by a concern with children's welfare.

Confronted with the academic debate about the passivity or activity of the child audience, one cannot help but suspect selective perceptions inherent in different research methods. It makes little sense to try to demonstrate that children are intrinsically either passive or active. Evaluations of their behaviour depend not only on how these terms are defined, but also on the particular research procedures adopted, since all methodologies tend to direct attentions to certain aspects of the situation to the neglect of others. Consequently, the optimistic notion of children as lively viewers or sophisticated readers of complex visual texts, when taken as absolute truth, becomes as inadequate as the notion of children being passive and mindless zombies glued to the television set. They can be equally misleading in the sense that both seek to generalize from a partial observation. It is a commonplace but nevertheless true, that children can be both active and passive viewers, depending on the dynamics of specific situations and on how these qualities are defined by the researcher.

The Contextualization of Viewing Activity

The way television viewing activity is contextualized in many interpretative studies is inadequate in two senses. Firstly, the notion of relevant context is unduly confined to the immediate milieu in which viewing takes place – family in particular – to the neglect of the larger social and cultural formation which impinges on and shapes both that milieu and the activities that take place within them. This restricted perspective is clearly evident in David Morley's much quoted study of families, which he claims is:

> one which is precisely interested in the viewers' activities in viewing as part of (and indeed as a constitutive part of) the social and primarily familial or domestic relations through which they construct their lives (Morley1986: 31).

This tendency to over-privilege the domestic milieu has been recognised not only by other researchers working in the interpretive tradition (e.g. Silverstone 1990: 187) but also by Morley himself in his more recent writings. Indeed, together with Roger Silverstone, he has recently called for an approach, which defines television as an essentially domestic medium, to be understood both within the context of household and family, and within the wider context of social, political and economic relations (Morley and Silverstone 1990: 32). This echoes the more general call within social and cultural anthropology, for an integration of ethnography and political economy (e.g. Marcus and Fischer 1986: 85).

Thus far, however, these calls for more adequate contextualization, which integrates the microscopic familial and other immediate milieu with macroscopic socioeconomic and cultural formations, more often than not remain at a level of programmatic statements which are not translated into concrete research practices. This is not surprising since phenomenology-oriented social researchers often tend to find themselves in a difficult situation whenever they attempt to move beyond the narrow, fragmented, and more or less autonomous life-worlds they are so used to dealing with. This dilemma was already noticed and described by Lassman in the mid-1970s as follows,

> Some of these points are demonstrated in the ambiguities and difficulties that are demonstrated by some phenomenologically oriented studies in which any attempt of such researchers to break out of a 'monadology' of self-sufficient 'life-worlds' often leads to an unconvincing tacking on, of a set of structural ideas derived from the 'conventional sociology' that has been heavily criticised in the methodological introduction to such works (Lassman 1974: 142).

To adequately contextualize television viewing within both the immediate milieu of the family and broader cultural and historical formations, an approach that tacks on a set of structural ideas is never sufficient. What is required is a critical perspective which is inherently sensitive to historical and structural dynamics. This critical approach will be further elaborated in the chapter that follows.

The second way in which the contextualization of viewing activity by ethnographic studies is inadequate is the fact that the crucial and indispensable notion of 'the

family' is seldom satisfactorily conceptualized. Sometimes tentative attempts are made to list various current perspectives on the family, but they do not inform the ethnographic studies of viewing actually being undertaken (e.g. Lull and Sun 1988: 10–16). In other cases, the family is roughly typologized into ideal types such as concept-oriented and social-oriented families (e.g. Lull 1980, 1982). But in most cases, the family is simply treated as a physical locus which family members inhabit to form a cluster of undefined relationships. This weak conceptualization of the family has lead some ethnographic researchers to accept a functionalist definition, which sees the family in terms of the functions it is supposed to fulfill for the equilibrium of the social system as a whole. The 'family systems perspective' on the study of television's role in family interaction, which sees itself as an aid to studying the 'healthy and dysfunctional families' (Goodman 1983: 412), is perhaps the most obvious example of this tendency. Within this work, categories like 'healthy' and 'dysfunctional' are so much taken for granted that the problem of defining families in this way never seems to be something difficult for the researchers of family viewing.

A New Empiricist Ethos?

The empiricist tendencies within the conventional approach to ethnography, which has been adopted by most of the interpretative studies on audience activity, are most perceivable when contrasted with the critical approach to ethnography. Ethnography in the 'stretched' sense now encompasses participant and non-participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interview, personal documents, and life histories. Despite the fact that ethnography can clearly provide unique insights into the dynamics of social activity within the natural settings, it is often criticized for being susceptible to contamination from subjectivity by researchers with a positivist outlook. To meet criticism of this kind, conventional ethnography begins to conform to the logics of neutrality, objectivity and balance. To this end, participant observation, the central ethnographic method of data collection, for example, strives for adequate description by using observational techniques 'systematically, comprehensively and rigorously', and with 'adequate safeguards against the many potentially invalidating or contaminating factors which threaten to diminish the interpretability of the resulting data' (MacCall and Simmons 1969: 77).

Accordingly, detachment from the social group under study is given considerable emphasis as a necessary guarantee of objective, systematic, and valid analysis by conventional ethnographers. Ethnographic 'facts', whose integrity has been safeguarded by detachment, can be seen as objective and valid as frequency percentages and correlation tables generated by hard statistical measures. As a result, 'social facts' are reified into fragmented ethnographic episodes in isolation from their social context. It is in this sense that many ethnographic studies of audience activity can be said to share an abstracted empiricist ethos with those mainstream empirical studies which they claim to condemn. As to this extent, the use of conventional ethnography

in audience research can be seen more as a technical innovation rather than as a methodological break with the positivist definition of social scientific research.

The emphasis on fact accumulation, either by quantitative methodology or by qualitative ethnography, is often the product of insufficient theorisation. This sometimes leads to the state of affairs identified by the American social critic Robert Lynd as early as in the late 1930s. Researchers, as Lynd noticed, tended to opt for a 'policy of rationalizing one's way out of blind alleys by asserting that more knowledge about anything is a self-justifying pursuit and there is no sure basis for saying that any one datum is more important than another' (Lynd 1939: 129). This is a typical American version of fact liberalism in social research – all facts are created equal! From this 'policy' arises a kind of fact-fetishism as ridiculed by North American critical sociologist Todd Gitlin,

> The two enterprises [*Personal Influence* and corporate broadcasting] share in a fetishism of facts, facts which by their raw muscularity, their indisputability, their very 'hardness', take on the authority of coherent theory. The fact in social sciences becomes a sort of commodity, the common currency of discourse, to be compared with, exchanged for, and supplanted by others, just as the fact as it is presented through mass media becomes authority itself, an orientation to the bewildering world that lies outside one's milieu and outside one's control (Gitlin 1978: 223).

Within more phenomenologically inspired audience studies, reflectivity is accorded a central position. This newly developed version of ethnographic practice therefore begins to pay great attention to faithfully recording the meanings that social actors attach to their own actions. Researchers are expected to acknowledge, and often to adopt, the perspective of the social actors rather than to impose their own interpretations on them. To be reflective, it is claimed, involves two levels of practice. Firstly, researchers are required to reflect on the research process in order to assess the possible impact of their presence and research practices on the data collected. Secondly, researchers are urged to reflect critically on the theoretical structures they have drawn out of their ethnographic analysis and to reconceptualize their evidence in terms of emergent models rather than forcing it into previously established schemas (see Harvey 1990: 11).

In contradistinction to the conventional approach to ethnography, we will here argue for a critical ethnography, which regards a systematic and rigorous description of social phenomena necessary but by no means sufficient. The production of detailed 'thick description' of social activity and meaning systems is not an end in itself. The researcher needs to go on to locate these grounded systems within broader social and historical formations in order to show how structural forces impinge on and shape the mundane everyday activities of the social actors. The resulting analysis attempts to chart the dialectical relationship between the social activity taking place within an immediate interpersonal milieu and the general formation within which it is embedded. In the words of one of its most articulate proponents, 'critical ethnography involves keeping alert to structural factors while probing meanings' (Harvey 1990: 204). While situated meanings are susceptible to scrupulous description by ethnographers, an adequate grasp of relevant structural dimensions cannot be achieved without considerable theoretical imagination.

Moreover, the critical approach to ethnography has a different definition of validity, which should unashamedly assert that a completely neutral and objective stance towards the subjects of research is not only unachievable, but inevitably twisted by the ideology of instrumentality bearing on validity – that is, the researcher in fact does not need to be neutral in order to achieve validity of the data collected. Critical social research, while abandoning instrumental reason in favour of human emancipation as its final goal, rejects the notion of pure objectivity and unmasks all attempts to be value-free and neutral as ideological and pretentious. To escape the vicious circle of self-justifying fact accumulation in conventional empirical research, a critical approach which is sensitive to dialectical, historical, and structural dynamics is needed, in order to guide the selection of relevant 'facts' by constantly locating them within the broader formations. This critical approach will be further elaborated in the following chapter.

Chapter 3
For a Critical Approach to the Study of Children and Television

Though rooted in a long tradition of critical commentary on contemporary social structures, the claim for a critical approach to social inquiry needs to be constantly reasserted, particularly in an area such as children and television, which has been dominated successively by empiricist and interpretative studies. Based on the preceding critical reappraisals of the still influential behaviourist approach and the currently thriving interpretative alternative, this chapter puts the case for a critical approach to the study of children and television. Sharing with all critical social inquiries the common ground of refusing to speak only in terms of miniature life world, the essential characteristic of the perspective developed here is that it is not confined to the immediately situated activity of children's television viewing or its short-term 'effects', but goes on to analyse the social and historical formations which provide the general contexts for that activity and furnish the material and symbolic resources that help organise it. The particular version of critical approach adopted here places a strong emphasis on the dynamic and historical formation of the socio-cultural contexts within which viewing activities take place, as against the more static, structuralist variants. It is at this point that Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and Pierre Bourdieu's constructivist structuralism, which will be discussed in the first section of the chapter, become relevant.

The Individual and the Society: The Search for Missing Links

The basic argument of the thesis touches upon one of the central debates in contemporary social sciences, particularly sociology – that is, how to conceptualize the links between situated action and general structure, or between the micro and macro levels of social life. To locate the basic argument of the thesis within its theoretical context, I begin this chapter with a brief account of relevant debates on this issue, focusing on the work of two most representative candidates – Anthony Giddens in Britain and Pierre Bourdieu in continental Europe. The theoretical discussion will hopefully shed light on the central case for a critical inquiry into children and television in

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China, the gist of which is the link between the situated activity of children's viewing and the broader historical and social formations in contemporary Chinese society.

The relationship between agency and structure, between the individual and the society, and between freedom and constraint, poses a basic and almost intractable problem for social theory and the philosophy of social sciences. Born after the French Revolution in the nineteenth-century Europe, at a time when the institutional constellations of modernity were taking shape, sociology was intended by its founding fathers as a solution to the historical dilemma – that is, men were increasingly alienated from the new society whose creation they took part in. The task of the newly born science, 'social physics' or '*sociologie*' as August Comte coined it in his ambitious project for positive philosophy, was meant to uncover the objective laws which govern the changes in society in the same way as physical laws govern movements in the natural world. In disenchanted post-Revolution Europe, the ambivalence felt by men towards the world created by their very action and yet remaining beyond their control and manipulation was acute. Comte's social physics was thus an attempt to intervene between the individual and the society in the aftermath of violent social turbulences in order to achieve a 'spontaneous harmony between the whole and the parts of the social system' (Thompson and Tunstall 1971).

Since then, sociology has developed as a discipline, drawing insights from other disciplines, but the dualism between agency and structure, between individual and society, and between determinism and voluntarism, has never been reconciled and overcome. On the contrary, it has been increasingly split between the macro and the micro strands of sociology. The former emphasizes structural constraints whereas the latter stresses individual autonomy. For functionalism and various versions of structuralism, the objectivity of social structures and social systems is the main object of social analysis while individual actors as creators and bearers of these objective structures and systems are either neglected or ignored. On the other hand, for ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and sociologies influenced by phenomenology and existentialism, the life world of individuals, the meanings they attach to it, and the beliefs they hold about it are the only basis for solid social theorisation. Structural constraints are thereby dissolved by an individualist methodology and become transparent and invisible.

What is missing from both the structuralist and the individualist approaches is some account of the intrinsic links between structure and agency, which go beyond dualism to capture its inherent dialectics. Attempts to do this have been made by a range of social theorists including Elias, Touraine, Berger and Luckmann, Bhaskar, Bourdieu and Giddens (see Bryant and Jary 1991: 22). To this prominent list I would add the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1970), for his discussion of the connection between history and biography, and between social issues and personal troubles. I would also add Zigmund Bauman, the British sociologist with a Jewish background, for his brilliant critique of 'the science of unfreedom', a name he gave to both mainstream sociology and its phenomenological alternatives (Bauman 1976). In what follows however, I will concentrate on the work of Anthony Giddens

and Pierre Bourdieu, on the grounds that they are the most fertile and influential theorists currently working to transcend the opposition between individual and society, and between agency and structure.

Anthony Giddens and the Structuration Theory

One of the principle ambitions behind the formulation of structuration theory is, according to Giddens, to put an end to two kinds of empire-building endeavours: firstly that of interpretative sociologies, which are founded upon an imperialism of the subject; and then, that of functionalism and structuralism, which are based on an imperialism of the social object. For Giddens, the basic domain of study for structuration theory is neither the experience of the individual nor the existence of structure, but social practices ordered across space and time (Giddens 1984: 2).

Giddens attempts to overcome the dualism of agency and structure with the notion of the duality of structure, which regards the relationship between action and structure as complementary rather than oppositional. Drawing on linguistics and the philosophy of language, Giddens makes a comparison between the separation of language and speech, and that of social structure and social interaction (Giddens 1976). In a similar way that speech is spatially and temporally situated whereas language is virtual and outside situated speech, interaction is constituted in and through individual activities whereas structure is employed in the constitution of interaction and is meanwhile reproduced by interaction. Structure, reconceptualized as generative rules and resources, is therefore considered to be both the medium and the outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes.

In contrast to the functionalist understanding of systems as the interdependence of action conceived as homeostatic causal loops, analogous to physical and biological systems, structuration theory defines system as the reproduced patterning of social relations across time and space. Social systems as regularized patterns of interaction between individuals and groups are structured by rules and resources and constituted by structural properties. The structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of human action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction. Structural properties, according to Giddens, can be analysed in terms of three dimensions – signification, domination and legitimation – which have to be grasped in relation to one another. When regularized practices stretch in and through time and space, they become 'institutions'. The interrelationships involved in differentiated institutional orders are complex but can be subjected to comprehensive analysis. When we study political institutions, for instance, we concentrate on the dimensions of domination and authorization although signification and legitimation are also involved. But if we analyse the symbolic orders or the modes of discourse, we will start with the dimension of signification, and then involve the dimensions of domination and legitimation. We deal with economic institution and legal institution in a similar way. This new dialectical classification is intended to contest what can be called substantivist concepts of

'economic', 'political' and other institutions, which presume concrete institutional differentiation of the various orders.

Functionalism and structuralism have always lacked an adequate account of agency. Functionalism regards social action as meaningful only in terms of the function they fulfill for the maintenance of systemic coherence. Structuralism reduces agents to the mere bearers of structures. Giddens conceives action as a continuous flow of interventions in the world initiated and monitored by autonomous agents. Actors not only monitor their activities and expect others to do so but also routinely monitor the contexts in which they act. Agents have a constant theoretical understanding of their own activities and are usually able to explain most of what they do if required. In other words, they are competent in that they are able to rationalise their own action. It is in this account of agency and action that structuration theory departs considerably from structuralist and functionalist sociology and incorporates insights from micro sociology – ethnomethodology in particular.

Freud's psychoanalysis is among the many intellectual resources[1] on which Giddens builds his theoretical synthesis. In place of Freud's triad of superego, ego and id, Giddens offers the conceptual triad of discursive consciousness, practical consciousness and unconscious motives. Discursive consciousness refers to the kind of knowledge actors have of social conditions. It has an explicit discursive form. Practical consciousness cannot be expressed verbally and discursively, but is not protected by any bar of repression, as is the case with the unconscious motives. There is no clear-cut and rigid distinction between the first two forms of consciousness. The division between them can be altered, for instance, by socialization and education. However, there are almost impermeable barriers built on repression between discursive consciousness and the unconscious motives. Much of the actors' knowledge about the world consists in their practical consciousness. This is what makes the practical knowledge of the laymen worthy of studying and hence Giddens strongly emphasizes the notion and practice of 'double hermeneutics' in social inquiries. This is to say, they necessarily involve 'the interpretation of interpretations'.

In his revision of the interpretative understanding of the 'activeness' of social agents, Giddens postulates the 'stratification model of action', which shows how individuals' knowledge of their own actions and the contexts of their actions is limited or structured by unintended consequences of action on the one hand and by unacknowledged conditions of action on the other. In drawing on structural rules and resources, agents unintentionally reproduce the structural conditions by and through their very action. Here the dialectics between structure and agency are brought to full play.

Structuration theory is also concerned with the concepts of time and space, and with the ways in which they are incorporated into social theory. This is the problem of 'contextuality' of social life and social institutions. All social life occurs in time

[1] See *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1984). In this book alone, Giddens directly draws on and discusses Erickson, Goffman, Freud, Foucault, Durkheim, Blau, Parsons, as is shown in the content list.

and space and is constituted by the intersection of presence and absence. To Giddens, the fundamental question of social theory is to explicate how the limitations of individual 'presence' are transcended by the 'stretching' of social relations across time and space (Giddens 1984: 34). Face-to-face interaction is based on the co-presence of interactive actors. As social systems extend in space and time, interaction can take forms than other physical co-presence. Distantiation in time and space was first made possible by the capacity to write. The rapid development of communication technology has radically transformed the time-space relations and made distantiated interaction a key feature of modern life.

In his assessment of the contribution of Anthony Giddens to social theory, John B. Thompson provides some constructive criticisms of structuration theory (Thompson 1990). Here I will only relate two relevant points he has made – the loose and deficient conception of structure as 'rules and resources', and the problematic conceptualization of the relationship between action, structure and constraint. As a conceptual innovation which diverges considerably from the ways in which it is commonly used, the conception of structure as rules and resources, according to Thompson, generates more confusion than it is supposed to dispel. The loose and abstract character of such a conception derives on the one hand from the very ambiguity of the term 'rule', and on the other hand from the very general notion of structure Giddens proposes, which tends to neglect the very specific features of social structure. Being unable to provide a precise and consistent account of what would count as a rule which is relevant to the social structure, Giddens fails to convince his readers that the identification of social structure with rules and resources is a fruitful way to reconceptualize structure.

Essential to Giddens' conceptualization of action in terms of his stratification models is his emphasis on the unintended consequence which may become the unacknowledged conditions of further action. Structure is said to be implicated in action itself, including even the most radical social changes. In conceptualising structure as both constraining and enabling action, Giddens tries to avoid the twin trap in which structuralist and interpretative sociologies are enmeshed while holding on to their respective insights. However, as Thompson argues, in stressing the enabling character of structure Giddens eventually underplays the role of structural constraint 'unintentionally' against his own wish.

Giddens tries to rescue the theme in his book *The Constitution of Society*, to show that his theory can fully account for the role of structural constraint. There is no difficulty for him to show that the structuration theory can accommodate the limits imposed by physical environment on individuals' life, as well as institutional resistance to manipulation and change by particular agents. However, the sort of structural constraint which derives neither from physical conditions nor from specific institutions but from social structure as such still poses a problem. To resolve this problem, Giddens proposes that this kind of constraint can be 'best described as placing limits upon the feasible range of options open to an actor in given circumstances or a type of circumstance' (Giddens 1984: 176–177). For those individuals who have only one option open to them, Giddens insists that it should still be regarded as a feasible option since given the motivation it is a reasonable

course of action to pursue. In response to this, Thompson's writes, 'Giddens manages to preserve the complementarity between structure and agency only by defining agency in such as way that any individual in any situation could not be an agent' (Thompson 1990: 169).

Thompson proposes a more direct confrontation with issues concerning agency and structural constraint, which will require a more satisfactory conception of structure and structural constraint as well as a more systematic analysis of wants and desires relevant to individual action and choice. One of the key tasks for social analysis, for him, is to explore the space between the differential distribution of options according to categories such as class, age, and sex on the one hand, and the wants and needs of different kinds possessed by different categories of individuals on the other. This is to examine the degrees of freedom and constraint entailed by social structure. 'Such an analysis', Thompson concludes, 'would show that while structure and agency are not antimonies, nevertheless they are not as complementary and mutually supporting as Giddens would like us to believe' (Thompson 1990: 170).

As mentioned earlier, one of Giddens' primary ambitions in formulating structuration theory is to combat the tendency of empire building shown in interpretative sociologies, and in structuralism and functionalism. However, as a grand theorist and the founder of a highly abstract theoretical enterprise, Giddens cannot completely escape his own strictures. In place of the subjectivist empire and the objectivist empire he so determinedly fights against, he ends up erecting an empire of the duality of structure, which can, paradoxically, reify the very dialectic between agency and structure by overplaying with the so called duality. With the same imperialist tendency lurking behind the formulation of structuration theory, Giddens fails, partly if not completely, to realise his own ambition. It is in the general theory of practice, formulated by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, that one can hopefully find a better articulation against such theoretical imperialism.

Pierre Bourdieu and Constructivist Structuralism

Though sharing Giddens' basic concern about how best to conceptualize the relationship between situated action and general structure, Pierre Bourdieu takes a different approach. He attempts to transcend what he calls the 'artificial opposition' between subjectivism and objectivism by constructing a general theory of practice, which he terms on one occasion, as constructivist structuralism (see Harker et al. 1990: 23–24) to risk an unwanted association with classical structuralism, I adopt this term for lack of a better notion. Constructivist structuralism should not be taken as a simple reconciliation between constructivist and structuralist approaches. it can best be described as a method for social analysis which is developed to give full play to the dialectic between agency and structure. Drawing on diverse intellectual resources, ranging from Marxism, phenomenology, structuralism to analytical philosophy.

Bourdieu's work is often regarded as a unique synthesis of the core ideas of Western thought. It is nevertheless meant to transcend the false separation between structure and agency implied in these very core ideas. Bourdieu's theory of practice opens up a useful perspective on the dynamic interplay between personal situations and social conditions, and between private life and the external world. The perspective is developed to grasp the social genesis of individual mentality on the one hand and the objective structures enshrined – often on an unconscious level – in social and individual practice on the other hand. This is supposed to be achieved through defining and revising a set of closely related sociological concepts, the most important of which include: field, habitus, capital, strategy, and trajectory. I will briefly explain each of the concepts in the following paragraphs.[2]

The 'field' as conceptualized by Bourdieu, is a field of forces. It is essentially dynamic in that various potentialities coexist and struggle for prominence within it. The result of the struggles is either the transformation or the preservation of the field. As field consists of a system of objective relations of power between positions, the structure of the field is defined by the balance struck between the deployments of symbolic and other capital. People's positions in the field are determined by the amount and type of capital they command. In research practice, the notion of field can help to define areas of struggle which can be subject to social analysis, such as the field of Parisian intellectual life, the field of popular culture, and the field of higher education in Britain, and so on. Closely linked to the concept of field is the concept of social space, which refers to a multiplicity of fields which are related to one another. Space can be seen as a series of fields of forces at a higher level of abstraction. An individual's social space can be located in a series of fields through life time, in which they strive for social position with the symbolic and material capital available to them.

Habitus is, in Bourdieurs own words, 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu 1977: 78). It refers to a set of dispositions which are acquired through adjustment to social positions within a field, and is created and recreated through the interplay between objective structures and individual initiatives. It also includes the agents' knowledge of the social world, which can be mobilized in turn as constitutive power in the struggle for positions. Habitus can be seen to operate at the sub-conscious level. As one's social position changes, habitus also changes. Bourdieu identifies two main constraints on agents and their habitus. The first is the habitus of socializing agents; and the second is the objective social and material conditions in which agents find themselves. Bourdieu's thesis on the creation of individual habitus through family socialization, which is in turn structured by the objective conditions in the material world, can be directly related to my study of parental control over children's television viewing activity in China.

[2] For a fuller account of these concepts, see *An introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu*, Chapter 1 'The Basic Theoretical Position' (Harker et al. 1990).

Capital in Bourdieu's work has a wider definition than the one of the classical tradition confined to the economic sense; it ranges from material to cultural and symbolic capital. Different forms of capital can be transformed into one another. For instance, money can be invested on higher education and in this way material capital can be transformed into cultural capital. Capital exists within a field as resources as struggles for positions draw on. The relationship between field, habitus, and capital is a direct one. The field of forces is bounded by power relations, the balance of which can be achieved through struggles between the different volumes and structures of capital. Values attached to different forms of capital depend largely on the agents' habitus.

Strategy has always been an important concept in Bourdieu's work. It refers to the intuitive product of 'knowing' the rules of the game. As distinguished from rules, strategies are neither conscious nor calculated and determined. Two types of strategies are identified to account for the process of agents constructing social world and reproducing their positions in it. Reproduction strategy is adopted by agents to maintain and improve their social positions. Reconversion strategy is adopted by them to adjust to movements in social space, either horizontally or vertically, depending on the structuring and restructuring of the capital available to them.

Trajectory is a relatively new notion introduced in *Distinction* (1984) to describe the route by which people arrive at their positions within a social space. What is interesting here is that Bourdieu is not only talking about personal but also collective or class trajectory. The most common route is the 'modal trajectory', which is related to a 'given volume of inherited capital'. There are also individual trajectories which diverge more or less from the modal trajectory. The concepts of strategy and trajectory are crucial for overcoming the cleavage between the objective and the subjective worlds, with structural elements dynamically and intrinsically engrained in personal action.

The development of a general theory of practice equipped with new conceptual apparatus is needed in order to root out the perennial cleavage between subjective life world and objective social structure, as inbuilt in conventional sociological language. Bourdieu develops his methodology through his concrete research practice rather than elaborating it on a general and abstract level as grand theorists usually do. His 'constructivist structuralism' underpins his empirical and ethnographic studies of various fields of social life including traditional societies, academia, higher education, class distinction, symbolic violence and state power. Focusing on the details of everyday life world, Bourdieu attempts to filter objective social structures through the core of subjective life world. In line with the way in which his methodology is developed, the relevance of its conceptual apparatus has to be perceived in concrete empirical observations and social analysis. The significance of his constructivist structuralism lies in its capacity to open up and illuminate specific cases in social analysis. Instead of a systematic grand theory which may impose its own conceptualisation on reality, Bourdieu provides

sociologists with a set of sharpened analytical tools for deeper analyses of social life. It is in this sense that his approach can be said to be genuinely anti-theoretical-imperialism.

Although neither Giddens's structuration theory nor Bourdieuls constructivist structuralism has a direct bearing on my own work, in that I do not follow their theoretical injunctions in a strict sense, this does not mean that their work has not any relevance to my topic. On the contrary, their attempts to surmount the historic opposition between individual agency and structural constraint and to update the whole debate around this central sociological dilemma provide valuable new resources for defining and conceptualising the Chinese situation. It is in this respect that their work has contributed to my theoretical position, which stresses the interplay between situated activity and general structure on the one hand and the historical formation of general structure on the other hand. There is a dual emphasis involved at this point – on the situated activity of children's television viewing, which has to be located within social and historical contexts on the one hand, and on the dynamic creation and recreation of that social and historical context by this situated activity on the other hand. It is this dynamic process rather than the static end-result of social life that has to be captured. For this purpose, both Giddens's structuration theory and Bourdieu's general theory of practice are useful general sources for the development of a critical approach to the study of the life world of Chinese children and their television viewing activity, even though I do not strictly confine the exposition of my argument to the concepts developed and elaborated by either of them alone.

For a Critical Inquiry into Children and Television in China

The concentration of critical media research on issues such as the ownership and control of media institutions has left a substantial blindspot in relation to audience activity. As Graham Murdock has argued, filling the gaps

> is part of the wider project of teasing out the dynamic and dialectical relations between structural formations and audience activity that lies at the heart of the [critical] perspective I have sketched out here. Working toward an empirically grounded answer is, in my view, one of the major tasks now facing critical inquiry (Murdock 1989: 248).

The study of children and television in China reported in the chapters that follow can be seen as a tentative attempt to contribute to this 'wider project' of developing a critical approach to research on audience activities. Arguably, such an approach is particularly relevant to the understanding of audience activity in societies other than the West where media systems have been largely imported from elsewhere. Moreover, the unique features of these societies demand that special attention to their cultures and histories.

The Critical Tradition and Audience Study

Perhaps the easiest way to grasp the essential characteristics of critical social inquiry is to compare it with the major alternatives. The first of these – positivist social science, aims to discover the general causal laws under which social phenomena can be subsumed; whereas, the second – the various interpretative approaches, and particularly those grounded in phenomenology, emphasize the description and comprehension of the life-world within which social actors perform their daily activity. According to Zygmund Bauman, both 'the science of unfreedom' – a name he bestowed on mainstream sociology, and its existentialist and phenomenological alternatives, are equally conservative. The former tends to reify society in the process of demystifying individual autonomy whereas the latter reifies individual freedom in the process of demystifying society (Bauman 1976). In contradistinction, the critical tradition of social inquiry drawn upon here in this piece of work operates with a dialectical, structural, and historical perspective. It focuses on the dynamic interplay between individuals' situated action based on commonsense understanding, and the general social cultural formations which both enable and constrain their action.

The advantages of such a critical perspective lie first and foremost in its ability to relate both the viewing activity and its immediate domestic context to larger politico-economic and historical process in order to illuminate the interplay between the audience activity and structural dynamics. Whereas positivist researchers are content with establishing correlations between variables, such as the amount of television viewing and children's school performance, and conventional ethnographers settle for 'thick descriptions' of how children watch television, critical researcher regard these materials as data which require further theorization and exploration. As Murdock points out,

> [W]here mainstream researchers tend to view survey 'findings' as an end product, however, critical researchers see them as posing questions that need to be answered in other ways…. Hence, the decisive break between critical inquiry and other approaches comes with the way available research materials are conceptualized theoretically and the way that explanations are constructed (Murdock 1989: 226–227).

Thus far critical studies in the field of children and the mass media have been few and far between, with Melody's study on advertising and children's television (1973), and Valdez's later attempt to develop a political economy of the production and distribution of children's programmes on commercial television (1981). More recently, critical commentators have directed attention to the innovative practice of fusing children's television programmes and advertising in new programme forms (e.g. Engelhardt 1986; Kline 1989).

My own study of the impact of *Transformers* cartoon and toy range in China, reported in the final chapter, falls under this latter category. At the same time, it seeks to go beyond the political economy approach developed by these American and Canadian researchers. This approach focuses on television industry's directive organisation of the child audience in its account of the promotion of a consumerist ethic, whereas I have tried to link the rise of consumerism in China to more general

social and cultural changes and to locate children's television related activity within this broader formation. A project like this requires a degree of methodological pluralism. Accordingly I have gathered data in a variety of ways, through focused interviews, a sample survey, observations of natural settings, and the analysis of official statistics and second-hand documentation. As mentioned earlier, what enables these diverse sources to be integrated into a coherent critical perspective is the way in which they are theorised.

Having now sketched the general characteristics of a critical inquiry into audience activity, we need to turn our attention to the question of how such an approach bears upon research practice, particularly the study of children and television in China. But before we do so, we first need to examine the general historical and intellectual background to mass communication research in China, in order to fully grasp the significance of critical research for the comprehension of current changes in Chinese culture and society.

The Intellectual Context of Media Research in China

Traditional Chinese culture is essentially a culture of 'values' rather than of 'facts', as shown in the 2,000 years long practice of recruiting official bureaucrats by giving and taking examinations in Confucian classics. But in confrontation with the overwhelmingly powerful West, China had to go through painful cultural changes, as the country lost the two Opium Wars to Britain around the mid nineteenth century. Social and cultural elites in China were forced to learn from the West in the area of technology and science first, and then in arts, humanities and social sciences. Social sciences in the Western sense lived a short and rather insignificant life in the two or three decades before 1949. As the Communist defeated the Kuomintang and came to power, social sciences were abandoned as bourgeois ideology. This happened to line up with the attacks on mainstream social sciences by left-wing intellectuals in the West itself, especially with the rise of the 'new left' in the post-war years.[3] The historic Chinese orthodoxy of Confucianism, together with other modern Western ideologies, was replaced by a gradually reified and deified version of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought, whose total capture of the intellectual field somehow precluded any alternative theorisation.

However, the post-Mao decade of 1980s saw the institution of substantial cultural and ideological changes in the wake of the newly introduced liberal economic policies. The impetus 'to liberate thought' – '*jie fang si xiang*', a new official slogan with particular connotations within the historical context of the late 1970s – was itself liberated from its original narrower project, and led to the rapid introduction, and indeed in many cases the reintroduction, of social thought from the West. Theories

[3] See *Ideology in Social Science: readings in critical social theory*, ed. by Robin Blackburn, 1972, Fontana, Glasgow. The book covers nearly all disciplines in western social sciences – politics, sociology, anthropology, economics and history.

and philosophies as diverse as Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, Freudianism, Sartre's existentialism, Schopenhauer's pessimism with a Buddhist twist, Nietzsche's exposition of the will to power, and various 'new' theories of postmodernism, post-industrialism and the 'information society', all became fads of the 1980s. Led by the general reorientation of official policies towards opening up to the outside world, Chinese intellectuals turned to the scientifically and technologically 'advanced' West in finding solutions to what they saw as the backwardness of their own society. The fact that only a relatively small circle of intellectual elites had direct access to these new thoughts did not mean that their impact was restricted. On the contrary, the solid socialist tradition of elites relating to the 'masses', enabled these new ideas to be filtered and finally spread throughout a much larger proportion of the population, eventually, in the form of a new drive for material abundance and personal satisfaction, denied to them in Mao's socialist and collectivist China striving for strength and dignity as a nation.

In the process of being imported into the Chinese intellectual arena however, Western thinking was selectively appropriated as it was adapted to the emerging social and cultural formations of post-Mao China. Hence, the doctrine of Darwinism, the survival of the fittest, became the principle rationale for the revival of a competitive market economy; the interpretation of existentialism as a defense of individual dignity and respect stood as an opposition to the lofty spirit of selflessness and collectivism promoted by the Party leadership; Schopenhauer's profound pessimism corresponded to and reinforced the mood of tragedy prevailing among many Chinese intellectuals who were acutely aware of the dilemmas in which the country was caught when confronted with a world dominated by the powerful West; and the theories of the post-industrial information society were widely regarded as the template for future development in their own country.

The central puzzle confronting Chinese intellectuals throughout the present century was to explain how China lost out to the West in terms of economy, polity and culture and the successive political struggles and ideological confrontations can all be seen as marking attempts at the catching up game. From this perspective, the turn towards the West in the 1980s is best understood as the latest effort to find a way out of relative poverty and backwardness. It is within this general social and intellectual context that mass communication research was introduced into the intellectual and academic arena, and from the beginning it was (mis)understood as a peripheral but institutionally independent discipline, completely different from mainstream Chinese journalism of the Yan'an tradition.

The field's emergence began with the publication of a handful of translated books, such as *Men, Women, Messages and media: Understanding of Human Communication* (Schramm and Porter 1982), and *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communication* (McQuail and Windahl 1981). Its institutionalization within universities began in 1986, when the Institute of Public Opinion was established in China Renmin University (or People's University of China) in Beijing and the Centre for Culture and Communication Research was founded in Fudan University in Shanghai, as extensions of the already well regarded journalism schools in both places. Following these initiatives, departments of journalism in other universities started to provide

introductory courses on mass communication research based on the available translated books. However, because of the highly selected nature of these works, mass communication research was misunderstood as being primarily about audience rating, market research and surveys, public opinion polls, and the management of public relations.

Critical research was conspicuous by its absence. This elision can be partly explained by the widespread rejection of the particular version of Chinese Marxism associated with party orthodoxy to the extent that anything associated with Marxism was spurned. This popular sentiment is best expressed in the polemic statement 'Marxism has died', which was openly articulated by some political dissents at the time. Not only had official Marxism become the scapegoat, to be blamed for the apparent failures of socialism in China, but Western Marxism as such, which provided the major intellectual base for critical communications research in Europe and America, was also viewed with suspicion by many Chinese scholars. Added to this, the age-long tradition of good-willed paternalism, within the family and the state, which may tolerate technical criticisms, has always found it difficult to accommodate critical scholarship within the academic system. But this was about to change with the coming of age of the market ethos – soon everything that is solid theoretically begins to melt into the practical air.

We argue for critical social inquiry because it can at least help Chinese intellectuals to understand their country's cultural dilemma within a global context, and to see how the rise of the West, and Western domination, are related to it. The critical perspective as we have adopted here highlights the prevailing pattern of asymmetric cultural flows through the channels of mass communication, from the central to the periphery nations, from rich to poor countries, from developed to underdeveloped regions, and particularly, from the United States to the rest of the world, and poses the basic question for critical mass communication researchers in China: where does China stand within this map of unequal flows of cultural products and information?

Critical inquiry can also help to grasp the way that the movement towards a market economy in China in the 1980s has had a fundamental impact on every aspect of people's lives, and pose a series of new questions for research. How did the new consumption craze of the 1980s come about in the first place? To what extent has the new consumerist ethic, encouraged by the rapid expansion of advertising in the media, clashed with and eroded the traditional value and the Maoist ideology of thrift? How did the United States, China's 'number one enemy' not so long ago, manage to establish its new image of being the most admirable nation in the world in the 1980s? How did Kentucky Fried Chicken so easily eclipse the Peking Ducks in popularity, and what meanings are initially attached to American fast food and cola drinks? These questions all arise from the changes brought about by the 'open-door' economic policy, which has reintegrated China into the unequal world capitalist economic order. This study by no means exhausts, or intends to exhaust, all these questions. Rather it concentrates on one particular field of popular consumption – children's television viewing – and on its relation to the emergence of wider patterns of consumption and consumerism, as evidenced by the craze for the toy range linked to the imported Transformers cartoon series.

Children and Television in China: A Critical Inquiry

Critical inquiry is particularly relevant to the study of children and television in China because it is the only approach that can do justice to the indispensable historical and cultural dimensions involved in understanding audience activity in contemporary China. The absence of these broader contexts from previous studies of children and television, is partly due to the fact that the cultures shared by Western researchers and their Western subjects is so much taken for granted that they become, in a sense, invisible, and thus unproblematic. I was born and grew in China, but the central arguments of the thesis were developed whilst I was studying and working outside the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with access to materials and literature not generally available at the time within the country. Hopefully, the perspective generated by this distance has been integrated with my 'insider knowledge', to use an anthropological term, to produce a fuller and more faithful account than could be produced either by Chinese researchers within China or by visiting foreign researchers.

One of the departure points for the present analysis is the relation between biography and history, and more specifically the formation of generational experience. On the question of generations, Karl Mannheim's formulation still provides a useful starting point:

> (a) New participants in the cultural progress are emerging, (b) whilst former participants in that process are continually disappearing; (c) members of any one generation can participate only in a temporally limited section of the historical process, and (d) it is therefore necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage; (e) the transition from generation to generation is a continuous process (Manheim 1952: 292).

However, these general formulations need to be modified when applied to Chinese society. In common with many other traditional societies, China has been going through turbulent and fundamental transformations over the last 150 years, partly as a result of its fatal encounter with aggressive Western powers. Modifications are particularly needed to Mannheim's formulations (d) and (e). The transmission of the accumulated cultural heritage in modern China tends to be ruptured rather than 'continuous' as a result of its encounters with the West and the radical revolutions from within. Confucianism, the fundamental doctrines of classical China's political and life philosophy, which characterises Chinese culture as such,[4] was openly and fiercely attacked during the cultural upheaval widely known as May Fourth Youth Movement. The radical slogan 'Crush Confucianism into Pieces' was shouted out by angry young radical intellectuals under the influence of October Revolution in Russia.[5] The movement started as a protest against the Versailles treaty and ended

[4] The other two major ideologies in traditional Chinese society are Daoism and Buddhism.

[5] The May Fourth Movement in 1919 was triggered by the Versailles treaty, by which Western powers conceding Shangdong peninsula under German control and influence before the First World War to Japan, the new imperial power in Asia, despite the fact that China took part in the War against Germany and its allies.

up as a nation-wide cultural upheaval against Western and Japanese imperialism and against China's own 'feudalism' as contained and condensed in the Confucian tradition.

It was arguably from that point onwards, the increasing pace of social changes and the subsequent rapid shifts in people's common experience have shortened the actual intervals between 'generations', compared with the commonly acknowledged interval of around 30 years. In China now, at the time this research is conducted, generations born after the communist revolution and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, from the 1950s up to the 1980s, are often referred to as *wu ling hou* – those born in the decade of 1950s, *liu lin ghou* – those born in the decade of 1960s, *qi ling hou* – those born in the decade of 1970s, and *ba ling hou* – those born in the decade of 1980s.

Wu ling hou are the off-springs of a most optimistic and revolutionary generation. *Wu ling hou*'s parents were born in the 1920s and 30s. They went through the wars and many joined the communist revolution to eradicate class exploitation and imperialist oppression. Having experienced the evils of the 'old society' and the goods and hopes of the 'new society', they embraced socialism and collectivism with little reservation and became the most determined participators in the country's economic and social construction throughout the 1950s – the golden years of socialism in China. Facing the Cold War and a hostile international environment, the new socialist China was isolated by major world powers and was forced to adopt a policy in favour of building national strength and restoring national dignity at the sacrifice of individual satisfaction. As a result, the first 30 years of the People's Republic saw the establishment of a complete industrial infrastructure, a sufficient national defense system and independent foreign policies. New socialist China achieved remarkable economic and social progress in isolation from the world capitalist economic order. This achievement was, however, discounted by serious mistakes made by Mao and the Party, which were later on widely publicized and exaggerated in Western media. The achievement was also badly undervalued by post-Mao market reformers.

Born in the 1950s and grew up in a new social environment of collectivism, *wu ling hou* were in their teens during the Great Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao as he pushed his radical project of social equality to an extreme. Many of the *wu ling hou* teenagers went to the countryside to participate in a re-education programme as Mao dismantled schools, colleges and universities as hierarchical institutions against the socialist principle of equality. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, some of the *Wu ling hou* already became disillusioned with Mao's radical egalitarian ideals and practice. After Mao died in 1976, the few quick-minded lucky ones among them grabbed the opportunity to take the first national university entrance exams rehabilitated under Deng Xiaoping in 1977 and 1978. Upon their graduation in the early 1980s, many earnestly threw themselves into the post-Mao experiments with intellectual and economic liberalization. They started to question the very collectivist spirit passed on to them by their revolutionary forefathers while flirting with ideas of liberalism from the West.

This collective romance with liberalism started to fade when China went further down the road of market reforms after 1992. In the aftermath of the 1989 political

turbulence, market reforms were questioned by the 'old left' and China found itself once again at a cross road – to turn right or left? Deng Xiaoping answered the question by taking his decisive tour to south China in January 1992 to lend support to the showcase of liberal market reforms – China's supreme Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen. The *wu ling hou* social and intellectual elites, once unanimously enthusiastic about liberalism as a way for individual emancipation from rigid and at times harsh collectivism, parted their ways in the mid 1990s as capitalist market ethic started to show its true face. Some became critical of the unregulated liberal market and became China's 'new left', whereas others went on towards further liberalization as they themselves turned out to be the earliest beneficiaries of the very liberal system they advocate.

But for the less fortunate ones among them, life was to become very different. They were to be among the first sacrifice of fierce market competition during the initial wave of privatization policy sanctioned by Deng in the last few years of his life in the mid 1990s. These unlucky *wu ling hou* were either in their late 1930s or early 1940s, and got 'laid off' as burdens when state or collectively owned enterprises went bankrupt in the new liberal market in which the government allowed unfair competition between collective enterprises with heavy social responsibility and the new flexible private and foreign companies which hold efficiency and profit above everything else. These *wu ling hou* were to become the new urban poor subsidized by the remnant family values in China as the baby of social welfare got thrown away with the bath water of clumsy collective ownership. It was children of this generation of parents that I happened to do my empirical study with in the late Spring and early Summer of 1989. The generation born in the 1980s, are immediately recognized as the *ba ling hou* generation, for their quick adaptation to the new ethics of the market and consumption.

The generation of the urban *ba ling hou* is unique in a number of respects. First and foremost, they are the first generation of children to be born and to grow up with television at home. Secondly, most of them are the product of the one-child policy, which has exerted an enormous impact on family structures and values. These single children are believed to share a set of similar traits: pampered; self-centred; extravagant; and burdened with high parental expectations. Thirdly, these children are being brought up within an increasingly consumer oriented culture. This last characteristic has been a particular focus of both popular and official attention and comment. The news story 'Young Generation in China Confounded with Reality' is typical of its kind. The newspaper article listed several incidents of confused young people in face of the new commercial ethics and their quick adaptation to money economy. One particular incident runs as follows. A child borrowed a pencil from a classmate but was asked to pay for using it because they were having an economy of commodity and everything should have to do with money (*The People's Daily*, Overseas Edition, May 26, 1989). A few days later, a survey of 3,899 children from five big cities came to the rather more 'comforting' conclusion that children love money but they love knowledge more (*The People's Daily*, overseas Edition, May 29, 1989). Finally, the peculiarity of the present generation is related to the unique historical experience of their parents, who were once the Red Guards of Chairman Mao, and who received and later

rejected their intense political and ideological training in socialist collectivism. These social and personal experiences have produced a particular worldview and a particular set of hopes and expectations, which, in turn, cast a shadow over their off-springs.

A critical inquiry into children and television in China needs to take all the cultural and historical dynamics delineated above into consideration, in order to tease out the dialectical relationship between these general cultural and historical tendencies, and the concrete activity of children's television viewing and parents' reaction to it. The case study of the Transformers cartoon series and toy range, for example, only becomes fully understandable when cast against the background of the general expansion of consumption, which boosts and is boosted by the burgeoning market economy. In addition, the one-child policy, which has substantially altered the previous power relations between parents and children, also needs to be taken into serious account in order to explain this seemingly bizarre phenomenon. Beyond this, a variety of more general social dynamics concerning children's television viewing, including the relatively limited time Chinese children spend watching, the overemphasis on the educational capacity of children's programmes, and the tight parental control over children's television viewing as a whole, also need to be comprehended in terms of changes in the formations of contemporary Chinese culture and society. The definition of 'indecent' love scenes on the screen, for another example, is related not only to the traditional cultural inhibition of sex as a taboo, but also to the particular experiences of the *wu lin ghou* parents who grew up during the Cultural Revolution when gender equality was pushed to an extreme that the distinction between the male and female sexes was eliminated and became literally nonexistent in all forms of representation.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the chapters that follow will support the claim that a proper understanding of history and culture is indispensable to a full analysis of children's television related activity, particularly in a society such as contemporary China, where a deep rooted heritage of values and practices – both traditional and socialist – is being eroded by the consequences of the liberal market policy of the 1980s. In other words, the study of Chinese children's situated viewing activity requires a parallel analysis of the changing historical and cultural contexts within which these situations are located. Only by moving back and forth between the two can one achieve an adequate understanding of the social phenomenon under study. It is precisely these interactions between inertia and innovation, biography and history, social formations and everyday life, that our critical research seeks to illuminate.

Chapter 4
Children's Television in China: From Education to Commercial Entertainment

The task of this chapter is to rewrite the official account of the development of children's television in China from a critical perspective This necessarily involves a reinterpretation of the available historical facts. The perspective taken here therefore calls for a shift in emphasis from retelling the known history of children's television, which is indelibly coloured by mainstream evaluations at the time, to exploring socioeconomic and ideological forces which helped to form this history. The formation of children's television is periodized here into four main stages, with regard to the role it is designated to play in children's life. These include: the initial stage of intellectual and political education (1958–1967), followed by a period of termination during the high time of the Cultural Revolution (1967–1972); the second stage of heavy political and ideological education after its resumption in the last 4 years before the official end of the Cultural Revolution (1972–1976); the third stage of the restoration and expansion of intellectual and social education (1976–mid 1980s); and the most recent stage marked by the coming of commercialized entertainment. This last stage, coinciding with the popularization of television sets in Chinese families, is a deviation prompted by the new liberal economic order from the longstanding cultivating role of children's television in China. But this present stage of commercial entertainment mixed with elements of intellectual and moral education seems to last for a long time into the foreseeable future.

State Control and Market Regulation

The task of rewriting this history is made difficult by the scarcity of available information on the one hand, and by the mainstream official approach uncritically adopted by most of the available studies on the other. In the People's Republic of China up to about mid 1980s, all mass media are subject to direct Party control. The newspaper, with its long history, provides the prototype for control and tends to define and confine the form and content of other media. Guidelines for newspapers developed by the Party during war time in the 1930s and 1940s exert a general influence on the

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later media practice right up to the end of the 1980s. The theoretical justification for this derives from the Chinese version of Marxist journalism, which takes Lenin's account of the relationship between the party and its publications as a starting point and endows it with almost absolute truth and authority. The following quotation from Lenin's 'Party Organisation and Party Literature' was the primary theoretical cornerstone, on which rationalizations for Party control over the mass media were to rest for more than half a century from the Yan'an period of the late 1930s.

> Newspaper must become the organs of the various party organisations, and their writers must by all means become members of these organisations. Publishing and distributing centres, bookshops and reading-rooms, libraries and similar establishments – must all be under party control (Lenin 1960, *Collected Works* 10: 44–49).

Accordingly, the media are openly promoted as the mouthpiece, or the 'throat and tongue', of the Party. Chinese Marxist theories of journalism place much emphasis on what is called 'party character' of the mass media. This is well explained in one of the key university textbooks on the history of the press in China in the 1980s:

> Newspaper propaganda is an important component of the Party's cause. Thus it must be subject to the total leadership of the Party. This is the principle of the Party character of proletariat newspapers as well as the tradition of the Chinese proletariat newspapers (Fang et al. 1983: 142).

Xuanchuan, propaganda in Chinese, is by no means derogatory as it is in countries with a strong liberal tradition. It is a neutral if not an outright positive term, since the Chinese do not see why one cannot propagate a good cause. During time of war in the 1930s and 1940s, that is, the Anti-Japanese war and the Civil War, the central task of the media controlled by the Communist Party was designated to propagate the guidelines and policies of the Party to the people, and to translate policies into mass action so to generate the social forces for change. After the Communist Party defeated the Kuomintang – the Nationalist Party, and assumed power in 1949, the mass media were employed in mobilizing the masses to participate in national development on the one hand, and to be involved in political movements against any sign of potential capitalism, liberalism and possessive individualism on the other. In all the mass movements, economic or political in nature, the mass media – newspapers and radio broadcasting in particular at the time, played a significant role in agitation, promotion and at times political condemnation.

However, the situation whereby the mass media are subject to direct control by the Communist Party has changed in the course of China's opening-up to the West and adoption of market reforms in the 1980s. That decade saw a massive collective infatuation, especially among the intellectuals, with liberalism as an emancipating ideology from strict Party control. Within the journalism circle, a debate on the media's 'party character' and 'people character' went on for years between the 'liberal' and the 'conservative'. The central questions raised during the debates are: what is the relationship between the two 'characters' and which actually comes the first? The more liberal-minded journalists tried to break away from party control by regarding 'party character' as the means to achieve the end of 'people character' – that is, the media should serve the ultimate interests of the people first and foremost.

Whereas, the more 'conservative' minded ones refused to see any possible fundamental conflict between the two and emphasize the point that the Party in fact should and do represent the interests of the people. The debates opened a theoretical niche for liberalism to raise its head in journalism and to take over as the *de facto* dominant ideology later in the 1990s as the process of media reforms went further down the road of the liberal market.

Party control therefore, has been continuously eroded by the trend towards marketisation in the field of mass communication. As commercial advertising as a source of income started to take the place of state financial allocation, Chinese media's 'people character' seems to win over its 'party character', but only that the people in this case begin to be reduced to consumers of various media products. Profit seeking rather than ideological construction became the final goal of the media industry. Despite that the party made one effort after another throughout the years to promote positive media reporting as against the media's new commercial drive to focus on only the negative and sensational side of reality to attract more audience and readership, the news value system in practice, if not yet in theory, has changed significantly towards what used to be condemned by Chinese Marxist journalism as decadent Western sensationalism.

The Cold War and the Birth of Chinese Television

The history of television broadcasting in China can be dated back to the year 1953, when the Central Broadcasting Bureau (CBB) sent their cadres abroad to study television technology. In February 1955, the bureau submitted a report to the State Council, planning to build a television station in Beijing in 1957. As a result, the first signal transmission was made on the International Labour Day – the 1st of May, 1958 in Beijing. Shanghai followed suit and started its television broadcasting in October of the same year. Two months later, Harbin – the capital city of Heilongjiang Province, bordering Soviet Union's Far East, also established its regional television station. In the following two years, an increasing number of provincial stations were set up.

The establishment of a television broadcasting network in China in the late 1950s, as with the development of its satellite technology and nuclear power in the late 1960 and early 1970s, was marked by the particular dynamics of the Cold War era (Zhao 1998). Television broadcasting was therefore seen as a significant political event as well as a technological innovation. The final decision on when exactly to start transmitting the first television signal was made only upon knowing that Taiwan, ruled by the rival Kuomintang, was planning to build a television station with technical support from the United States Radio Corporation of America (RCA) – and in particular that they would start transmissions on the 10th of October 1958, the National Day of Taiwan. The political kudos of beating the American-backed Kuomintang government at the game was decisive in the quick establishment of television broadcasting system in China in the late 1950s.

Table 4.1 Increase in number of television sets

Year	1958	1961	1978	1983	1988
TV sets	20	10,000	1,500,000	35,000,000	120,000,000

Source: *CCTV 30 Years: 1958–1988*

Table 4.2 Increase in number of TV and relay stations

Year	1965	1970	1975	1980	1983	1984	1988
TV St.	12	31	32	38	52	104	220
Rly St.	3	–	190	–	7,475	–	–

Sources: *China News Yearbook*, 1982
Beijing Review, March 25, 1985
CCTV 30 Years: 1958–1988
Abbreviations: *TV St.* Television Broadcasting Stations, *Rly St.* Television Relay Stations

The initial establishment of television stations was therefore more of a symbolic gesture than a practical strategy. This can be seen from the fact that there were a mere 20 receivers when transmissions first started. The popularization of television, in the real sense, did not take place until the late 1970s and early 1980s, twenty years after the initial establishment of services, and coincided with a strategic change in national development policies, from self-reliance to co-operation with the West, and from high national accumulation coupled with low individual consumption, to the stimulation of production by consumption.

Many more local television broadcasting and relay stations were established from the late 1970s onwards in order to cover as vast an area as possible in the country. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide a summary of this expansion in the 30 years from 1958 to 1988. In the late 1980s, China Central Television (CCTV) transmits three services: the first is nation-wide; the second can only be received in the Beijing region; and the third, which shares the same channel with the first, is purely educational, relaying lectures given by Central Television University.

The state-owned television broadcasting system in the 1980s consists of four institutional levels: (1) At the top is CCTV situated in the capital city of Beijing, which is the only nation-wide television network. (2) At the second level are the 23 provincial stations plus three municipal city stations, each of which has its own independent channel(s). (3) At the third level are the numerous city television stations within each province, transmitting local news and some selected entertainment programmes. Most of these stations do not possess their own channel at this moment and have to share a channel with either CCTV or provincial stations. (4) At the bottom level are a massive number of relay stations in counties affiliated to the nearby cities. Only a minority of these counties have their own television broadcasting stations which are similar to the city stations.

The education potential of television as an audio-visual medium was recognized, emphasized and explored from the very beginning of broadcasting. The 'Outline

Report on Broadcasting' submitted by the ministry of Radio and Television Broadcasting to the Central Committee of the Party defined the role of broadcasting as follows:

> Radio and television broadcasting is the most powerful modern tool for educating and encouraging all Party members, the army, and the people of all ethnic origins in the country to build up socialist material and spiritual civilization. It is also one of the most effective tools for the Party and the government to maintain close ties with the masses…. Radio and television as the means of propaganda are more technologically advanced than other media and are capable of contacting the masses more directly and quickly (Pei 1984: 8).

Control over television broadcasting by the Party is achieved in a similar way to the system that generates control over newspapers and other mass media. It proceeds by establishing party committees within the television network and stations to supervise their daily work. However, it is the Party itself that adopted the post-Mao 'open-door' policy and economic reforms. One of the unintended consequences of economic liberalization and intellectual debates was the gradual loosening of Party control over the 1980s, culminating in the summer of 1989. In the few years that followed, the Party re-emphasized its control over government bodies, educational institutions, and above all, the mass media – where their key role as the 'throat and tongue' of the Party got re-emphasized after the 1989 turbulence. Deng's significant tour in 1992 to Guangdong, the heartland of China's market reforms, confirmed the liberal direction of economic development in general. This is the starting point of Chinese television's 'double life' as the mouthpiece and money-spinner throughout the 1990s (Zhao 1999).

Children's Television: 1958–1990

Mainstream discussions about children's television in China tend to start with the rhetoric such as the following:

> Children are the buds of the country and the future of humanity. Whether they are properly educated concerns the prosperity and decline of the nation. The Party and government always attach much importance to the education of the young and have called all members of the Party and the society to take an interest in children's healthy growth. Television stations at all levels in the country should take children's programming seriously and try to run it well (Zhuang 1987: 103).

This is indicative of the strong educational orientation of children's media in China, which provides the necessary starting point for any sociological analysis of their production and distribution, with the recent tendency towards commercialised entertainment understood as a departure from this long-standing emphasis. But as media commercialization went further down the road towards money-spinning at the cost of mouthpiece, the principle of education through entertainment will eventually be thrown away in the same way as many other socialist values in the new era of market competition.

In the following paragraphs, the history of children's television in China[1] is divided into four distinctive periods. The differentiation is based on the assumption that practices in each period operationalize the same essential orientation towards cultivation and education. Although the educational role of television is weakened during the last stage of commercialization tendency, compared with previous stages, the overall feature of children's television in China of the late 1980s and early 1990s remains the same heavily dosed with intellectual and moral contents.

Moral and Intellectual Education: 1958–1967

Socialist China lead by the Communist Party not only had to face the rigours of economic reconstruction and political consolidation in the early years of her founding, but also had to confront the task of raising a new generation of children with distinctively socialist morals. All the agencies of socialization – schools, families, neighbourhood, and the media – were therefore mobilised to contribute to the morally healthy growth of the young generation, who were said to have been 'born in the new society and growing up under the Red Flag'. The young children were supposed to be raised to become successors to the Communist cause, who are both politically red and technically proficient. The newly introduced medium of television in the late 1950s was immediately drawn into this common cause of inducting the young into socialist norms.

Children's programming started immediately after the beginning of television broadcasting in May 1958. In the early days it consisted mainly of news reportage on organised children's social activities, puppet shows, and more than anything else, cartoons made by the Shanghai Cartoon Studio. Transmission of children's programmes on a regular basis – once a week – started in September 1958. *The Little Club* was one of the earliest children's columns[2] shown on CCTV. *Painting on Glass* was another children's column, in which the presenter creatively drew out the stories he told on a piece of glass. *The Clarion of Young Pioneers*, a half-an-hour column which started on November 1, 1959, focused on the social activities of Young Pioneers, the organization for school children. These columns enjoyed great popularity with the child audience of the time because of their vivid content and original form. But in fact the child audience in the early days of television broadcasting consisted only of a very small handful of privileged children with direct access to television sets.

A year later, children's programming began to be classified into two different age groups, with 30 min a week targeted at school children and 20 min a week at

[1] All unattributed materials are taken from *Contemporary Chinese Broadcasting*, Volume 2, Chapter 6 'Children's Programming'.

[2] The concept of 'column' is borrowed from newspaper editing, used in television broadcasting to refer to programmes under the same general heading and related to one another by format, theme, and time schedule.

pre-school children. In the same year, some provincial television stations started their own transmission of children's programmes, usually on an irregular basis. 1961 and the years immediately following saw a major growth in the amount and variety of children's programmes. Fairy tales, *kuaibanr* (rhythmic talk with the company of a pair of clicking bamboo pads), and children's television-dramas were added to the already established genres. More columns were made and broadcast. *Spring Festival Riddle Party* was a programme made for the special occasion of the lunar Chinese New Year, shown on the morning of that day from 1961 to 1965. Riddles were inserted between programmes and children were asked to come up with answers while watching. In this way, they could actively participate in the television programmes. In 1963, CCTV organised competitions among children on Chinese calligraphy and, which was met with much enthusiasm among its audience.

The guidelines for children's television formulated in 1960 by CCTV underlined the heavy stress on both moral and intellectual education.

> With moral education as the core, and through creating vivid images, [children's television should] educate the young to love the country and the people, to love work and science, and to take good care of public property, so to become successors to the revolutionary cause (Shou 1987: 104).

Regardless of the technological problems involved in 'creating vivid images' by television, this guideline is so general in its rhetoric that it can equally well be applied to all other children's media – newspapers, magazines, comic strips, books, films, and radio. Abiding by this guideline, children's programming was either morally uplifting or intellectually entertaining. Examples of the former included: *Revolutionary Heritage*, *Little Ma Ke Found a Wallet*, *Refuse to be a Little Golden Fish*, while instances of the latter included: *Cultural Treasure House*, *Good Friend – Books*, *Pay a Visit to Uncle Science*, and *The Palace of Science*.

Political and Ideological Induction: 1972–1976

Children's programming was terminated for a period of time during the Cultural Revolution from 1967 to 1972. Its resumption in 1972 marked the onset of the approach of sheer political and ideological induction. The following quotation is a standard post-Mao description and interpretation of the general situation of children's television in those years.

> During the 'Cultural Revolution', children's programming closely followed political movements. When adults were waging class struggles, children's programmes would show the landlady and her restoration records [of usurious loans, former land holdings, and so on, kept secretly by members of the overthrown classes dreaming of a comeback]. When adults were engaged in 'fighting selfishness and repudiating revisionism', children would criticize themselves for wasting food and forgetting that one third of the world population were still not liberated. When adults were asked to comment on Legalism and criticize Confucianism, children's programme accused Confucius of being a bad egg…. Whether theses programmes were understood or enjoyed by the child audience was never a question (Shou 1988: 412).

Programmes concerned with intellectual and academic education more or less disappeared from the small screen during those years. The former criterion for judging personal achievement – politically red and technically expert, succumbed to a new criterion – that is, the redder, the better. In his last 10 years, Mao's fantasy of a real equalitarian society becomes more urgent. He started the Cultural Revolution and allowed the 'weak' to rebel against the 'strong' to break up all hierarchies and authorities. As he got fed up with what he saw as a stale educational system, reproducing social distinctions, he went to the extreme to dismantle the old college admission system and let in 'workers, peasants and soldiers' to study in universities. Educational institutions were blamed for creating potential 'bourgeois' elites. Books were banned and schools were closed down. Intellectuals, together with cadres and middle-school students, were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants. Children's television programming in this period was inevitably drawn into these processes and has to be understood in terms of the political and ideological priorities assigned to the mass media during the Cultural Revolution, which saw them as completely and solely at the service of political and ideological struggles.

The following description and criticism of the television programming of the mid-1970s in general, is equally applicable to the specific case of children's programming during this period.

> Dull and dry shots accompanied by false and hollow slogans became the basic format of television programmes in those days…. Programmes containing knowledge and entertainment were all banned as 'feudal, bourgeois and revisionist'. Most of the excellent artistic works, modern and ancient, Chinese and foreign, were consigned to limbo. Programmes counted as artistic [then] included several songs, eight 'revolutionary model plays' and three films…. The television screen was overall withering and bleak (Zhuang 1987: 13–14).

This 'bleak' situation in television broadcasting, like the 'bleak' situation in other fields – economy, polity and education – was invariably and conveniently imputed by the post-Mao regime to the adverse influence of the two counter-revolutionary cliques – the Lin Biao Clique and the 'Gang of Four'. They became the standard scapegoats for whatever wrongs and failures the country went through in the 1960s and 1970s. These wrongs and failures in turn became a perfect *raison d'etre* for the market reformers after Mao.

Restoration and Expansion: 1977 Mid 1980s

In the years immediately after Mao, China went through a period of what was called 'cultural restoration'. A goal of 'four modernisations' of agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology, was set for the nation to strive for. Many of the values and practices discarded during the Cultural Revolution as vestiges of 'feudalist poison' and 'bourgeois trash' were systematically revived. Economic development replaced political struggle as the central task for the Party and the

people. The educational system of the 1950s and early 1960s, scrapped by Mao and the radical 'left', was rehabilitated and the previous emphasis on the criterion of 'both red and expert' replaced 'the redder the better'. Indeed, for some time, the criterion in fact became 'being expert equals being red'. Books, including many children's books, which got banned or ignored during the Cultural Revolution, were republished and reprinted. It was within this general context of a 'cultural restoration' that the pre-Cultural-Revolution values and practices concerning children's television were revitalized after 1977, coinciding with the expansion of television broadcasting itself. The great majority of ordinary Chinese people for the first time in life started to have real access to television.

Programmes disseminating scientific and humanistic knowledge, such as *The Glass is Singing* and *Solar and Lunar Eclipse*, reappeared on children's television screen after years of absence. In the spring of 1978, CCTV organised a nation-wide painting competition among children, and meanwhile showed a series of programmes teaching children how to paint. In the same year, a new column *The Treasure House of Literature*, went on the air, intended to introduce children to classical Chinese and foreign literature. A school teacher at the time in Beijing wrote to CCTV in the specific language of the time, commending the programme:

> This programme educates and enlightens children and exerts an imperceptible influence on their understanding of life and society. It helps them at an early age to distinguish the true from the false, the good from the evil, and the beautiful from the ugly. *The Treasure House of Literature* can be called children's good teacher and friend (quoted in Shou 1987: 107).

A conference concerning work with children and adolescents, organised by the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee in March 1981, appealed to all Party and society members to care for children's healthy growth. Soon after, Deng Xiaoping wrote his famous words of encouragement for Jingshan School in the heartland of Beijing – 'education has to face modernisation, face the world, and face the future'. Deng's calligraphy for Jingshan School, together with the appeal issued by the CCP Central Committee, were widely seen as marking out a new direction for the future development of children's television programming. The original guidelines for children's television programming set down in the 1960s were updated to take account of the new social and political goals of the 1980s:

> In order to train qualified personnel for the four modernisations, children's television programming should be multi-functional to fulfill the task of communist moral education, to disseminate scientific knowledge, and to provide artistic entertainment. Children's programming must be vivid and lively in order to achieve education through entertainment (quoted in Shou 1987: 107–108).

The years between 1978 and mid 1980s saw a rapid expansion of children's television in terms of both broadcasting time and programme variety. By the end of 1984, the two channels of CCTV transmitted more than ten slots of children's programmes (about 330 min all together) per week. During summer and winter vacations, three more slots were added to the usual amount. Children's programming by local provincial stations has also been expanding since 1978. One third of

CCTV's children's programmes are provided by provincial stations. Meanwhile, in line with the open-door policy, CCTV began to import children's programmes from Japan, the United States, West Germany, Czechoslovakia and other European countries. Importation in these early days often took the form of cultural rather than commercial exchanges. This situation changed in the course of time, until the mid 1980s when the orientation towards commercialised entertainment became more and more obvious.

The New Tendency Towards Commercial Entertainment

Under the new liberal economic policies adopted after Mao, mass media in China have been going through a process of commercialization. This process started with newspapers and magazines, followed immediately by radio and television broadcasting.[3] The core commercial practice carried out by the mass media in China at their initial stage of commercialization is the selling of advertising time or space. The surface justification for this is a financial one – the need to search for an alternative source of revenues to compensate for the shortage of government subsidies. The two channels of CCTV simultaneously started their advertising service in December 1979.

For some time, children's television lagged behind this general tendency towards commercialization, a fact which can be attributed to the longstanding official stress on its central role as a modern electronic educator. However, it was by no means entirely immune to influence from the increasingly commercialized economic environment within which it operated. The often indirect involvement of children's television in commercial practices can demonstrate this point. Such indirect involvement can be dated back to the transmission of the imported Japanese cartoon, *Tiebi Atongmu* (sound translation) on CCTV in the early 1980s. The main character from the cartoon – Atongmu, which enjoyed nation-wide popularity with children, was franchised to promote commercial products, especially Japanese-made electronic household appliances. Ever since then, other well-known cartoon figures, including the irresistible figures of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck from the Disney Land, has been constantly exploited for commercial ends.

Indeed, one major breakthrough in the commercialization of children's television in China was accomplished by Mickey and Donald in 1986. But a few years before that, it was CBS, one of the major US commercial networks, which set the example of an innovative commercial deal with CCTV. CBS managed to enter the Chinese market in as early as 1983 by way of a bartering deal – offering free programmes in exchange for advertising time slots on the screen of China Central Television. CBS then sold the advertising time slots at its disposal to multinational advertisers at a rate as low as $5,000 for a 30-s commercial slot ($1.66 per 1,000 viewers as

[3] More detailed discussion of commercialization and advertising can be found in Chap. 6.

compared to $7.00 back in the United States). Disney and other foreign companies followed suit immediately.

In 1986, *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck* went on air on CCTV's Channel One with a nationwide audience as a result of a barter deal between Disney and CCTV. It is clear that although no 'spot' of advertising was shown on children's television at that time, the emerging behind-the-scenes practices were thoroughly commercial. These arrangements were undoubtedly facilitated by the great popularity of the Disney cartoons. Three years after the initial show – that is in April 1989, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were still claiming the highest rating of 17.77% among all children's programmes shown on CCTV, with the other programmes ranging from 4.57 to 9.84%.

If China Central Television, the only national television network is more obliged to abide by the official guideline of children's television which emphasizes its educational role, provincial stations tend to 'enjoy' greater freedom and flexibility. As the old Chinese saying goes – 'the-mountain is high and the emperor is far – implying that central control over provincial stations often is looser than that over CCTV. It is thus not surprising that children's hour on provincial television is often filled up by rerunning the imported cartoons popular with the child audience. Hence, the general tendency of commercialised entertainment in children's television can be more easily detected on provincial television than on CCTV.

The implicit rule which dictates that commercial promotions are prohibited on children's television was finally broken, or to be more precise, detoured, by the showing of *Transformers* cartoon series on several provincial television stations, initially including Beijing TV, Shanghai TV and Guangzhou TV. This series of long-form commercials disguised as normal television programmes was imported from the United States. A detailed discussion of this crucial step in the commercialization of children's television in China – that is the showing of *Transformers* cartoon series to promote the linked toy range – will be found in the last chapter. But first, we need to explore in more detail the still central relation between children's television and intellectual and moral education.

Chapter 5
Intellectual and Moral Education: Parental Control and Children's Viewing Activity

Parental control over viewing has long been a central focus in studies of the relation between children's television activities and their intellectual and moral development. Consequently, I have chosen to examine it in detail, in order to show that its dynamics cannot be fully understood apart from an analysis of the social and historical contexts in which parent-child relations are embedded. This is true generally, but it is particularly so in contemporary China where the established terms of these relations are in the process of being eroded and transformed rapidly under the impact of rapid and dramatic economic, social and cultural changes. The notion of 'control' is used in this study in preference to 'mediation', for several reasons. Firstly, 'control' is more sensitive to the asymmetric power relations between children and adults whereas 'mediation' implies a neutral or functional notion of parents acting as a filter or cushion between children and television. At the same time, 'control' should not be understood as referring only to forceful imposition of parental will upon children. It also encompasses a wide range of other means through which parents exert influence, including regulation, persuasion and the selective use of rewards and punishments. As we shall see, 'control' is a more appropriate term to describe the Chinese situation, given the traditional parental authoritarianism of familial relations in China as compared with the relatively more permissive modes of child-rearing practice in many parts of the modern West.

This chapter will start with a critical assessment of the treatment of parental control of children's television activity in previous available studies in the West, followed by my own empirical research on the dynamics of the Chinese situation in the late 1980s. However, one general observation that can be ventured in advance is that children's television viewing in China is subject to closer parental supervision than that in the West, for cultural, social and historical reasons which will be elaborated on in the final section of this chapter.

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Parental Control and Children's Media Activity: A Historical Sketch

Parental control over children's television viewing activity needs first to be located in its socio-historical context proper. Socially, it is only one aspect of the general disciplining and educating of children by adults in most modern societies. Historically, it is continuous with parental interventions in children's media activity dating back to the emergence of popular juvenile literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century in some European countries. In China, the perceived need to exercise more control over children's viewing has been prompted, firstly by the increased stress on children's school performance in the 1980s, and secondly by the tendency towards commercialization of the media in general and children's television in particular, and the consequent loosening of traditional forms of ideological and moral control. The former in turn, has been exacerbated by the one-child policy, which turns the lone child into not only the centre of familial love and care but also the sole bearer of high parental expectations. Before examining the Chinese case in more detail however, parental control will be conceptualized and the treatment of this topic in previous studies critically reviewed.

Parental Control and Children's Media Activity

The relationship between adults and children has been one of control and domination throughout the history of human civilizations, though the degree of stringency exercised and the nature of the strategies adopted, have varied in different cultures at different historical periods. Justifications for age domination start with the assumed physical and psychological differences between children and adults. The result is a continuous paradox in the adult's attempt to comprehend children's world,

> The child is familiar to us and yet strange, he inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another; he is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a different order of being (Jenks 1982: 9).

The very difference and strangeness of the child world poses a constant threat to the adult and constitutes part of its subsequent insecurity. To eliminate this threat and to restore its sense of security, the child world must be transformed according to the design of the adult world through institutionalized practice of rearing, educating and disciplining. Such practices have been theorized within sociology as an all-embracing process of 'socialization', and within psychology as a process of 'maturation'. Both these conceptualizations elide the fact that these processes involve the seemingly 'natural' control and domination of adults over children.

Age domination assumes a natural and necessary appearance because of its apparent biological basis compared with other forms of domination, such as class,

gender and race. If developments in biology and physiology have partly helped to undermine the physical justifications for the domination of men over women and the domination of one ethnic group over another, they have not done, or perhaps will never do, the same thing for the domination of children by adults. Physical differences between children and adults in size, weight and strength seem likely to function as basis for continuing domination and control for the foreseeable future. That is to say that real equality between children and adults is not a plausible, and in many cases not a desirable, social and political goal, despite the fact that mainstream value of equality as an abstract concept has become almost self-evident in most modern societies – either western or eastern.

As we argued earlier however, childhood cannot be considered merely as a biological phenomenon. On the contrary, it is first and foremost a mutable social and cultural category. The problematic and suppressive nature of the categorization of adolescence in Western societies is a good illustration of the social and political implications that may follow from the way the line between what can be recognized as adulthood and what cannot is drawn. The result is a contradiction between physical maturity and social confinement. For children, a distinction can be made between the control required by real physical and psychological needs, for protection from abuse and exploitation, for example, and what we might call 'surplus' control.

However, the key socialising agencies in most contemporary societies – families, schools, peer groups, and the mass media – are not always in step with one another in their efforts to transform children in the direction of adult approved conformity. If any one of these agencies fails to fulfill its responsibility, the others are expected to compensate and safeguard the process of transformation. The mass media, and more particularly the commercial media, together with peer groups, tend to be the weakest links in the chain of socializing agencies. Thus they are often seen to be in need of 'corrective' efforts initiated by other agencies. Control and supervision over children's media activity is usually exerted at two levels – society and family. The former is often realised through the regulation of the media industry by the concerned government or self-policing bodies, as illustrated by the introduction of age-related rating systems for cinema entry designed to control children's access to certain films, and the 9 o'clock evening watershed for scheduling adult programming in Britain. Such actions are designed to protect children from what these bodies consider to be harmful influences.

These forms of external social control have emerged alongside parental practices of supervision over children's media activity within the family, which can be dated back to the appearance of commercialized print media targeted at children. The confiscation of popular children's magazines by parents, as recorded by Wilson, provides an example:

> It was thought at the time these books were published that 'Penny Dreadfuls' were the origin of all youthful crimes and parents not only banned them, but, when discovered, burned them without mercy. Today youthful crimes are put down to the cinema (Wilson 1932; quoted in Haining 1975: 17).

The history of the development of commercial mass media, from print through film to radio and television broadcasting and now video, is also a history of parents, educators and other morally concerned groups, struggling against what they regarded as the corrupting influence of these media. The subsequent proliferation of research focused on the 'effects' of media messages on children's behaviour can also be seen as a response on the part of social scientists to the same basic concerns. Studies on the relationship between exposure to films, and later on to television programmes, and juvenile delinquency is perhaps the most suggestive instance of the belief in the disrupting influence of the mass media on the proper process of socialization. A UNESCO report of 1952, dealing mainly with print, film and radio, made the following prediction about the 'new' medium of television,

> That problems raised by television for children will arise there can be no doubt. Television shares with radio the power of entering the home every day; like films, its influence is all the greater since it is exercised at once on the eye and the ear. It therefore seems likely that the problems felt with ever greater urgency than has been the case with these other media of expression (Bauchard 1952: 117).

This prescient statement accurately anticipated the surge of popular and political concern with the negative influence of television and the subsequent proliferation of the research on the topic. Studies of parental control or lack of control over children's viewing were an important part of this overall initiative.

The Treatment of Parental Control in Previous Studies

The early 'classical' studies on children and television, prompted by 'public concern', were conducted to inform parents, educators and broadcasters on the issue of television's influence so as to help them control over the situation. The British study by Himmelweit and her colleagues for example, provided detailed suggestions to parents, recommending the formulation of 'useful rules to discourage indiscriminate viewing and to prevent television from becoming an interminable source of conflict' (Himmelweit et al. 1958: 48). Other suggestions included: attention should be paid to the optical conditions of viewing; parents should discuss with older children who watch adult plays, and find time to watch with younger children or encourage them to talk about the programmes afterwards; taking into consideration each child's personality and disposition, parents should try to avoid exposing children to frightening and disturbing programmes; children should not watch too many adult dramas for which they are not emotionally ready; direct control is needed to make sure that children develop a more balanced 'diet' of programmes; parents can set a good example of viewing for children to follow. Suggestions to parents complement, and are complemented by suggestions to other concerned groups – youth club leaders, teachers and television producers – to ensure that the negative effects of television are reduced to the minimum the positive effects are amplified to the maximum.

The American counterpart of the British study, conducted by Schramm and his colleagues, wrapped its suggestions in 'a few questions' addressed to parents

and provided ready-made answers, all of which were inevitably coloured by the ideological climate of the immediate postwar years in the United States. The first question deserves an original quotation,

> Are the parents who are fearful of television's influence on their children doing as much as they can to make their children feel secure, loved and 'belonging' (Schramm et al. 1961: 181)?

Parents were told that, whatever influence television and other media might have, they can always counteract it. Studies were said to have shown that no 'normal' child (in the sense of being without serious hereditary psychological problems) is likely to be much harmed by television if he/she enjoys warm and secure social relationships. Therefore, parents were advised to try their best to build a 'happy home relationship' as well as to help children to establish a 'happy peer group relationship'. They should do something together with their children – to read a story, to throw a ball, or to go on a picnic. If a child is found to be withdrawn or overaggressive, parents should seek 'professional counsel' – presumably from family therapists. In brief, parents were advised to watch for signs which were 'there to be seen long before a child becomes overtly maladjusted, or a television addict, or a delinquent'. The internal connections between these three conditions, as indicated by their juxtaposition, were taken for granted.

Schramm and his colleagues' second question addressed parental concern over the low intellectual content of television and offered some possible guidance on children's viewing choice. First of all, parents were required to reconcile themselves to the limitations of commercial television. The authors recognized that 'there is too little opportunity for reality experiences on commercial television', but went on to point out that, 'there is more opportunity than the average child takes advantage of'. Thus parents were urged to make the best out of the unsatisfactory objective situation. Parental influence was almost exaggerated to the extent of an almost determinism,

> If a parent views educational television, then the child is almost sure to do so…. This is a very potent kind of influence. We venture to say, also, that if parents use the Sunday press conferences and discussions, then the children are almost sure to do so when they come to be old enough (ibid: 182).

One possible implication of this statement is that if parents are well-behaved good citizens with the right kind of taste in media products, their children will surely grow up to emulate them. It is the fault of the parents, not of the commercial television, if it is misused by the child audience.

Schramm and his colleagues' last question concerned some plausible actions that parents may take to counteract the undesirable influence of television. Parents were encouraged to give up the notion of 'big television and small me' and to write to television institutions. To put it in the authors' own apologetic words,

> Our experience has been that the top men in television do not believe in a program policy built completely on size of audience but rather feel that they must serve special interests as well as common denominator interest, and they must, as a public service, give the public some programs it needs to view in order to be good citizen of a democracy (ibid: 183).

Commercial television institutions were thus assigned the impossible role of a provider of public service and portrayed as benevolent and responsible guardians of a good and democratic society. The weirdest and most astonishing piece of advice was that parents should voice their opinions to the advertisers who sponsored the programmes. It was suggested that it was a 'good tactic' to write a letter to an advertiser telling him 'intelligently and vigorously why his children's programme is or is not satisfactory'. 'Writing helps', parents were promised, and particularly 'if a person supports his letter with his buying, he has a one-two punch' (ibid). This is as if to advise that the sheep should ask nicely the wolf not to eat it!

These questions addressed to parents correspond to other questions addressed to broadcasters, schools and government, each of which is allotted its due share of responsibility for ensuring that the young toe the required social lines. In these particular passages a natural alliance between advertisers and administrative researchers can be detected – an alliance cemented by the overwhelming ideology of consumerism in the age of 'the end of ideology' (see Bell 1960). Here one can easily see the dominance of the supreme commercial value in the golden years of post-war American capitalism. One can here easily feel the despair of critical-minded intellectuals such as C. Wright Mills when he expressed his anger at abstracted empiricism as a research style with hidden ideological agenda pretending to be science (Mills 1970).

In addition to the above two 'classical' studies, behaviourist studies of parental or familial mediations of children's television viewing often start with a modified model of 'stimulus – intervening variable(s) – response', in which

> A particular stimulus is associated with a particular response, but the nature of the response is modified by some third feature of the process: a third variable, or set of variables, is said to 'intervene' in the process (Brown and Linné 1976: 187).

Studies of this kind tend to seek to provide empirical evidence to support arguments such as that the family acts as a filter to the child's experience of television. Furthermore, this filtering process actively affects the type of influence television has on the child (ibid: 184). Such arguments are in fact self-evident, given prevailing family structures and the current mode of socialization in many contemporary societies. It is trivial trying to demonstrate whether or not family functions as a mediator between children and television. It certainly does. So do schools and peer groups. The problem is why and how? These are the issues studies of this kind need to address. They further need to discriminate between practices within different cultures at the same historical epoch, within the same culture of different historical epochs, or within families of various socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Quantitative research in this area tend to suggest that although parents have the potential to influence their children's television viewing pattern and their interpretation and acceptance of the content of the programmes, they seldom execute this power of influence sufficiently (see Davis and Abelman 1983: 390–391). However, the rules which are addressed by these studies are usually the explicitly articulated ones elicited by questions such as: 'Even though they're not always enforced 100%, are there any rules or regulations in your home about when and what the children watch, or do you let them make their own decisions?' (Steiner 1963: 96). The 'results'

of this exercise showed that less than half of the parents questioned had definite regulations and that a third claimed to exercise no controls. From this it is concluded that there seemed to be a discrepancy between what parents said worried them and what they said they did about it.

Interpretative ethnographic studies on family viewing mark a step forward from these conventional quantitative studies, in that they do more justice to the indirect, subtle, and implicit influence exerted by parents on children's viewing activity. 'Rules' are reconceptualized here in a much broader sense, to encompass both explicitly articulated regulations and the implicit and habitual ones governing the 'game' of family viewing which are seen as the natural consequence of the daily interaction between family members. Methodologically, ethnography is sensitive to nuances in the process of rule formulation rather than being limited to the product of this process, as quantitative studies tend to be. Questions such as how television is used and abused, in the family, how families select television programmes (see Lull 1982), what forms parental mediations take (see Bryce and Leitcher 1983), and what sort of parental restrictions are put on children's television viewing (see Streicher and Bonney 1974), are all thoroughly explored by interpretative studies based on observations and informal unstructured interviews.

However, one characteristic shared by quantitative and qualitative studies of parental control is the way in which the empirical data that have been gathered are treated. In both traditions of work, 'facts' are discovered and then displayed: 'the most common form of control was in reference to rules about how late to watch, but even that form of control was neither widespread nor consistent' (Greenberg et al. 1972); 'about half of the parents interviewed forbade exposure to certain 'adult' or 'offensive' shows, set bedtime limits on viewing, the majority of parents did not participate in their children's TV viewing at all' (McLeod et al. 1972); 'there is very little parental guidance about TV viewing in any form' (Mohr 1972). Since these 'facts' are usually treated as valid in their own terms, they are often quoted (e.g. Davis and Abelman 1983) and compared with one another (e.g. Gunter and McAleer 1990) independently of the specific contexts of study that helped produce them. Consequently, the 'findings' of these researches are treated as self-contained. This gives rise to the ironic situation in which commentators can always take from the stock of seemingly neutral facts, those that support their particular arguments.

A critical approach to the question of parental control over children's television viewing activity needs to move beyond the fetish of facts and take account of the larger socio-historical and cultural formations in which situated family interactions are embedded. This is to say, children's appropriation of television messages, which is mediated by parental control, needs to be contextualized at two levels, firstly within the immediate milieu of the family, and secondly within the larger social formations. John B. Thompson's depth-hermeneutic approach to the reception of symbolic forms is one recent, and important, recognition of this requirement:

> Symbolic forms are received by individuals who are situated in specific social-historical contexts, and the social characters of these contexts mould the ways in which the forms are received, understood and valued by them…. In receiving and interpreting symbolic forms, individuals draw upon the resources, rules and schemata which are available to them (Thompson 1990: 153).

The study of the Chinese case that follows in this chapter and the next represents an attempt to move towards a critical mode of inquiry in the direction Thompson advocates. To this end, the topic of parental control over children's television viewing is no longer treated as an issue in itself, isolated from general social and historical contexts, but rather as the product of a culture in transition, characterised by the resistance to alien values on the one hand, and the reinforcement of the conventional values on the other hand. Both impetuses are evident and accomplished within the field of interaction around the television screen.

Parents were once children, and the values, norms and mores they were socialized into will affect, positively or negatively, both their general attitudes towards television, its form and content, and their stance towards their children's television activity. The social, cultural and personal dispositions of parents form one of the cornerstones upon which their control and supervision are based. This is the case in any society. What has complicated the situation in China is the way these dispositions have been shaped and reshaped by the constant social changes and dramatic cultural transitions over the past century. In the case of the particular generation of parents of the children of the 1980s, what they have experienced in their life-time – born in the early years of the People's Republic in the 1950s, growing up during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and early 1970s, and becoming established in the new social climate of individualism and consumerism of the 1980s – has been decisive in formation and transformation of their personal beliefs and disbeliefs, which will be reflected in their viewpoints and mediation with their children's television viewing activity.

Parental Control and Children's Viewing: The Chinese Case

Parents attempt to exert influence over children's television viewing is, as previously noted, 'universal' in the modern contemporary world, in which family life is increasingly penetrated by the broadcasting and other media. What distinguishes Chinese parents from those in many other countries, particularly those in the West, is the extent and degree of their control. And this is only one aspect of an overall pattern of strict parental control over their children's lives in a country with a strong Confucian tradition. However, this pattern went through some real significant changes with the adoption of the one-child policy at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. This policy suddenly put the single child at the centre of parental care and attention and subverted the traditional Confucian power relation between parents and their children.

Children's media activity in the People's Republic of China before the popularisation of television was confined to print media (newspapers, magazines, books, and comic strips), radio, and films. However, whatever form the media took, the content tended to be rather identical – positive intellectual, political and ideological education. Since the media as the mouthpiece of the Party were owned and run by the state and no commercial interest whatsoever was involved, there was little

need for parents to exert the same degree of control as the state within the family over media content. One possible rare exception was the so-called 'hand-written' copies – *shou chas ben*, novels circulated underground, which were either politically subversive or pornographic in nature.

This situation, whereby the state acted comprehensively *in loco parentis*, changed fundamentally with the popularization of television from the late 1970s onwards and especially with its increasing commercialisation in the late 1980s. In the next three sub-sections, key dimensions of parental control over children's television viewing activity – control over viewing time and control over viewing content – will be examined in detail. This second area can be further subdivided into strategies based on the promotion of educational programmes and attempts to prevent children from watching 'unhealthy' programmes, despite the fact that there were not really many 'unhealthy' programmes on the small screen in China of the 1980s by any permissive Western standard.

Schoolwork and Viewing Time

The pervasiveness of parents' general control over children's viewing time in China of the late 1980s has been underlined by several studies of the time. A large-scale survey of 'Young People and Their orientation to the Mass Media' conducted in Beijing for example, came to the conclusion that there were more rules for television viewing than for any other form of media activity, and that the most prominent rules concerned how much and how late children can watch on school days (Greenberg et al. 1989). Furthermore, interventions in television viewing time were said to be used more often as a punishment than as a reward. An ethnographic study of family viewing in China concluded that formalized rules about children's television viewing had to do with the amount of viewing rather than the type of viewing (Lull and Sun 1988).

In my own survey of 176 parents, the great majority claimed to exert control over their children's viewing time, without significant differences between distinctive social groups defined by occupations. The results are shown in Table 5.1. The same tendency of concordance between parents of different social groups and occupations can be found in other aspects of parental control over children's viewing activity, such as control over viewing content. The consequence of this pervasive control over viewing time is indicated in the available figures for the actual amount of time that Chinese children spend watching television. Although children's viewing time is not adequately documented in China, a broad general picture can be compiled from the few studies that are available.

According to the same survey conducted by Greenberg and his colleagues in Beijing, children in their sixth grade of primary school (around 12 years old) spend only 1.3 hours per day on average watching television (Greenberg et al. 1989). The results of my own survey are broadly in line with this figure, as shown in Table 5.2. Despite these moderate estimations, there were still a considerable number of parents

Table 5.1 Parental control over viewing time

Occupation	Yes (%)	No (%)	No answer (%)
Manual laborers (82)*	86.6	12.2	1.2
Government employees (48)	87.5	12.5	0.0
Technical professionals (16)	87.5	6.3	6.3
Cultural professionals (20)	90.0	10.0	0.0
Others (9)	88.9	11.1	0.0

*In the bracket is the number of cases in each category
N = 176 parents
Missing case = 1

Table 5.2 Parents' estimation of children's viewing time

Viewing time	Number of parents	Percentage (%)
1 h or less	93	52
1–2 h	70	39.8
2 h or more	11	6.3

N = 176 parents
Missing cases = 2

in the survey – that is 38.1%, who thought that their children were watching too much television.

This concern is also shared by academic commentators. An earlier study conducted in Shanghai for example, came to the following conclusion:

> Watching about one hour per day is not much compared with Japanese, European and American children. Japanese children are more disciplined and watch much less than European and American children, but they still watch about 2.5 hours per day and 912 hours per year…. In Shanghai, if children watch one hour on week days [including Saturdays] and two hours on Sundays, they would watch 417 hours in a year – that is 36% of the time they spend attending classes at school (Wang 1986: 597).

Implied in this conclusion is the value judgment that watching less television is a sign of being a good disciplined child. The same judgment is evident in the following remark made by a mother during one of the open ended interviews I conducted:

> My daughter is very obedient. She does not watch television every day. She only watches a few children's programmes on Saturday afternoons and on Sundays. She is so self-disciplined that I never need to scold her for watching too much television as my neighbours sometimes have to do to their children.

The main purpose of parental control over viewing time is to minimise the degree to which children are distracted from study by television. Many parents believed that watching too much television would affect children's study adversely, both directly by wasting their time, and indirectly by affecting their eyesight, sleep, or health in general. One basic principle which underlies the life of school children in China is that schoolwork is placed above everything else. Television viewing belongs undoubtedly to the category of 'everything else'.

Lull's ethnographic study of family viewing in China observed that the most commonly expressed parental worry concerning television viewing, was that it might affect children's homework (Lull and Sun 1988: 205–219). If the television was switched on during children's studying hours, they feared that it may distract them from study. To avoid this, parents often had to give up watching their own favourite programmes. Several of the families interviewed by Lull said that they had changed their viewing habits in order to create a favourable environment for children to study. If the adults watched television after the children went to sleep, they would keep the volume as low as possible so as not to disturb them because they had to get up early next morning to go to school. Rules for television viewing were usually first articulated when the children reached school age, and a typical rule that evolved was that viewing was allowed only after homework was finished. These rules became stricter during children's examination time. At the same time, many parents believed that children should regulate their viewing time voluntarily.

My own questionnaire survey indicated that the great majority of the parents (88.1%), required children to finish their homework before watching any television programmes. Only a very small minority (10.8%) claimed that they were prepared to be flexible about the sequence of homework and television viewing, as long as children completed their homework afterwards. Some parents expressed their concern that children can become careless with their homework when they try to hurry up in order to catch their favourite shows.

In congruence with parents' requirements, nearly all the children who completed the questionnaire (95.5%) said that they would like to finish their homework first before watching any television. However, it would be unwise to accept the credibility of these claims at face value. The depth interviews suggested that many children are not as self-disciplined as they claim or wish to be. They have often devised their ways of bargaining over television viewing and homework. As a number of parents complained, one of the often employed strategies is for children to hurry through homework in order to squeeze some time for viewing. This enables them to answer any interrogation about their homework by parents with 'but I have finished my homework!' (i.e. 'what else would you ask of me?'). If the strategy of hurrying-up fails, they can always plead for permission to watch their favorite shows by promising to finish their homework immediately afterwards. In this way, the finished or to-be-finished homework is converted from the pretext for parental control into a justification for children to watch their favorite shows.

Children's submission to parental control can often be more apparent than real however. As one boy told me confidentially, he dealt with his parents as follows,

> They keep the TV set and video recorder in their bedroom and lock the door. They want me to study at home after school. But they won't come back from work until six in the evening. I can finish my homework quickly and go to my friend's home to play or watch television if I want to. I go home before they come back and they will see me studying. They are not going to find out. My friend will never tell on me.

Table 5.3 Promotion of educational programmes

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

N = 176 parents
Missing case = 1

He could hardly conceal his complacency. 'You have your policy, but I have my expediency', goes the popular Chinese saying, instructing people on how to detour control and surveillance from above. Other children, inspired by his story, started to talk about their own stories of subterranean resistance against parental control with a sense of triumph that they sometimes can hardly conceal. Though these stories can hardly be taken literally or at the face value, they do indicate that children are often more difficult to manipulate and control than adults think they are.

The Promotion of Educational Programme

Parental control over children's television viewing time is executed to eliminate the possible conflict between television and schoolwork. However, the relationship between television and intellectual education is a dialectical rather than a static one – being contradictory and identical at the same time. In this section, parents seeking to strengthen the identity between television viewing and children's schoolwork will be looked at in relation to the traditional Confucian values concerning education and social mobility, which was broken up during the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution by Mao's ideal of egalitarianism in education, but got restored and further instutionalised in the late 1970s.

James Lull's ethnographic study of family viewing in China noted that parents frequently encourage or simply require their children to watch certain programmes. This is particularly the case in upwardly mobile families, where children are instructed to watch what the parents believe will be intellectually beneficial. One family interviewed by Lull referred to educational programmes as 'necessary' for the child. Other families believe that supervised viewing was an important part of a good education (Lull and Sun 1988). The same aforementioned survey of 'Young People and Their orientation to Mass Media' conducted in Beijing at around the same time found that telling their children to watch certain shows was one of the most frequent ways in which parents intervened positively in their children's viewing behaviour (Greenberg et al. 1989: 59).

The results of my own survey, shown in Table 5.3, were broadly in line with these findings. Parents across all social groups reckoned that they encouraged their

children to watch certain programmes they regard as morally or intellectually educative. However, it is noticeable that this tendency is more marked among government employees, who have a strong interest in inculcating 'correct' activities, and among cultural professionals, who, as Bourdieu points out, tend to overvalue cultural credentials and competencies since they are the major public indicator of cultural capital that constitutes the basis of their claims to privilege. Unfortunately, the sudden curtailment of the fieldwork period did not allow me to explore these dynamics in more depth in interviews.

Many parents used rather vague phrases, such as 'programmes of educational significance', to describe what they advocated on television. Others said that they encouraged their children to watch Chinese children's programmes because of their educational significance. Even some of the imported cartoons, particularly those from Japan, which tend to propagate eastern values of hard work, discipline and obedience, were classified as 'educationally meaningful'. On the other hand, Micky Mouse and Donald Duck were thought to be harmlessly entertaining, if not positively educating, eventhough things might not be as simple as they assumed (see Dortman and Mattelart 1991). In addition to parental promotion of educational programmes within the family, school teachers and programme producers are constantly attempting to 'transform television into children's second classroom', as often encouraged by the officialdom.

Hence, television is openly promoted as an alternative or supplementary tool for educating the young, and parents are given, and often accept, the responsibility for ensuring that children watch morally improving material. As one mother told me during an interview, she insisted that her daughter watch the television series *Confucius* because it can teach her the spirit of diligence. School teachers also tend to cite examples drawn from television programmes in their teaching. One of the children interviewed retold a story told by her teacher in the classroom as follows:

> Our teacher told us this story from a television programme about two brothers, Xilong, and Xifeng. The fortune teller says that Xilong will become a government official but Xifeng will not. So their mother thinks Xilong does not need to study hard. But Xifeng studies very hard. Finally, Xifeng becomes an official instead of Xilong. Our teacher told us to follow Xifeng's example, not Xilong's.

This instance is typical of the way children are inculcated with the positive values concerning education and social mobility in the Confucian tradition. Children are constantly instructed by parents, and teachers to study hard so that they can grow up into dragons – a traditional symbol of power and success. In addition, television, radio, and all sorts of publications are often used by parents as a means to improve their children's schoolwork. For some children, it is compulsory to attend the after-school lessons taught on television, such as *Children's English* and *Chinese Calligraphy*. Tiantian, a first year primary school pupil, lives with her grandparents, who are both professors in one of the top universities in Beijing. Besides going to school and doing all the associated schoolwork and homework, she is obliged to follow the English language course for children on television. The following time-table is stuck on the wall beside her bed.

6: 30	Get up
7: 00	Have breakfast and prepare the schoolbag
7: 35	Go to school
11: 30	Come home and do some outdoor activity
12: 00	Eat lunch
12: 30	Help clean the floor
13: 00	Study English, read or paint
13: 30	Go to school
17: 00	Come back and do homework
18: 00	Have supper
19: 00	Play electronic synthesizer
20: 00	Have some free time
20: 30	Wash and prepare to go to bed
20: 50	Go to bed

Although no legitimate time-slot is allocated to television, she watches a number of carefully selected programmes including *English for Children*, *Children Reading* (*Chinese Characters*), news, and some children's shows. Her grandmother encourages her to watch only 'meaningful programmes'. 'Early child education should not be neglected', she said seriously, 'since she is left with me, I have to be responsible for her.' She also voiced the opinion that the television station should provide more educational programmes which directly assist children's schoolwork in the after-school hours.

I spent the evening in their flat observing the situation. The discipline and self-motivation of this 7-year-old girl was striking. After supper, she went to finish her homework and got it signed by grandmother (which is compulsory in most schools to show that she did it by herself). Then she started playing the electronic synthesizer (she was attending a spare-time musical school, which at that time was one of the most fashionable things children could be required to do). After a brief interval, she switched on the television set to watch *English for Children*, with a textbook in hand. I thought that was her last obligation, which turned out to be wrong. Immediately after *English for Children*, there was the programme *Children Reading* (*Chinese Characters*), which she again followed. By the time she had finished, it was nearly 8 o'clock. Her entire evening had been taken up with parentally approved activities designed to advance her education, although the extra-lessons given by television were missing from her neatly designed time-table.

The Prohibition of 'Unhealthy Content'

The third aspect of parental control does not directly relate to children's schoolwork, although parents sometimes still use this as an excuse to exert it. This other dimension of control can be seen as a reaction on the part of parents to the 'Westernization' of the media, television in particular, and to the accompanying process of media commercialization. This new trend is often associated with the rise

of 'tabloid' newspapers (*xiao bao*), 'semi-underground' video halls, and commercial films containing sex innuendo, though nudity is still officially forbidden. These parents, who were born in the 1950s and grew up in the 1960s and 1970s – a time when the vocabulary of sex and passion were literally deleted from the media, not only had to readjust themselves psychologically to the more liberal and 'permissive' cultural climate of the 1980s, but also had to face the challenge of bringing up their children in a very different social environment.

Lull's ethnographic study of family viewing in China came to the conclusion that very few parents thought that there were any programmes that should not be viewed by children, a finding which is said to be best explained 'by the type of programming that exists on the Chinese television network and stations' (Lull and Sun 1988: 220). Lull further argues that, generally speaking, programmes are not thought to be a bad influence because of their content, and that with the exception of concern about the adverse impact of *kungfu* shows on boys, very few families worry about the effects of exposure to certain kinds of content on their children. This conclusion is misleading. It assumes that reaction to television programmes can be read off from the programmes themselves as understood and evaluated by researchers from a very different culture, in Lull's case, the United States, or California in particular. His misunderstanding of the situation is due to the fact that he lacks the cultural resources required to arrive at an interpretation which is true to the audience's own experiences and beliefs. Ignorance of the substantial cultural difference in definitions of what is unsuitable for children, leads him to produce a typical Western misinterpretation of a Chinese phenomenon. Another possible reason for this misinterpretation is methodological. It seems likely that he simply failed to dig deeply enough into people's lives and to make them talk openly about the long-standing taboos surrounding sexuality.

These concerns are partly articulated in a contemporary Chinese study conducted in Shanghai on the influence of radio and television broadcasting on children. This study made the point that television inevitably revealed to children both the adult world, and increasingly, the world of Western life styles, which they might choose to imitate 'prematurely' (Wang 1986). It was therefore suggested that television stations should be very careful about showing certain programmes, such as love stories. The author reasoned:

> Children around television and radio sets today are the masters of the country tomorrow. Whether broadcasting can be their 'good friend' not only concerns their physical and spiritual health but also concerns the future of the country…. If the content of television programming is not strictly controlled, children will be adversely influenced immediately or gradually in many aspects. It is a glorious duty of Shanghai TV to provide children with 'nutritious' spiritual food…. It is impossible to entirely stop children from watching adult programmes. What psychological antipathy tells us is that the more children are prohibited from watching certain programmes, the more they want to watch them…. Thus the best way is to improve programme reviews and criticisms, which will lead children to a better understanding of certain content in adult programmes (Wang 1986: 599).

Although this more 'advanced' strategy of explanatory mediation is often recommended, in reality many parents resort to the more basic strategy of prohibition to

Table 5.4 Prohibition of unhealthy programmes

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

N = 176 parents
Missing case = 1

control children's access to any content related to love between men and women. The following remark made by a father during the interview I conducted is typical of the prevailing attitude parents hold towards children's knowledge of relationships.

> When my son asks questions about those things, I simply tell him that it's none of his business and stop him from asking more. There is no better way out. If you explain to him, he will certainly want to know more. You can never really make it clear to him. If you do, he will be corrupted as a result.

This remark was further confirmed by my own survey, which showed that the great majority of the parents claimed that they prohibited their children from watching certain television programmes. The pattern of this kind of control is shown in Table 5.4.

Once again, a general convergence of parental attitudes towards undesirable content can be detected, with the noticeable exception of technical professionals. This can be partly explained by the elite educational background of this social group, which is a consequence of the overemphasis on science and technology as part of the general developmental policy of the 1980s. Hence the best brains tend to be attracted to professions of science and technology due to the high prestige attached to them by both official policy and the public imagination. This tendency can be best illustrated in the once popular saying that 'as long as one is good at mathematics, physics and chemistry, one can travel around the world without fear'. The basis of science and technology is reduced to these three disciplines in popular imagination, and in curriculum design for compulsory education nation-wide. As higher education tends to open up people's perspectives on social values, the highly educated tend to be more 'liberal-minded' and 'tolerant' to different opinions and ways of life. Indeed, they are also better equipped to deal with them. The exceptionally tolerant attitude of this particular social group is therefore understandable. In contrast, cultural professionals, which in this case consist of both college and school teachers, have a lower average educational background.

When asked to specify what sorts of material they prohibited, more than half (62.5%) mentioned love stories, using phrases such as 'unhealthy programmes', 'yellow (obscene) shots', 'programmes unsuitable for children', 'programmes for adults', 'films imported from the West', 'things between men and women', 'kissing', 'hugging', and 'bed scenes'. In sharp contrast, far fewer parents (11.4%) claimed to prohibit their children from watching programmes containing too much violence.

The depth interviews conducted after the structured survey helped to clarify the nature of parents' and teachers' concerns. One primary school teacher argued strongly that children should not be allowed to watch whatever they want on television, and singled out programmes for adults. According to her,

> Such programmes are not just unsuitable but harmful. They will evoke children to ask embarrassing questions and affect their study. But it's almost impossible to entirely prevent children from watching them. Even if you smash the television, they can always go to the neighbours to watch.

Another teacher expressed her concern about love scenes on television in relation to the age of the child. According to her, 'the rope of control' can be loosened a bit for younger children because love stories do not make any sense to them. She told a story about her 4-year-old son:

> My son is still very young, four years old. But he already knows too much for his age. Once he saw a couple kissing on television. Then he put his arms around me and said, 'mummy, let me kiss you too'. I thank heaven he did not quite understand what all this is about. What did we know about these things when we were at this age? Nothing!

The majority of these Chinese parents, who were born in the 1950s, still abide by the traditional convention that men and women should not be seen too close together. Audio-visual media are often blamed for undermining this still cherished value. One father for example, was very proud of his own boyhood, which he remembered dearly as the old 'age of innocence' contrasted with the new 'time of corruption':

> In those days when we were at school, it never occurred that girls and boys spoke to each other. We were all busy with studying. But now, children are learning too much from films and television while they should listen to parents and teachers. One day they were showing a couple in bed on television. My son asked, 'what are they doing?' I said, 'I don't know.' He didn't give up and turned to his mum. She told him that it was obscene. What else can we do? These things are shown on television and we are put in an embarrassing situation with the child.

The same argument was contained in a 'joke' told by a retired grandfather who used to work for the local government:

> I have a neighbour, Nanny Li. She has a little grandson, who started school this autumn. But these days he keeps asking his nanny for a wife. Isn't this funny? Some time ago, Nanny Li saw his grandson together with another two boys dragging a little girl. They tried to get hold of her to peck (*qin*), or kiss (*jiewen*), to put it more formally. The little girl didn't like it and resisted. But that did not matter. They pushed her down on the floor and forced a kiss on her. Nanny Li was passing by. She went up and scolded the boys. But her grandson protested, 'people are kissing on television, why don't you let me kiss?' She was stuck but managed to come out with the excuse that one can only kiss his wife. 'You can't kiss her because she is not your wife', she argued. From then on, he kept asking for a wife to kiss (laughters). What a silly kid! But the kid is not to be blamed. It is television programmes and the polluted social climate that is responsible for this.

He went on to attack the prize-winning film, *Red Sorghum*, complaining that immoral love scenes were presented as something acceptable or even aesthetic. He then recited a poem that he had written to condemn the film, which I shall forbear from translating.

The 'other country' of the 'good old days' was frequently evoked in the interviews I conducted, as with this mother of two children, who was nostalgic about Chairman Mao's time:

> At least there wasn't so much yellow (obscene) stuff then in films, television programmes, books and magazines. If 'the old man' (*lao renjia* referring to Chairman Mao) were still alive, he would not have tolerated these things. I can't stop television network from showing these programmes, but I can make sure that my kids do not watch them.

Only one mother, out of those interviewed, could be said not to be hostile to children watching love scenes on television. She said,

> I explain to my daughter that love between men and women is a good thing, but only for adults, and that she will understand it when she grows up. But I do not encourage her to watch love stories because it's a waste of time. She seems to be able to understand me quite well.

It turned out in later interviews with school children that her daughter stood out in her group for her uniquely 'profound' understanding of love and relationships between men and women.

The means by which control over content is executed can vary from parent to parent. The most mentioned ones included persuasion, regulation, and coercion. One strategy which was specified both in the quesionnaires and during the interviews was to switch off the set. The father who took pride in his innocent boyhood told me:

> As long as *Zuoye Xingchen* (*The Stars of Last Night*) is on, I turn off the set. What do kids know about adult family life? They need not know it. I don't want him to be corrupted by things he does not yet understand.

However, it seems that few parents wait until this point. Rather rules, explicit or implicit, are instituted to prevent children from watching what they should not watch. Only when these rules failed would they switch off the set as a last resort.

Given such strict control, what do Chinese children in the 1980s actually know about sexuality? And what do they think of it? There is literally no research done on children and sexuality, and Freud and his work on infant and child sexuality were still controversial within Chinese academia in the 1980s. The topic of sex and sexuality itself is a taboo and children are kept away from any knowledge concerning sexuality. In answer to the questions that often beset children, such as 'where do I come from?' and 'how was I born', Chinese mothers invent all sorts of stories. The most common include: 'You jumped out of my armpit or a rock'; 'I picked you up from a garbage room/the mountain/a basket outside the door'; 'The doctor opened my stomach to get you out'. In most cities in 1980s, there was no museum of natural history where parents can take their children to get a glimpse of the process of the formation of a fetus and the birth of a child. Accordingly, ignorance about sex is associated with innocence and knowledge with corruption in the 1980s.

In order to get some idea about children's understanding of sexuality, I questioned 32 year primary school children (aged from 8 to 9) in Jiaozuo City, Henan Province. The confoundedness and embarrassment of the teacher in charge about the topic I chose was too obvious to be overlooked. I tried to be 'thick-skinned' and pushed my way through. This was the only way by which I could squeeze some

limited and indirect information about this 'untouchable' area. I questioned children on their knowledge on '*aiqing*' – love between a man and a woman which in Chinese literally means 'love and feeling'. To the question 'Do you have any idea about *aiqing*?' 21 children answered 'I don't' or 'I have no idea'. Most of the answers were brief, fragmented, and sometimes self-contradictory, revealing the evident traces of confusion, uncertainty and self-repression. The following answers are selected as illustration, with the first two being the most common.

I don't know. It is a nice thing.
I don't know. It is awful.
Aiqing is to like somebody (boy).
It is to like him (girl).
Aiqing is a man loves a woman. And then they are married. They love each other (boy).
Aiqing is to hug and kiss very often. It is a bad thing to do (girl).
It is that, in order to be loved by a woman, man is filled with love. It can be nice (girl).
It is to date a man (girl).
To date a man is a shameful thing (girl).
It is very bad. And (if you do it), the police will take you away (boy).

The 'finding' that more than half of these children claimed to have no idea about *Aiqing*, love and feeling in Chinese, cannot be taken at the face value, however. It is highly possible that they chose not to talk about something they considered embarrassing or shameful. This was partly confirmed by a later interview with a smaller group. During the interview, we mentioned love stories when we were talking about some songs they had learned from television. One boy (Li) and one girl (Shi), who claimed to have no idea in the open identified questionnaire, turned out to have definite opinions. The following extract from the interview further illustrates the confused and repressed understanding by children of love between a man and a woman.

Duan: (girl)	I can sing '*Yi Jian Mei*'.
Li: (boy)	I can sing '*Xingxing Zhi Wo Xin*' ('The Stars Know My Heart').
Zhao/Shi: (girls)	I can too. (Then they all started to sing the song: 'last night, tears of heart-breaking oozed out of my heart.…' Surprisingly, all of them could sing with some precision in verse and tone.)
Int:	What is this song?
Li:	A love song. (He is one of those who claimed to have no idea what *aiqing* is.)
Shi:	It's about revealing the secrets in your heart.
Int:	Is it a song from Zuoye Xingchen (a television series)?
All:	No.
Int:	Do you like Zuoye Xingchen? (Some say 'yes', some say 'no'.)
Int:	(to Li) Why don't you like it?
Li:	It's awful.
Zhao:	He (referring to Li) hates love stories.
Int:	Why is that?

(continued)

(continued)

Li:	It's boring.
Shi:	It's not just boring. It's disgusting. (She claimed to like the show just a while ago.)
Int:	Why disgusting?
Shi:	I think so, because… (Zhao cut in.)
Zhao:	I know why, because there is a man kissing a woman (in the show). (Everybody laughed, looking at each other, feeling a bit embarrassed.)
Yaya:	(My five-year-old nephew who insisted on staying there during the interview) Yuck! Kiss before married. (He covered his face with both hands to show how shamed he felt about all this.)
Shi:	But if you are in love, you can kiss. (Everybody laughed at this comment.)
Zhao:	A man holding a woman, so tightly. It is a thing for adults.
Shi:	Teacher (referring to me as the interviewer), you just wait to drink Zhao Wei's *xi jiu* (wine and spirit for celebration of a marriage). (She tried to tease Zhao).
Duan:	And Li Yan's *xi jiu* too. They are nine years old we are only eight (and so they will get married before us).
Shi:	Well, why don't we marry Zhao Wei to Li Yan. (Somehow her remark didn't attract much attention. The conversation drifted to advertisements on television.)

The sense of embarrassment, shame, and filth associated with aiqing (love relationship between a man and a woman) implied or explicitly expressed in children's remarks is noticeable. For them, sexual love is shameful, disgusting and 'yucky'. But where did they get these ideas? It is unlikely that they get them from the officially approved media products (in contrast with the commercial semi-underground video halls), since the official media of the 1980s tend to portray love between men and women as positive – romantic, sublimated, and idealistic. The pejorative connotations ascribed in male–female relationships or in sexual love are rooted at the deepest level of cultural sedimentation, which remains resistant to changes, initiated either by officials or radicals. The nearly total deletion of sexual love and its representation from the public sphere during the 10 years of Cultural Revolution is an extreme expression of this deep-rooted cultural trait in the name of a most radical 'revolution'. This traditional and still potent view of sexual relations as a taboo associated with shame and corruption will be examined in detail in the critical analysis of the Chinese case which follows.

For a Critical Analysis of the Chinese Case

Most of the previous studies on children and television tend to treat, albeit often implicitly, children as a young but autonomous audience. Accordingly, parental 'mediation', though regarded important and necessary by educators and moralists, is treated as something secondary. Behaviorist studies on children and television tend to reduce the issue to one of the many intervening variables between the stimulus – audio-visual

messages on television, and children's responses. Interpretive audience studies, though they take great pains to document viewing activity as it takes place in natural settings, often provide only a superficial analysis of the social relationships within which children's viewing activity and parents' control over that activity are embedded.

It is against the prevailing tendency to overestimate the 'autonomy' of the child audience that parental control is placed at the centre of analysis in this study. The discussion of Chinese parents and their regulation of children's viewing activity in the previous section can be seen as a particular instance of more general practices of parental control, the nature of which is shaped by broader cultural, social and historical contexts. One noticeable feature revealed by this study of Chinese parents and their control over children's viewing activity is the general conformity between different social groups (as shown in the previous tables), although the ways by which control is exerted may vary from one social group to another. This general conformity has to be accounted above all in terms of the specific class structure in socialist China, which is marked by the ideal of equalitarianism.

The critical analysis offered here will focus on three relevant aspects of the socio-historical contexts in which children's viewing and parents' regulation of their viewing are embedded: (1) the legacy of the traditional norm of filial piety and the role it continues to play in legitimating parental power within the family; (2) the restoration of a positive evaluation of the relationship between education and upward social mobility in contemporary China; (3) and the long-standing taboo on the discussion of sexuality, which is now in the process of being eroded by the new 'permissiveness' as indicated by the rapid increase in the use of tabloid publications and semi-underground video halls driven by commercial interests.

Filial Piety and the Legitimation of Parental Power

The traditional patriarchal family-clan system and the vestiges it has left on modern Chinese society still constitute a solid basis for parental power in China. Confucian definitions of the distinctive roles played by parents and children have also exerted a long-standing impact on contemporary family ethics. As a consequence, parental control is both legitimated and institutionalized by the widely advocated and internalized social norm of filial piety. In pre-republican imperial China, filial piety was a legal as well as a moral obligation. Lack of piety was considered one of the ten major crimes one could commit and familial law sanctioned capital punishment on those who failed, or were thought to have failed, to fulfill their responsibility towards their parents. Most of the key Chinese thinkers and philosophers, from the time of Confucius (551–479 BC) to early this century, have in one way or the other expounded on the theme of filial piety. Mencius (372–289 BC), the other major representative Confucian thinker for example, placed filial piety at the centre of all morality, and identified five manifestations of its absence: (1) Children are lazy and unable to take care of their parents. (2) Children indulge in gambling and drinking and neglect their parents. (3) Children are keen on money and other material satisfactions, and are closer to their wives than to their parents. (4) Children look on immoral things and listen to immoral

words and involve their parents in trouble. (5) Children are militant and aggressive and endanger their parents. These specifications of lack of piety serve as practical guides on how children should behave with regard to their parents. *Xiao Jing*[1] – *The Scripture on Filial Piety* – followed Mencius in advancing filial piety as the core moral ethical injunction in Chinese society. It advocated that a filial country should be ruled by the practice of piety, which was regarded as the fountain of all human virtues. *Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety*, compiled in the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), was designed to inculcate people with this dutiful virtue. One of these stories told of a son, who buried his own child in order to save food for his parents. The 'reason' given was that he could have other children in the future but no more parents. The Confucian doctrine, 'if a father tells his son to die, the son has no reason not to', served as the perfect moral justification for the prior claims of parents.

At the same time, abuses of Confucian orthodoxy by advantaged social groups led to frequent rebellions from the young. The first major assault on Confucian tradition occurred during the May Fourth Movement and the contemporary New Culture Movement soon after China turned republican. Confucianism, together with its insistence of children's unconditional obedience to parents, was seriously challenged by the new ideas of equality, freedom, and individuality, and by the support for Mister Democracy (*de xiansheng*) and Mister Science (*sai xiansheng*), introduced and spread by the radical intellectuals influenced by modern Western ideologies. The second major assault on Confucianism came, of course, with the ascendency of the Communist Party. Confucianism was singled out as the most formidable cultural stumbling block to China's social progress and modernisation, as the new ideology – the Chinese version of Marxism – was institutionalized in its place. Under Communist rule, one of the major tasks for academics in the social sciences and humanities was to constantly criticize Confucianism as a deep-rooted cultural disease. However, one paradox of all revolutionary changes is that they tend to be dramatic but ephemeral. This has also been the case in China, where radical movements have repeatedly failed to penetrate to the deeper layers of cultural sedimentation in Chinese society. It was entirely in keeping with this history that one of the most noticeable tendencies after the death of Mao should be the restoration of many of the traditional values displaced by the revolutionary activity of previous decades. As a consequence, the spirit of radical revolution has been replaced by enthusiasm for moderate reformation.

Among the many traditional values which have been restored in the new sociopolitical climate, two are particularly relevant to a macro interpretation of parental control over children's viewing in China: the traditional norm of filial piety, and the Confucian doctrine that 'a good scholar will make an official'. The former helps to explain the pervasiveness of parental power in relation to children's television viewing. The latter helps to account for the supreme place occupied by academic performance in children's lives, and for the strength of parental support for educational programmes on television.

[1] See X.Z. He (1988) for more detailed account and critique of *Xiao Jin* and *Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety*.

Education and Upward Social Mobility

The educative aims of parental control over children's television viewing can also be explained as an expression of the prevailing belief about the relationship between education and social mobility in Chinese society. Such a relationship has its roots, once again, in the Confucian tradition. The imperial examination system evolved in the Ming and Qing Dynasty was the supreme illustration of how power could be procured through education. Myths about individuals from humble background working hard to pass the imperial examinations to become high-ranking government officials were continually articulated in popular idioms and stories. The Confucian doctrine '*lao xin zhe zhi ren, lao li zhe zhi yu ren*' – 'those working with their brain rule whereas those working with their brawn are ruled', which was fiercely attacked by Mao's equalitarianism, regained its vitality in the new liberal and competitive social climate of the 1980s. Mao's radical education policy in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) abolished the conventional examination systems and selected candidates for higher education directly from ordinary working people workers, peasants and soldiers (*gong nong bing*), the designated leading class in socialist China, on the basis of their 'political' performance. Mao's radical policy lived a short life and got abolished in 1977. And once again it became possible for most people (in theory at least) to strive for social mobility through education. Entering university is the major route to upward mobility for young people in terms of job opportunities and social prestige in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, the number of students universities can accommodate is severely limited in contrast with the great number of people who wish to receive higher education. This results in a high degree of competitiveness between young people, with the chances of success for the great majority being extremely small. Furthermore, because Chinese universities are strictly hierarchical, it is widely believed that to get into a good university means one has to be extra 'smart' and work extra hard.

The one-child policy has further intensified the lofty evaluation of education in terms of the very high parental expectations carried by the lone child. This can be illustrated by the results of my own survey of parents in relation to their children's viewing activity. Most of these parents expect their children's to receive higher education, as shown in Table 5.5, regardless of the distinctive social groups they belong to. Two cases reported in the press perhaps can help further illustrate the kinds of popular images of excessive expectation that circulate in the public sphere.

Table 5.5 Expectation of children's higher education

Occupation	Yes (%)	No (%)	No answer (%)
Manual laborers (82)*	100.0	0.0	0.0
Government employees (48)	95.8	2.1	2.1
Technical professionals (16)	87.5	0.0	12.5
Cultural professionals (20)	95.0	0.0	5.0
Others (9)	100.0	0.0	0.0

* In the bracket is the number of cases in each category
N = 176 parents
Missing case = 1

A school boy died of corporal punishment by his mother because he failed to score 90 (out of 100) for two of his exams. The incident was investigated by the National Children's Coordination Committee. One report, based on a thorough survey of 36 primary school pupils, claimed that some parents had warned their children that they would be punished in the same way if they did not study hard and well (*The People's Daily*, Overseas Edition, June 2, 1989). Soon after the investigation, a school girl died after being brutally assaulted by her mother because she failed to finish her home work by 7: 30 in the evening as required (*Guangming Daily*, August 3, 1989). These are only two cases noticed and made public by official media because of their extreme nature. A recent survey conducted in a primary school in Beijing claimed that nearly half of the children questioned were punished for their failing to perform as well as their parents expected of them in exams (*The People's Daily*, overseas Edition, June 2, 1989).

Life for most school children is heavily geared to schoolwork, and academic performance has become the sole criterion by which their merits are judged. For them, holidays and vacations often mean even more work and less play. Although parents and teachers tend to support each other in pressing children to work hard, disagreement arises when one party carries things to extreme. A letter written to *The People's Daily* by several parents represents such a case. It complained that the amount of homework assigned to children keeps increasing. Sometimes they had to start immediately after school and could not finish until 11 at night. Children were so exhausted that they could not get up the next morning. In contrast, the primary school teachers that I interviewed revealed the other side of the story. They claimed that they had to assign their pupils substantial amounts of homework. Otherwise parents would blame them for being irresponsible. This apparent contradiction derives from a situation which is not quite within the control of either individual parents or teachers, and needs to be traced back to the transformation in the evaluation of education from 'knowledge is useless' during the Cultural Revolution to revised Confucian tradition that 'everything else is inferior to reading' from in the 1980s.

Official statistics claim that about 12% of all primary school students are short-sighted, a 'fact' which is widely attributed to them being overloaded with study. Prompted by this kind of evidence, the National Education Committee issued a formal regulation to alleviate the workload of primary school pupils in 1988. This has five provisions. (1) It is prohibited to add to the national standard curricula. (2) Homework should be limited to a certain amount, and first-year students should be exempt from any written homework. (3) The number of examinations should be strictly controlled. (4) Non-work time should be guaranteed between classes, after school, on holidays, and during vacations. (5) The number of academic competitions should be limited. However, the practical acceptance of these regulations was not to the committee's satisfaction and the regulation had to be reinforced 2 years later in 1990 (*The People's Daily*, February 21, 1990). By recognising these social conditions under which Chinese children's television activity takes place can one fully understand why their viewing pattern is so heavily directed towards educationally 'improving' programmes under the supervision of parents. Indeed, the role that parents play in the formation of general viewing pattern can hardly be overemphasized in the Chinese case.

Sexuality as a Long-Standing Taboo

The third aspect of parental control – the prohibition of love stories (*ai qing gu shi*) – has to be interpreted independently from the previous two aspects, in that it does not relate directly to children's school work. It has to be accounted for in terms of the long-standing institutionalized suppression of sexuality in traditional culture and of recent changes in this sphere. Depictions of sexuality, together with anything related to it, have been the subject of a long-standing prohibition. Popular sentiments that associate sexuality with shame, filth, and guilt have their root in the assumption that human beings are born amoral and that their innate desires endanger the harmony and peace of the soul and the society. This assumption underlies the following argument made by *Xunzi*, one of the key ancient Chinese philosophers.

> People are born with desires. When they do not have what they desire, they will try to get it. If they try too hard, competition occurs. Competition leads to chaos and chaos to exhaustion and poverty (*Xunzi*, quoted in He, 1988: 125–126).

Other major ancient Chinese philosophers have also commented on the destructive potential of human desires, including sexual desire, and suggested a conscious control over them. The Confucian creed '*na nv shou shou bu xin*' – that men and women should never be intimate, has long been taken as a guidance for relations between the opposite sexes. Daoism, a major alternative line of thought in addition to Confucianism and Buddhism, advocated 'no desire' as a sublimated state of mind in order to achieve the same outcome of suppression from within as Confucianism from the outside. Similarly, Chinese Buddhism, the only systematic religion imported from India, promotes the destruction of desires in order to enter the spiritual realm. The only permissible desire for both Daoism and Chinese Buddhism becomes, paradoxically the desire to eliminate all desires. Whether regarded as a source of social instability by Confucianism or as the root of individual frustration by Daoism and Buddhism, human desires have not attracted much sympathy within these three major Chinese cultural traditions. Sexual desire has been regarded in a particularly negative light as evidenced by the still popular saying that 'lust is the worst among all sins'.

All orthodoxies face resistance however, and undercurrents relating to sexuality have been recorded in paintings, fictions, poems and other literary genres. These representations have often been misunderstood by Western observers, who have taken them as typical rather than exceptional as part of centuries long tradition of Occidental imagination of the Orient. This can be clearly seen in a range of commentaries such as the remark made by a Frenchman that the Chinese regard sexuality as 'supreme joy; pleasure without remorse; and those who practise it are only seeking paradise on earth' (Beurdeley 1969: 3). This misrepresentation is rooted in the general search for examples and precedents that accompanied the new candour about sexuality in the West in the 1960s, and the formation of the more liberal attitudes that came to be known as the 'permissive' society. It was a classic manifestation of the romantic current within Orientalism, whereby Eastern practices are held up as more 'authentic' than those in the Christian West.

It is therefore particularly ironic that at the same time that the idea of the 'permissive' society was emerging in Europe and America, China was going through the Cultural Revolution, which took the opposite direction towards a kind of revolutionary asceticism. The result is that all the symbolic forms produced in those years – journalism, literature and the arts, were entirely free from emotional colour, let alone any sexual references. Heros and heroines in novels, films, and dramas, were either single or did not have their spouses with them for some reasons, or often for no reason at all. Physiology and biology, inseparable from sexes, were no longer taught at school. Sexuality became associated not only with shame, filth, and guilt, but also with 'bourgeois corruption'. It was in those years of 'extreme innocence' that the parents of the present generation of children received their school education and family teaching. This initial socialization was bound to leave its vestiges, positively or negatively, on their life philosophy as a whole. This inevitably shapes their interpretation of cultural products, which in turn has an impact on their stance towards their children's media activity. This legacy of sexual puritanism inherited from the Revolutionary period, now finds itself confronted with a more open system of representation. Not surprisingly, this collision poses moral dilemmas for the parents of the first generation of single children in China.

The commercialization of mass media in China, which got accelerated throughout the 1980s, resulted in a rapid spread of material that was officially regarded as 'pornographic'. In response, a nation-wide anti-obscenity movement was initiated by the government in 1988, which focused particularly on tabloid publications and the circulation of underground video tapes. A provisional regulation on how to identify 'pornography' was drafted in 1989. This defined 'pornography' as 'publications without any aesthetic and scientific values' which propagate obscene behaviour and arouse people's sexual desire to the extent that they get corrupted and degenerated' (*The People's Daily*, January 31, 1989). According to the regulation, any publication that has one of the following features can be legitimately designated as 'pornography': (1) any obscene description of sexual behaviour and psychology; (2) any open promotion of pornographic images; (3) any obscene description or teaching of sexual techniques; (4) detailed description of incest, rape, and other sexual crimes; (5) detailed description of child sexuality; (6) any obscene description of homosexuality and other perverted forms of sexuality, or detailed description of violence, mistreatment and insulting behaviours associated with sexual perversion; and finally (7) any other obscene description of sexuality which is beyond the tolerance of ordinary people. This last provision was intended to fill any possible gaps left by the first six.

By these standards, many mainstream Western media products would undoubtedly qualify as 'pornography'. Certainly, they would serve to reinforce the stereotype of Westerners as unscrupulous sexual athletes as closely related with their media images, which already enjoy very wide currency. The following remark made by an interviewee articulates this view very clearly:

> What is our television station showing the children nowadays? They could have broadcast fewer imported programmest, and more programmes of educational value. We Chinese are an ancient civilization and should behave civilized as well, not like the Westerners. The Westerners are not responsible in love affairs, it's their problem. But we should not advertise for them on our television and influence the young adversely.

In an attempt to adapt to the new situation of commercial media, China adopted its first rating scheme for cinema in 1989, which categorised certain films as 'unsuitable for children under 16'. Four types of films are designated as 'unsuitable', including those containing episodes of rape, theft, drug abuse, prostitution, and sexual behaviour. In addition, films which are classified as unsuitable for children under 16 are not to be shown on television. According to one of the leading figures in the Film Bureau, the rating scheme is intended to protect children's physical and spiritual health (*The People's Daily*, Overseas Edition, April 13, 1989). However, this scheme is at the same time open to abuse from the very commercial dynamics it seeks to curb. The first self-designated unsuitable-for-children film, *Widow Village* (*Guafu Cun*), for example, became something of a public 'joke' since tickets sold extremely well among adults precisely because it was presented as being unsuitable for children. Many people who went to see the film came away disappointed, complaining that there was nothing much to see. This was scarcely surprising since explicit portrayals of sexuality in film are entirely forbidden and implicit portrayals are strictly controlled. Films which break the rules will be banned, or cut carefully in the late 1980s.

A Final Remark: Beyond Broadcasting

This chapter has dealt with children's relations to broadcast television, taking parental attempts to control their offspring's viewing as a particular point of entry into the dynamics involved. Though necessary, under contemporary conditions, such a focus is no longer sufficient for a full explanation of children's activities around the small screen. Over the last decade, in many countries, including China, these activities have been extended in various ways beyond scheduled encounters with broadcast output. This is most obvious in the case of video cassette recorders and video games, but there are also a variety of other more subtle ways in which children's imaginative relations with the moving image have travelled outwards from broadcast material to other aspects of everyday life. One of the most interesting, and significant, of these trajectories is centred on the emerging links between television and the toy industry. The following chapter explores the dynamics of this connection, and its relation to emergent patterns of Chinese consumerism, through a case study of the craze for the toy range based on *The Transformers* cartoon series.

Chapter 6
The Craze for the Transformers: Children's Television and the Rise of Consumerism in China

As with children's television viewing generally, what the Chinese newspapers dubbed as 'the Transformers fad (*bianxing jingang re*)' cannot be explained simply in its own terms. Press criticism focused on the surface story – children's fascination with the expensive American-made toys and the promotional cartoon series plus the subsequent embarrassment and perplexity experienced by parents. However, this commentary tends to miss the most important point concerning a fad of this sort – its inevitability. This only becomes perceivable when examined against the background of the socioeconomic changes which have been taking place in China since late 1970s and early 1980s, and more particularly, the emergence of a consumerist culture nourished by the revival of advertising and other liberal policies adopted after Mao died. Western influence, encapsulated in the much admired 'American way of life' has penetrated through the economic spheres into the cultural and political spheres. Seen from a global perspective, the Transformers fad is a long-range consequence of American deregulatory policies in the field of children's television, and of the world-wide enthusiasm for privatisation initiatives more generally.

The New Ethic of Market and Consumption

Consumerism is rapidly displacing the then mainstream doctrine of 'plain living and hard work' (*jian ku fen dou*) and the traditional value of thrift (*jian pu*). The open-door policy adopted in the late 1970s marked a strategic change in nation-building from self-reliance to co-operation with the West. Deng's pragmatism finally won the hearts of the nation and replaced Mao's radical revolutionary idealism. This has finally led to the country rejoining the world capitalist system dominated by North America, Western Europe and Japan, after 30 years of isolation under Mao in search for national independence and dignity somehow at the sacrifice of individual liberty and personal material satisfaction. The core of the economic reforms since 1979 lies in their orientation towards a new market regulation and away from the old central control and planning, as evidenced by the encouragement of foreign investment, the

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establishment of personal or collective contract systems, and the privatization of certain enterprises to start with. Underlying these reformative practices is a faith in the 'redemptive' power of the market, which is believed to be able to overcome the economic stagnation caused by what was seen as an over-centralised state planning.

The economic reformation is accompanied by, or leads to, cultural transformations. One of the most noticeable of transformations is the rise of consumerism as embodied in the officially defined 'consumption craze (*xiao fei re*)' in the mid and late 1980s. In congruence with the contemporarily fashionable economic thesis that consumption stimulates production, people have started to believe that they are able to contribute to the country's economic construction not only by producing but also by purchasing. As Mao's dictum has it, to right the wrong, one has to go beyond the proper limits. China indeed started to experience a historical period of such an 'over-correction' in the decade of the 1980s.

The Revival of Advertising

Consumerism as a belief system and a life style is primarily disseminated and sustained through the mechanism of commercial advertising. This is the case in all consumerist cultures including the burgeoning one in China. The reintroduction of the once condemned capitalist practice of advertising into socialist China has its roots in deep-seated social and historical shift. The apparent 'economic stagnation' of the 1960s and 1970s from a hindsight of the 1980s was widely seen as the product of over-centralized planning coupled with endless 'political and ideological struggles', which could only be overcome by encouraging free markets and private enterprises. Thereby are personal and collective interests coordinated and people's initiative in production stimulated. Apart from these material forces of political economy, there is a deeper socio-psychological reason for the revival of advertising in China, and together with it, the rapid institutionalization of the new ethic of consumption. This has to do with the 'vacuum in belief' created by popular disillusion with the credo of Chinese Marxism and the attractiveness of consumerism as an alternative source of definitions of the 'good life'. 'To live a better life' (*ben xiao kang*) has become a convincing official and popular ideology and turned into a basic goal in life for most people. However, the power to define what will count as 'a better life' seldom lies with them. The current tendency is that an increasing part of this definitional power is being usurped by commercial advertising. Hence 'a better life' is equaled with being able to buy more goods promoted by commercial advertisements.

To talk about the revival instead of the emergence of commercial advertising presumes that it has a past history in China. In fact, its absence spans a relatively short period. Advertising in the modern sense, as a profitable part of commercial media, started in China with the so-called coastal newspapers of the early and mid nineteenth century, which had their origins in the European communities in southern and eastern coastal areas. Advertising in the early days consisted of the extra sheets containing advertisements and shipping news attached to the newspaper. The

practice of commercial advertising reached its peak during the Republican period in the 1930s. All the mass media in the era of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) – newspapers, magazines, radio, and film – were closely modeled after the Anglo-American fashion. A 1947 UNESCO report claimed that China had as many as 29 private commercial radio stations at that time (quoted in Tunstall 1977: 194). The early newspapers in the Red Areas held by the Communist forces in the latter half of the 1940s were one of the rare exceptions. They did not carry commercial advertising but concentrated instead on policies and political guidelines of the Party.

The year 1954 saw the complete abolition of commercial advertising in China by the Communist government under pressure from the Soviets. The abolition followed logically from a theoretical conception of a socialist economy as noncompetitive and centrally planned, guaranteed by state or collective ownership of the means of production, whose purpose was no longer to pursue profits through the manufacturing of commodities. The supposed disappearance of the driving force behind the practice of advertising rendered commercial promotion redundant. The only formal equivalent to advertising in the two and a half decades that followed was public announcements or promotions for cultural products such as literary works, and music or theatrical performances. The abandonment of advertising was then seen as an enormous saving of social and economic resources. When the Soviets started advertising again in the late 1950s, the Chinese remained unaffected. They presented this decision as another sign of the Soviet revisionism – the betrayal of socialist principles (Yu 1986: 2).

Advertising was finally reintroduced into China in the year 1978, when the Ministry of Finance gave permission to national newspapers to sell space to advertisers. This move involved more than the mere restart of an abandoned commercial practice. It was as much an ideological as an economic issue for the Chinese government – a matter of capitalist versus socialist values. To get out of the ideological dilemma brought about by the re-adoption of advertising bearing the stamp of capitalism, newspaper editorials as the most handy and sensitive 'wind vane' for policy change, were fully employed. The first sign of official acceptance of advertising was released in January 1979, in an editorial in Shanghai's *Wenhui Bao*, titled 'Restoring the Good Name of Advertising' (Ding 1979). As the title suggests, it is argued that advertising is not all negative, and can contribute to socialism if used in the right way. Another editorial, which appeared in *The People's Daily*, commended the capacity of advertising in guiding consumption and providing services to consumers, and presented the former 'capitalist tool' as 'an important ground which will influence social morals and habits' (Seligman 1984: 12).

In addition, historical anecdotes were exploited to blur the intrinsic link between advertising and capitalism. The earliest advertising in the world is said to be able to trace back to 3000 B.C. in ancient Egypt. China's own first advertisement is identified with 'the earliest banner for a wine shop' during the Warring States Period (475–211 B.C.) (*Shichang Yishu – The Art of Market*, No. 3, 1988: 33). The qualities of socialist advertising as distinguished from capitalist advertising are stressed as non-profit-seeking, honesty, and healthy taste, though in reality it is almost impossible to maintain these claimed qualities. However, the most powerful

justification for the reintroduction of advertising came from the theoretical revision of the orthodox interpretation of Chinese socialism. Socialism in China is redefined as 'the initial stage', in contradistinction to the original phrase of 'the transitory stage' which implies an automatic transition from socialism to communism. The economy at this initial stage of socialism remains a commodity economy. Commercial advertising thereby is legitimated by a more coherent theory of 'the initial stage' of socialism.

The expansion of advertising has been phenomenal since *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang Ribao*) set the precedent of carrying a four-day series of advertisements on the Chinese New Year's Day in 1979. Other major national newspapers, with the notable exception of *The People's Daily*, soon followed. However, *The People's Daily* eventually started its own advertising activity in October the same year, with the publication of the semimonthly periodical *Shi Chang* (*Market*). The volume of advertisements has been growing at a rate of 50% each year since 1978 and by 1986 the total advertising sales had reached 700 million *yuan* RMB, a phenomenal figure at the time (Zhang and Cheng 1988: 48). The first local advertising agencies were opened almost simultaneously in Shanghai and Tianjin in 1979, followed by the Beijing Advertising Company the year after. Similar organizations were founded in other big cities and the advertising industry had already become an important economic sector by the year 1981. The China National United Advertising Corporation, established in February 1981, manages and supervises domestic advertising activities through local companies at the provincial and municipal levels. The China Foreign Trade Advertising Association, established in August of the same year, deals with advertising activities of transnational corporations operating in or outside China. The number of advertising agencies increased from a mere number of 10 in 1979 to 6,944 in 1986, employing a total of 81,000 people.

Foreign capital has played a crucial role in shaping the Chinese advertising industry and stimulating its rapid expansion. Japan, the United States, and Hong Kong took the lead in cultivating the largely untapped Chinese market. The Dentsu Advertising Agency of Japan signed a contract with Shanghai Advertising Corporation to promote Japanese products in China in as early as 1979. Interpublic-Jardine, a joint venture between McCann-Erickson and Jardine Matheson, opened its first overseas advertising agency in Beijing in the same year. Young & Rubicam, Dentsu, and Saatchi and Saatchi all opened branches in China in 1985 and the Ogilvy Group followed the next year. Advertising sales to foreign customers have been increasing rapidly along with the growth of the advertising industry itself since the early 1980s. In 1982, foreign sales counted 10% of China's advertising revenue – about $7.7 million. In 1985, they reached 63 million *yuan* RMB – about $20 million. In 1986, they further went up to $40 million. Japanese and American companies are the major clients, accounting for 90% or more of the total foreign sales.[1]

Table 6.1 shows the top ten foreign spenders on advertising in China, with special attention accorded to television advertising. It can be seen from the table that most

[1] These statistics are taken from Seligman (1984) and Kim (1987).

Table 6.1 Top ten foreign spenders on advertising in China

Company	Total (£)	TV out of total (%)
Toshiba	107,498	72.86
Hitachi	99,849	63.83
NEC	90,556	75.72
Nestle	54,037	100
Casio	51,003	47.45
Mitsubishi	45,909	48.05
Ricoh	45,205	69.51
Kodak	41,756	100
IBM	39,804	38.54
Citizen	38,149	9.79

Source: Advertising Department of China Statistics Bureau (*Marketing Week*, March 23, 1989: 42)

of the top ten (with the exception of Citizen and IBM) spend a large percentage of their total advertising budgets, from nearly half to 100%, on television advertisements, due to the very rapid expansion of television broadcasting in China on the one hand[3], and still relatively low cost of television advertising compared with that in many Western countries on the other hand. Television broadcasting was already covering 70% of the whole population in 1987; and a 30 seconds peak time slot, for instance, costs about £3,000 on China Central Television, much less than what it will cost back in the U.K. (Chapman 1989: 42, 46).

Commercial advertisements are not only carried by conventional media, but also by wall newspapers, posters and pamphlets, all of which were once used as crucial means of political agitation in Mao's China. People in big cities are already used to neon lights on top of high buildings winking 'Sony', 'Sharp' or 'Minolta' – Japanese made electronic appliances which took the advantage of Japan being China's close neighbour in Asia. The US of course was not that far behind. The sight of a bridge decorated with a huge picture of natural scenery bearing the invitation 'Come to Marlboro Country' has become something commonplace for passers-by. Similarly, pedestrians and cyclists at crossroads take it for granted that the giant billboard which used to carry political slogans or traffic instructions is now occupied by a huge poster of Tian An Men, promoting nevertheless the American Express. This upsurge of advertising as an economic practice has profound social, political and cultural consequences, the most obvious of which is the birth and growth of a consumerist culture in China.

The Emergence of a Consumerist Culture

The following quotation from two Chinese writers, which needs more like a celebration than a description, provides an insight into people's experience with advertising in the 1980s. It is also representative of the mainstream positive

assessments of the impact of advertising on economy and culture at the time. Not surprisingly, given this generally favourable climate of opinion, criticisms against advertising tend to remain at a technical rather than a fundamental level, and to concentrate on issues such as low aesthetic standard and falsity in product description. The government's decision to re-adopt advertising is seldom questioned.

> Nowadays, people no longer regard advertisements as novelties. Advertising is already accepted as a symbol of social changes in our society. When the first advertisements appeared in the narrow space between pages of the newspaper, people were astonished, then they felt relieved and finally they accepted them calmly. Today, advertising has become widely spread. Newspapers, television and radio have special departments dealing with advertisements; buses are decorated with pictorial advertisements outside and inside; railway timetables have advertisements on the cover or between the pages; advertising posters are painted on the walls along the railways. Stadiums where musical performances take place and sport games are held cannot escape the penetration of advertising either. The so called 'a show specially recommended by so-and-so company' has become an alternative form of advertising (commercial sponsorship). Some interestingly made advertisements are enjoying great popularity…. Advertising is saturating the life of ordinary people (Zhang and Cheng 1988: 48–49).

The replacement of political slogans by advertising posters is, according to these writers, analogous to the substitution of traditional 'Chinese costumes' by 'Western suits', both of which are claimed to signal a revolutionary transformation. The advent of advertising is regarded as the prelude to the dawn of a new age in Chinese history – the so-called 'economic age', which is supposed to bring new life to the old civilisation. This kind of eulogy, dedicated to changes brought by economic reforms is not unusual in Chinese academia, particularly among those whose task is to find justifications for official policies. Though advertising in China occasionally suffers from setbacks, with the most severe happening during the political and ideological movement of 'anti-bourgeois pollution' in 1983, the general tendency is in favour of its persistence and rapid growth.

As a consequence of the reintroduction of advertising, the emergent consumerist ethic not only negates the officially advocated life style of plain-living but also contradicts the traditional value of thrift and prudence. The officially defined 'consumption craze' can be traced back to the end of 1970s when Japanese companies launched their initial campaigns at potential Chinese consumers. A series of Japanese trademarks including Toshiba, Hitachi, Sony, Sanyo, Sharp, National, Mitsubishi, Citizen, and Seiko soon became part of the everyday language of city dwellers and a substantial demand for these consumer goods was successfully created. Owning a 14-inch black-and-white Hitachi television set, or a four-speaker Sharp or Sanyo tape-recorder was the dream of many ordinary households. Before then, the most valuable and costly goods people could imagine to possess were bicycles, wristwatches and sewing machines – the old 'three big items' in Mao's China. However, in the new political-economic climate, being well-off and able to consume was no longer a sign of a corrupt bourgeois life style but a status of respectability linked with smartness and industriousness.

An adequate description and analysis of this newly emergent ethic of consumption need to focus on three related aspects: the rapid increase in material demands;

the awakening brand-consciousness; and the bizarre combination of the old values and the new ethic – saving excessively in order to spend excessively. Saving lost its meaning as an end in itself but became the means to gain satisfaction from more 'conspicuous' consumption. Personal achievement, which in Mao's time meant outstanding political performance as measured by one's contribution to the society as acknowledged by the Party authorities, assumed very different connotations, one of which is being able to earn and spend one's own money. An increasing number of consumer goods were listed as in great demand, ranging from the new four big items – colour television sets, refrigerators, automatic washing machines, and hi-fi systems – to the more recent vogue for video recorders, motorcycles, vacuum cleaners, and microwave cookers. For women, there are more and more varieties of clothes and accessories, cosmetics, and beauty preparations. For children, there are more and more expensive toys (culminating in the imported Transformers in 1989), electronic synthesizers and pianos (the purchase of which is justified by their supposedly educational and refining function). In contrast, there are few products exclusively for men, except for liquor and cigarettes (with Marlboro being among the most desirable largely due to powerful commercial promotion), but men are in most cases still central to the consumption system by virtue of their control over and responsibility for family expenditure.

A cover story in *Marketing Week* summarises the key ideological role of consumerism. It argues that with a huge split between urban and rural areas and between North and South China, the only common thread is consumers' desire to be 'modern' (*Marketing Week*, March 23, 1989: 41). To be 'modern', it needs to be added, has very concrete meanings to most people, especially the younger generation. To them, it means wearing denim jeans, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken,[2] drinking Coke or Pepsi Cola, riding a Honda motorcycle, listening to pop music through hi-fi systems, and watching James Bond movies on video tape – in short, trying to live out their conception of everyday life in the West. 'The Four Modernisations' has always been officially promoted as the ultimate goal which the nation is striving for, now with the West seen as the archetype of modernisation. National policy has taken on a particular form in the context of everyday life.

The awakening of brand-consciousness among Chinese consumers is another sign of the penetration of the consumerist ethic. It has been accompanied by a noticeable shift in attitudes to brands, away from a valuation of quality and economy and towards an emphasis on status-conferral. The old plain trademarks, not infrequently endowed with revolutionary and socialist ideological significance, such as 'The East Is Red' (*dong fang hong*), 'Workers-Peasants-and-Soldiers' (*gong nong bing*), 'Sunflowers' (*xiang ri kui*), 'Marching On' (*qian jin*) and 'Red Flag' (*hong qi*) began to sound so awkward that some simply had to change names in order to keep up with new trends. One strategy is to take on a trademark that sounds foreign but reads in Chinese. This is particularly common when it comes to

[2] Kentucky Fries Chicken has an outlet of 500 seats in central Beijing, which is currently the largest in the world. In addition, the world's biggest McDonal's was opened in Beijing near Tian An Men Square in April 1992.

fashion, cosmetics and skin-care products for women.[3] Other manufacturers simply adopt nation-wide or world-wide brand names, many being unaware of the new rules of copyright in this practice. The difference between the genuine and the fake is in price, and often in quality as well. A newer trend in the early 1990s is to add the prefix '*fang*' (to copy) to an established trademark. In this way, the manufacturer can avoid lawsuit for copyright or brand invasion. Hence one can see *Fang-nike*, *Fang-puma*, and *Fang-addidas*, which, though 'inferior' to authentic Nike, Puma, and Addidas, are nevertheless regarded as superior to other unheard brands. The emphasis is always put on the suffix – the imitated trademark.

People desire Western consumer goods and associate the consumption of these goods with being modern and up-to-date. But in reality only a very small minority has access to them in the 1980s. This is not only because of the official control over hard-currency and the importation of consumer goods, but also because of their relatively high price in Chinese currency. For example, Olay, a skin-care cream which costs about $6.5, is priced 15–18 *yuan* RMB in China in 1989 – about 3 to 5 days' salary of an average wage-earner. Even so they sell well as authentic foreign products. As we shall see, the same process operates with the imported toys – the Transformers. *The People's Daily* carried a story in April 1991 about American consumer products gradually entering the Beijing market. The largest department store in Beijing was then selling more than 100 different American-made consumer products, ranging from nonstick frying pans, cigarettes, luxury lamps and lanterns, to men's shaving blades and hi-fi systems. Many of the products manufactured by Sino-American joint ventures are said to have become the everyday necessity of the Beijing consumers. Expansion in consumption is taken as a most important sign of improvement in people's living standard.

Owning high-status consumer goods symbolizes the economic capacity, which has replaced political performance as the major indicator for one's overall position on the social map. The number of electric household appliances, together with their brand names, is now an important criterion for judging how well-off and 'modern' a family is. Affluent families will try their best to furnish their homes with Japanese-made goods, whereas less well-off ones have to make do with Chinese-made equivalents. Spurred on by rapidly expanding consumer demand since 1979, Chinese industry was turning out the world's greatest number of black and white television sets and washing machines by 1987, and one fifth of the world's overall output of refrigerators by the year 1988 (*The People's Daily*, Overseas Edition, September 20, 1989). Following the importation of the first colour television assembly line in 1979, another 100 or more had been imported up to 1987. Official statistics showed that in the year 1988, for every thousand Chinese people, there were 100 television sets, 50 washing machines, 10 refrigerators and 270 bicycles (*The People's Daily,* Overseas edition, April 15, 1989). If the huge base of a 1.12 billion population is taken into

[3] One example for such practice comes from the most successful Chinese skin-care and cosmetic range made in Shanghai. It is named Ruby in English and *Lu Mei* in Chinese. However, the Chinese characters seldom appear on the bottles of its products in order not to destroy its apparent foreign aura.

consideration, the absolute number of durable consumer goods now in circulation is enormous, even allowing for gross disparities between regions and income groups.

However, it would be wrong to assume that most Chinese families in the 1980s can easily afford these electric household appliances simply because of the rise in ownership. In reality, the purchase of these durable goods is often realised through a very peculiar consumption pattern in the 1980s and 1990s. People have to save excessively for the sake of spending excessively on 'big items'. If a Chinese made refrigerator costs about 1,500 *yuan* RMB and an average wage-earner's monthly salary is 90–120 *yuan* RMB, it means that one has to save for at least a whole year in order to buy one, regardless of basic living costs. As a consequence, family expenditure on food, and other immediate daily necessities, has to be cut in order to save sufficiently for the purchase of the socially significant big items. In many cases, these items are purchased to meet the desire of the heart at the sacrifice of the stomach, as cynics put it, and they are 'saved out of the mouth'.

The overheating of the consumer sector is said to be directly related to the highest levels of inflation in China since 1949, and indirectly linked to the exacerbation of a series of social problems such as the thriving black market in hard currencies, prostitution, official corruption, and the rapid rise in property crimes as against other offences in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To many 'old guard' commentators, it seemed as though the country was sinking into chaos and confusion, when people started to believe that immediate material satisfactions are more rewarding than the indefinitely postponed 'Communist tomorrow', which had been beckoning but evading them ever since 1949.

The Party and the government attempted to tackle these problems. Economically, the tightening up of fiscal and monetary policies was used to combat overheated consumption and high inflation. Ideologically, the value of austerity was rediscovered and emphasized again and again. The government turned to the old stories from Mao's China in the 1950s and 1960s about of Lei Feng – 'the good soldier of the Party', Jiao Yulu – the model cadre, the 'iron man' Wang Jinxi, and other officially endorsed examples of self-sacrifice, in an effort to restore the discredited spirit of hard-work and plain-living (*jian ku pu su*). Despite all these efforts, the question remains – is the Party really capable of addressing the situation using old strategies from a collectivist past in the new historical situation of economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s?

The political and ideological confrontations between rival camps within the Party leadership over the past decade reached a critical point during the pro-democracy movement in 1989. Since the defeat of the movement, the advocates for tighter state control and plan have gained the upper hand for some time, blaming the liberal market-oriented policy makers for the critical state of the economy as well as the 'degenerated moral mood of the society'. The problem of an 'over-heated' economy coupled with 'over-consumption' is only one indicator of the general dilemma in which China finds itself – being caught between the free market and central control and occasionally losing its balance. Deeply entangled with the world capitalist system through its acceptance of direct foreign investment and bank loans, there is no possibility of the government withdrawing completely from its

open-door policy. In response, whilst reiterating its adherence to the open-door policy, the government has been trying to exert macro-control from time to time over the economy since 1988.

The increasing influence of the West is another important factor which helps to shape the future of China, not least through the imposition of economic sanctions in the aftermath of the 1989 movement. Tighter government controls and ideological shifts to socialism and central planning turned out to be a short-lasted phenomenon. Deng Xiaoping's significant tour to South China in January 1992 marked a turning point for China's political and economic future towards further liberalization. The decade of the 1990s will see the liberals winning over the old guards and the 'new left' in ideology and policy-making, dragging the country onto a road of 'double capitalism' – privatization plus dismantling the existing social welfare system in the name of efficiency and profit. Market instead of Marxism becomes the new 'God' which is supposed to rescue China from ruins. Consequently, western influence will continue to penetrate the economy, politics and culture of the country, and combine with internally generated structures to produce particular kinds of change. The craze for the Transformers among Chinese children in the year before the Tian An Men Square demonstrations, and the political debate the craze sparkled off, serve as a case study of one possible pattern of change.

The Transformers Fad and Reactions to It

As a commercial product the Transformers were born in Japan, grew up in America, and subsequently travelled all around the world. They were first designed and manufactured by the Japanese in 1984, and then, along with the accompanying cartoon series, were introduced into American toy market by Hasbro, one of the three major toy manufacturers in the United States. Boosted by a re-written and re-edited cartoon series, the Transformers became the most successful line of toys ever introduced, bringing in more than $100 million revenue in its launch year – 1984 to 1985 (*Business week*, March 25, 1985). At the same time, the Transformers had entered the continental toy market, and sold in many European countries including the Great Britain.

Hasbro took its first steps towards the Chinese market in 1986, sending delegates to negotiate with one of the local stations – Beijing TV – on the transmission of the cartoon series, and to arrange joint ventures to manufacture the toys in the capital. It is said that the Chinese side failed to meet Hasbro's demands in areas such as transportation, telecommunication facilities, customs checks, and taxation. In any event, the negotiations failed. This meant a delay in the birth of the Hasbro project in China but not an abortion. Before long, Hasbro managed to contract business partners in Singapore and Hong Kong respectively and started the joint-manufacturing of spare parts, which were later assembled in Shenzhen, one of the special economic zones in southern China (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989). At the end of 1988, the *Transformers* cartoon series went on the air in

the country's major metropolitan cities – Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou – and immediately became the hit with child viewers. It was followed by the sale of the toys based on the key characters in the cartoon series. While unprepared Chinese observers were still wondering 'how come the Americans across the ocean understand so well our psychology and our market, and come (to sell their toys) not too early and not too late but precisely after the *Transformers* cartoon series went on air?' (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989), a craze for the expensive American toys was already gathering momentum among urban chinese children. This added further fuel to the heated debates about the cartoon and the toys among parents and commentators.

The 'Absurd' Fad

The story of the toy starts in earnest with the transmission of the cartoon series by local television stations in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing in late 1988. As for the financial arrangement behind the deal, two different versions circulated in China. The first had it that the television programme was sponsored by Hasbro and provided free of cost (*The People's Daily*, February 27, 1989). The second claimed that 'only now do we get to know that the cartoon series are bought, which means that we are paying the foreign businessmen for their advertising' (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989). Whether sponsored or purchased, the show turned out to be extremely successful and popular with children. And this was decisive in initiating what the Chinese newspapers came to call 'the Transformers fad', starting in big cities where the cartoon was first shown and spreading rapidly to other parts of the country.

The basic situation is simple and straightforward – children watch the cartoon and demand the toys, which are then rigorously promoted by the large-scale joint sale organized by the three top department stores in Beijing to coincide with the New Year's Day followed by the Chinese Spring Festival. A contemporary press report describes the sale like this:

> Children with money given as *hong bao* (red envelope with money in it)[4] for the Spring Festival, pupils who did well in the final exams, parents who promised to their kids, all rushed to the toy counter. Some took out the money and paid. Others hesitated because of the high prices. But children refused to leave [without the toy], some accusing their parents of being liars…. When the fad was at its peak, over 90% of children from kindergarten to primary school have at least one transformer. I was told that some parents in Guangzhou spent 2,000 *yuan* RMB or more on Transformers for their kid(s), and rumours have it that a child in Shanghai took 300 *yuan* RMB from home to buy Transformers (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989).

[4] Children are given some money on the first day of the Chinese New Year in a small red envelope as a sign of good wish for the coming lunar year.

The Transformers quickly became the best-selling children's toys, not only in big department stores but also in small corner shops. Licensed street vendors and the black market traders also made considerable sums from selling Transformers, with profit margins averaging between 30 and 50% (*Beijing Evening News*, March 9, 1989). The following scenarios are taken from press report of the Transformers sale at *Ditan* Fair, one of the oldest and largest fairs held once a year in Beijing around the Spring Festival.

> The second day of the Spring Festival, in Ditan Fair where toys were sold, a boy of four or five years old was rolling about on the ground, shouting 'I want it, I want it'. 'That thing costs a hundred *yuan* RMB or more,' his father said to him, while trying to drag him up, 'go and buy it, then we won't have money to buy food this month'. The boy's mum complained aside, 'I told you not to bring him here. Look at this....' At a different location, a man in his thirties said to his son of about ten years old, 'we can't afford it, tens of *yuan* RMB, enough for me to buy a pair of trousers! Let's get a Transformer comic strip instead!' The boy, while trying to hold his tears, protested, 'some classmates have got five or six Transformers already' (*Beijing Evening News*, March 9, 1989).

Other newspapers carried similar stories about disagreements and conflicts between children and their parents brought about by the Transformers. *Yangcheng Wanbao*, an evening paper in Guangzhou – one of China's forerunners in market experiments in the 1980s, described the situation as follows:

> The families who can afford [the Transformers] have already bought them. But can those who cannot afford them get away with it? No. The little master, who is too young to be considerate, sees their classmates playing [with the Transformers] and cannot help but asking for them. Once the 'little master' makes a scene, the whole family will be affected, and it is thus better to 'open the wallet'. Besides, the Transformers are classified into three grades – high, medium and low. Children who have got the toys will compete among themselves on their grade…. Those who don't have Transformers will easily develop a sense of inferiority…. The essence of the problem is that the prices are well beyond the economic means of ordinary families and it needs to be asked whether it is worth spending hard currency to import these toys (*Yangcheng Wanbao*, March 2, 1989).

The existence of low, medium and high grades of Transformers, with very different price ranges complicated the whole issue. Children were very conscious of the differences between the grades and attached concrete meanings to them – they demonstrated the economic power of their parents. Children in possession of genuine Hasbro-made transformers felt superior to the majority, whose parents could only afford the cheaper copies (though these were also expensive compared with other toys). Some indication of cost is provided by the list of prices shown in Table 6.2 for selected lines of genuine Hasbro Transformers available at that time in the biggest toy shop in Beijing. According to the saleswoman, they had recently been reduced by about 10%. In a country where people's daily wages average three to four *yuan* RMB in the late1980s, and over half of that goes on the basics of 'fuel, rice, oil and salt' – *chai mi you yan*, it is clear that purchasing toys at these prices will place a great financial burden on the parents.

Newspaper stories in China in the 1980s are more often indicators of the substance of official concern than disinterested accounts of contemporary life because of the nature of the mass media being the mouthpiece of the Party and the government. Official stance is always implied, if not explicitly expressed, in the facts selected for

Table 6.2 Retail prices of transformers

Toy name	Seaspray	Groove	Jungle	Optimus prime
Price (*yuan*) (is)	9.9	17.6	43.0	97.5
Price (*yuan*) (was)	13.0	19.0	46.0	105.0

publicity. To assess the validity of these newspaper stories, I visited the two biggest toy shops in Beijing in May 1989, when the fad was already in decline. In the first one – the then well-known Beijing Shop for Women and Children (Beijing Funv Ertong Yongpin Shangdian) on Wangfujing Street – one of Beijing's busiest shopping areas, the saleslady told me that all the Transformers had sold out 2 days before and that it was not easy to get new stock. Most of the Transformers sold in this shop were the cheaper fakes made in Taiwan or Guangdong. 'The most expensive Optimus Prime,' she told me, 'costs only 54 *yuan* RMB,' – half the price of a genuine Hasbro-branded model. But it is still equivalent to 10–15 days' income of an average salary earner.

In the second place, Wangfujing Toy Shop, a newly opened branch of the Beijing Wangfujing Department Store – one of the top ten largest department stores in the country, I found my way to the Transformers counter. What distinguished this counter from the others was the thick iron railings surrounding it. The saleslady explained that these were to prevent the crowds of customers from breaking the glass counter when the Transformers were first sold in January. The Transformers had, according to this lady, boosted the initial sale of the newly opened toy shop:

> The queue often went out of the shop and on to the pavement when we first began selling the Transformers. One Sunday, if I remember correctly, we sold 200 thousand *yuan* RMB. Even now, we still can sell tens of thousands of *yuan* RMB worth per week. That's not bad at all.

While we were talking, two school boys came in and stuck their heads through the railings, looking into the glass counter. On spotting them, the saleslady said,

> Here you two again! Good children should go home directly after school. (She then turned to me) See, these two kids, often come these days to have a look at the toys. What's the use of looking at them without buying them? I have to tell them to go home as early as they can, otherwise their parents would be worried.

I asked her whether they ever bought any. She said,

> No, I can't sell them anyway. Ghosts know where they got the money. It's said in the newspaper that some children stole their parents' money to buy Transformers. We are a state-owned shop, unlike the private street vendors.

I stayed for another 15 minutes or so to observe the situation. A mother and her son arrived. Her son insisted on buying a Triple Changer, costing 43 *yuan* RMB while the mother recommended a cheaper one. 'Either Triple Changer or nothing', the son said with determination. They went away with a Triple Changer. A father asked his son if he would like to have a Seaspray, a very small transformer which cost 9.9 *yuan*. The son pointed at the Triple Changer, 'I want that one.' The father in the end managed to get away by saying that he did not have enough money with

him. A couple came to the counter and I approached them. I told them that I was a research student of media and communications and that I would like to talk with them about the Transformers. The lady obvious misunderstood my intention and reacted quickly and strongly, 'Please don't! Whatever you are going to promote in the paper, please don't promote the Transformers.' She took me for a journalist, whose role is commonly seen as a promoter or an agitator of some cause. I explained to her that I had no intention of promoting the Transformers and I was conducting a critical social investigation. She was relieved and said to me,

> That's better. When I bought the first Transformer, I came here early in the morning[5] before the shop opened and found myself at the end of a long queue. I was so worried I might be too late and could not get one. I don't want my child to feel inferior in any way and get his self-respect hurt. What other children have, he should have.

She told me that she had already bought four Transformers and that her son was 5 years old and very bright. She was very proud of him and took great pleasure talking about him.

In the newspaper commentaries, however, the voices of children who watched the Transformers cartoon series and consumed the toys were very seldom heard. To fill the gap I did a small scale survey of 80 eight to nine years old primary school pupils in Beijing. The result showed that 92.7% of the boys and 26% of the girls had at least one Transformer toy. Before the survey, the headmistress emphasized that I should make it clear to the pupils that this was not a competition to see who had the biggest number of Transformers, claiming that the fad had already adversely affected the 'normal school mood'. The children surveyed tended to give detailed information on their Transformers – the names of the toys they had, who bought them, where and when, and how much each one cost. Some children specified that their Transformers were genuine ones 'Made in the US.' This was in fact not the case because Hasbro manufactured the Transformers sold in the Chinese market in Southeast Asia.

Concerning the reasons for purchasing the toys, most of them said that they like playing Transformers because they are interesting and can 'transform'. Some claimed that Transformers made them use their brains or made them more intelligent – a reason that is too carefully composed to be entirely genuine. Others said that they got their Transformers as a reward from parents or grandparents because they did well in their exams. The following extract from a discussion with the children gives a flavor of the way they talked about Transformers.

Shi (boy, grade three):	They are (the Transformers cartoon series) very, very, good, interesting.
Pei (girl, grade three):	They are very interesting. But I heard that the newspapers said Transformers are out of date now in the States. Chinese children like them. Americans repaired the used toys and sold them to us. I think it's disgusting. (Her criticism is obviously based on some unfounded rumours.)
Shi:	I like watching the Transformers. I also like the Transformer toys. But teacher (they assume that I am a teacher), whenever I buy a

[5] It should be pointed out that on early winter mornings in Beijing, the temperature frequently drops to around −10°C.

	Transformer toy, I will ask my mum first. (He wants to assure me that he is a good boy even though he likes Transformers). Guess what? My uncle bought me a quasi-Transformer from the United States. It is not a figure in the cartoon, but it can also transform. They say quasi-Transformers are in fashion now in the States. As long as it can transform, it is good.
Pei:	Some classmates play too much with Transformers and they do not study well. Some children bring their Transformers to school. Some children even steal their parents' money to buy Transformers and become criminals. (One needs to do more than that to become a criminal, of course. The badge she is wearing on her sleeve tells people that she was 'somebody' in the class – a monitor or something equivalent – thus needs behave like and be recognised as a good pupil!).
Interviewer:	Are the toys still available now?
Shi:	Yes, of course. The shop near my home has got the whole range of Transformers. The shop in my grandma's place has Dalisheng, Feitianhu, Dawuwei, and Baohusheng (sound translations).
Jia (boy, grade two):	And also Feitianxiao (sound translation). I have four. I don't bring them to school. If you bring them to school, the teacher will confiscate them.
Pei:	The cartoon is very long, lasting 90 episodes.
Shi:	I heard the cartoon is so long that you will never finish watching them all your life, the same as 007 (i.e. James Bond).

This extract illustrates the children's 'extensive' knowledge about the cartoon and the toys. They are familiar with almost everything related to the Transformers: the cartoon stories; toy prices; where about they are available; and even the latest vogue for quasi-Transformers in America (though this is more likely to be hearsay than anything else). They also expressed their confusion about the apparent incoherence and disconnection in plot development, assuming that it was the fault of the TV station which had missed out certain episodes. To these fascinated child viewers, the Magic Transforming Powers (as translated into Chinese – *bian xing jin gang*) would never make such an obvious mistake.

Children's fascination with the cartoon series and their desire for the expensive toys (including the 'less costly' fakes) put parents in an awkward situation – they did not want to disappoint their children but they could not easily afford the toys. To help parents out, school teachers, many of whom are parents of young children themselves, tried to exert their influence, forbidding pupils to bring the toys and the linked comic books to school. *Zhongguo Ertong Bao* (*Chinese Children's Weekly Paper*) attempted to tackle the problem by organizing a nation-wide competition to design 'paper Transformers' among primary school pupils, promoting a set of paper Transformers cuts costing only about two *yuan* RMB. The announcement for the contest stressed this point:

> My dear little friend, you must like the Transformers a lot. But, they are too expensive…. The recently published Transformers paper cuts cost only a bit more than two *yuan* RMB and can be made into eight master Transformers, which can transform into aircraft, tanks and ships. If you use your brain, you can make them transform into more varieties. Welcome to the nation-wide paper Transformers competition (*Zhongguo Ertong Bao*, May 15, 1989).

Unfortunately, paper Transformers are in the end pieces of paper, not the same as the 'real thing'. Hence the competition might well have ended up, though unintentionally, furthering the promotion of Transformers without alleviating the financial burden of the parents.

The Heated Debates

The embarrassment and perplexity experienced by parents in dealing with their children's demands for Transformers sparkled heated public debates in the major newspapers of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou – the cities hit hardest by the fad. These debates culminated in the intervention by the Standing Committee of the People's Congress – the supreme legislative body in the country. Some members of the Committee expressed concern about the importation of expensive toys when they were discussing the Bill for Examination of Imported and Exported Goods. Subsequently, 20 members came together to suggest that Beijing TV stop broadcasting the cartoon (*The People's Daily*, March 2, 1989). The news story about the initiative appeared in *The People's Daily* (overseas Edition, February 19, 1989), with the subtitle 'Absurd Story Poisons Children and Imported Toys Invade Market'. This intervention by powerful and authoritative figures added further heat to the dispute. Rumours claimed that the toys were out of date in the United States or, more fancifully, that they were second-hand leftovers discarded by American children, and dumped on the Chinese market after being repaired.

Ms. Hu, one of the initiators of the intervention by the Standing Committee, told *The People's Daily* how she arrived at the idea of publicizing the suggestion of stopping the broadcasts:

> One day my grandson insisted I read him the Transformers comic strips. I've never watched the television series. But when I looked at the comic strips, I noticed that neither the picture nor the language has anything to do with beauty, and the content is ridiculous, violent, and incoherent. It was impossible to follow the story. Looking at the prices, a book of ten or more pages cost 0.8 *yuan*, 0.9 *yuan* or more than one *yuan* RMB. The number of copies printed is over sixty or seventy thousand, the highest being two hundred and fifty thousand. I mentioned this during a group meeting of the Committee members and it turned out that others had felt the same way. We talked about how the time arrangement of the broadcasting affects children's eating, and about the prices of the toys being beyond the financial capacity of ordinary Chinese families. Then, we forwarded our suggestion to those concerned (*The People's Daily*, March 2, 1989).

Those who opposed the Transformers were basically in agreement with Mr. Hu and her fellow Committee members. They argued: (1) that the cartoon advocates violence; (2) that it affects children's eating because of the time it is broadcast; (3) that the toys are so expensive that they are well beyond ordinary Chinese family's purchasing power; (4) that children may be turned into avaricious consumers by the toys; and (5) that the linked comic strips are crudely written, and exploitatively priced.

Some criticism, however, went well beyond the points mentioned above. Transformers were said to be damaging not only to the family economy at the micro

level due to the high prices, but also to the national economy at the macro level because importing these expensive items wasted the already insufficient foreign currencies so vital to the country's economic development (*The People's Daily*, February 27, 1989). The importation of Transformers was even compared to the importation of opium at the time of the two Opium Wars of the mid nineteenth century. In contrast, supporters of the Transformers stressed the popularity of the programme and ignored the prices of the toys. They argued that the cartoon series benefits children's intellectual development because it is 'fully charged with the wisdom, enthusiasm, imagination and masculinity of the industrial society'. Good and evil, kind and wicked, represented respectively by Qingtian Zhu and Batian Hu [sound translations – the two most important and powerful characters in the cartoon and the most expensive toys in the shop] are so clear-cut that the joy and enlightenment the cartoon brings to children is beyond the understanding of adults (*Yangcheng Wanbao*, March 2, 1989).

Between these two poles of antipathy and sympathy, stood the moderate critics who, though affronted by the high prices, were ready to admit that 'positive lessons can be learned from the 'Transformers shockwave'. They tended to stress the superior quality and design of the imported toys compared to traditional Chinese-made toys, and urged the domestic toy industry to 'transform' itself and catch up with the West. One press story, arguing this case, started with the claim that 'the American Transformers, which have fascinated tens of thousands of urban Chinese children, have made the domestic toy industry realise that it is lagging far behind' (*The People's Daily*, Overseas Edition, February 17, 1989). Another article in the same vein wittily titled 'From Transformers to Transformation' came to the conclusion that:

> The positive impact of the Transformers fad lies in the fact that it demonstrated to us that self-contained and old-fashioned toy manufacture and design cannot compete with the outgoing and constantly renewing Western toy industry. Our domestic toy industry has to go through a 'transformation' in technology as well as in management (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989).

Faced with intensified public debate, and pressed by the suggestion of the members of the Standing Committee, Beijing TV set out to sever the link between the cartoon series and the toys. The emphasis was placed on differentiation, implying that Beijing TV was merely fulfilling its task of broadcasting and could not be held responsible for the flood of imported toys and comic books. One of their leading executives made the following remarks when interviewed:

> We regard highly the suggestion made by the twenty Committee members. But the television series is different from the toys and comic strips. The television series we are broadcasting is very popular with the audience, especially children. Many people think that the cartoon is good for the cultivation of children's intelligence and imagination. We have submitted a report to the authority concerned and decided to go on broadcasting this programme. Some foreign news agency reported 'the spokesman from Beijing TV said the authority had banned the broadcasting'. This is not true. Up to now we haven't received any order from above to stop broadcasting (*The People's Daily*, March 2, 1989).

As a result, Beijing TV, instead of ceasing to broadcast the Transformers Cartoon series 'without delay' as demanded by the members of the Standing Committee, made a symbolic gesture designed to show respect for these Committee members and to quieten opposing voices. They reduced the broadcasts from three a week (Saturday evening, Sunday morning and evening) to two a week (Saturday and Sunday evening). Following Beijing TV's lead, Guangzhou TV also refused to give in to public criticisms and parliamentary intervention, insisting that 'there are more positive than negative effects and therefore continuing the broadcasting is a reasonable choice' (*Yangcheng Wanbao*, March 2, 1989). While the public debate gradually died away, the Transformers continued to display their dazzling powers to the child audience. No one went on to ask the next question: does it really make a difference, broadcasting twice rather than three times a week the same Transformers programme?

Beyond the Fad and the Debates

The fascination of the Transformers fad lies in its apparent self-contradiction – that incredibly expensive toys sell incredibly well. According to an assistant manager of Wangfujing Toy Shop on central Beijing's busiest shopping street, the turnover from the retail sale of only four to five models of the transformers during the promotional sale around the Spring Festival (which does not involve price-cuts as is usual for Christmas sale in the West) amounted to 800,000 *yuan* RMB, a formidable sum at the time for a toy shop. No other toy had ever sold so well in history (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989). Then we must ask why and how did this happen? To answer the question, we need to examine at least three factors: the overall promotional strategy adopted by the US based toy manufacturer Hasbro; the very special nature of the children's market in China under the one-child policy, and the consumption pattern of the 'new rich' towards the end of the 1980s; and finally the indirect impact of the deregulatory policies pursued by the Reagan government throughout the 1980s back in the US, which encouraged the expansion of advertising on American Children's television in general, and accelerated the growth of the new form of programme-length commercials in particular. In this new form, television programmes and commercials become one and the same, inseparable from each other, with commercial promotion being the ultimate end of television programming.

The Hasbro Project and the Chinese Market

Hasbro's marketing strategy benefits from the unique elasticity of the children's market in China, and the emergence of the 'new rich' as a strata of vanguard consumers. The use of a television cartoon series in the promotion of products – programme-length advertisements – was at the time a complete novelty to Chinese consumers and its success was therefore helped by the lack of sophistication of a still largely

underdeveloped consumer consciousness. Only two out of the ten newspaper articles quoted commenting on the Transformers phenomenon made it clear that the cartoon series constituted deliberate commercial promotion for a product range targeted at children. Most of the others tend to separate the toys from the cartoon series and to take their mutual reinforcement as a kind of accidental contingency. The precise timing of the product launch was another factor in its success. Spring Festival and, to a lesser extent, New Year's Day before that, are the times of year most celebrated by the Chinese. The growing tendency towards commercialization signals a sort of concentrated consumption around this period of time, an increasingly part of which goes to children as the new centre of the family. The children's market in China has become a particularly attractive sector, because it is exceptionally absorbent and has great potential of expansion as a result of the official one-child policy adopted in the beginning of the 1980s. This policy has abruptly and drastically changed children's status within the family. The traditional parent-centred society suddenly started to give way to a modern child-centred society. This is evidenced by both the rapid growth in children's consumption and the fact that children are subject to increasingly high expectations from parents.

The first feature is highlighted and frequently commented in news stories. One such example shows in the newspaper article 'Consumption in China Gone Astray – Excessive Expenditure on the Young Generation', which points out that the gap between consumption levels of different generations is widening as a result of parental indulgence towards their children (*The People's Daily*, overseas edition, May 30, 1988). It cited a survey conducted in Shanghai showing that children's average monthly expenditure reaches 53 *yuan* RMB. This is very high percentage given that a couple's monthly income put together amounts to only about 180 *yuan* RMB on average. This pattern is confirmed by the results of another survey, conducted in Sichuan province, hinterland in China's southwest, showing that pocket money of the 50 primary school pupils questioned added up to 2,150 *yuan* RMB, or 43 *yuan* RMB each on average (*Economic Daily*, May 31, 1989). Most of this money came from '*hong bao*', the red package containing money given to children on the day of the Chinese Lunar New Year during the Spring Festival, expressing the wish for good luck. The amount of money in these red packages has been increasing over the years as family income goes up. 'The Little Emperors of China', the title of a well-known literary report (a popular literary genre in China of the 1980s and 1990s which combines fiction and journalism), has become the common nickname for the generation of lone children born in the 1980s, whose status is created and maintained through increasing parental care and expectation, as shown in the increasingly conspicuous expenditure dedicated to them.

The spokesman for coca Cola was referring to the unique size of the Chinese market when he claimed that even if each Chinese person bought only one Coke each year, it would mean at least an extra one billion bottles sold (*Marketing Week*, March 23, 1989). From this commercial point of view, the children's market is even more promising since its uniqueness is not confined to quantity but extends to quality. It is this double uniqueness which paved the way for Hasbro's success in China. The success was further consolidated by the existence of a very recent 'new rich class', whose

purchasing power is considerably higher than that of most ordinary Chinese people. This new stratum is made up of economically privileged employees, including those serving in foreign companies or joint ventures, together with the early self-employed business people who are the direct product of the liberal policy of small-scaled limited privatization at the early stage of market reforms. The proponents of privatization claim that by allowing and encouraging some people to get rich before others, they will bring all the others onto the road of common wealth, the final goal of the revised version of Chinese socialism. In the early days of the reforms, many of those who dared to leave their modestly paid official posts – known as the 'iron rice bowls' – to start their own businesses, together with those who for one reason or another were unemployed, succeeded in boosting their income in various ways. The emergence of these earliest 'new rich' has exerted a significant impact upon overall consumption patterns in China. They are the first consumers of Coke and Pepsi cola while the majority still made do with boiled water. Naturally, their children play with expensive imported toys such as the transformers. This new 'class' were the bottom-line guarantee of the Hasbro strategy directed at a market with a very low average purchasing power.

Echoes of Deregulation

Transformers in the United States do not enjoy the same unique popularity as they do with Chinese children. More than a dozen other toys, backed up by similar animated cartoons in which they exhibit their qualities and capacities, are vying for the attention and expenditure of the child audience and consumers. There are the military figures, such as G. I. Joe and his range of armaments made by Hasbro; Rambo and his Force of Freedom produced by Coleco Industries; figures from the star wars films; He-Man and his female counter-part She-Ra; and a number of others. Indeed, children's television in the United States is increasingly dominated by product-linked animated cartoons. Take the Saturday morning shows as an example. The time devoted to product-linked programmes rose from two and a half hours in 1981 and 1982, to six and a half hours in 1984 and 1985. Sixty-five percent of all children's programming was product-linked by the year 1989. The number of licensed toys based on cartoons jumped from 14 in 1984 to 40 or more the next year.

The phenomenal expansion of toy marketing through showing programme-length commercials on children's television is directly attributable to the deregulatory policy, which was initiated in the mid-1970s and reached its fullest implementation under the Reagan Government in the 1980s. In his analysis of the dynamic of deregulation, American media critic Herbert Schiller identifies several ends served by its introduction into the cultural-informational sphere. Two of these are highly relevant to the present discussion: (1) Deregulation aims to satisfy the specific marketing needs of the corporations engaged in the production of consumer goods and the provision of service whose sales require heavy and continued access to the national media system. (2) It tends to accelerate the large transnational media companies'

thrust to operate globally without restrictions and obstacles (Schiller 1989: 118). The first point explains the sharp increase in the number of long-form commercials disguised as television programmes, shown on children's television in the United States. The second point helps to shed light on the introduction of this 'American' way of commercial advertising to children into the Chinese broadcasting system.

Programme-length commercials targeted at children have a brief prehistory in the United States dating back to 1969, when the Topper Corporation, a toy company, made a complaint against ABC for broadcasting Hot Wheels, a television programme based on toys produced by Mattel, a major toy manufacturer in North America. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) acknowledged the complaint and concluded that,

> (W)e find this pattern (i.e. programme-length commercials) disturbing; more disturbing than the question of whether the commercial time logged is adequate. For this pattern subordinates programming in the interest of the public to programming in the interest of salability (quoted in Cherubin 1984).

Hot Wheels was forced off air as a result. Pushed by action groups concerned with children's television, such as ACT, the FCC issued guidelines on children's television, which stressed the obligation of broadcasters to serve the special needs of the children, including their educational needs.

However, things changed in the early 1980s with the onset of deregulation in the sphere of communications, and more particularly, with the appointment of Mark Fowler as head of the FCC in 1981. He proclaimed that,

> (I)t was time to move away from thinking about broadcasters as trustees. It was time to treat them the way almost everyone else in society does – that is, as businesses (quoted in Engelhardt 1986: 77–76).

In line with this stance, FCC lifted its 1974 restrictive guidelines on children's television at the end of 1983. The next year television stations were given permission to carry as many commercials as they choose to within a given period of time, which in practice sanctioned programme-length commercials. A complaint made by ACT about product-tied commercials was rejected in 1985.

The underlying rationale for this deregulation of children's television rests on the assumption 'that children's consumer interests will be best served by the unconstrained activities of the cultural industries' and that 'consumer education itself is to be conducted in and by the marketplace' (Kline 1989: 303). Thus children's television – one of the most important contemporary socializing agencies – is subjugated to the profit-seeking strategies of private corporations. In this situation, the quality and diversity of children's programming will inevitably remain secondary to the promotion of products. Most efforts will be directed at the reduction of programming costs and the maintenance of their selling capacity. This produces a form of children's television which, as described by Tom Engelhardt, is

> filled with hundreds of similar creatures: furry bears and fruit-scented little girls, robots and Smurfs … elbowing each other off the screen every half hour or so to demonstrate their unique buyability while mouthing extracts from a random loop of recorded messages: be polite, be happy…. On and on (Engelhardt 1986: 69).

As we have seen, one group of the 'hundreds of similar creatures', the Transformers, have already found their way across the Pacific to the People's Republic of China, where they enjoy a monopolised popularity without distraction from other fellow competitors back home in the United States. It is in this sense that the Transformers fad among Chinese children can be talked about as a magnified echo effect of American deregulation.

Critical American commentators argue that children's imaginative play has increasingly become the target of marketing strategies and is subjected to the limits defined by the commercial market (Kline 1989: 299). Granted some validity to this argument, the question is – to what extent this process, initiated by Hasbro's Transformers, is likely to intensify in China and how? In the present situation of retrenchment,[6] it is hard to predict whether other similar 'creatures' in the US will follow the example of the Transformers onto the screen and into the toy market in China in the near future. However, it is not necessary for this to happen for the general process to advance. It is very possible that the Chinese toy manufacturers will imitate the 'novel' marketing strategy brought in by Hasbro. This would be entirely in line with the commonly accepted viewpoint concerning national development – anything that generates profit without breaking the law and thus adds to the gross national product tends to be officially sanctioned or encouraged. This explains the upgrading of advertising to the status of art. It also accounts for the mixed reaction of admiration and regret (how come we never thought of doing the same thing!) to the success of the Hasbro strategy. In fact, having realised the immense profitability of the Hasbro marketing strategy, one toy manufacturer in Beijing did make an unsuccessful attempt at producing Transformers (*The People's Daily*, March 28, 1989). For them, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the marketing strategy itself. On the contrary, it is thought to be worth learning by Chinese marketers. The fault, if any, is seen to lie in the exploitatively high prices and in the fact that most of the profit goes into the pocket of a foreign company.

The future of children's television in China will be determined by a complex set of interrelated factors: (1) the political-economic policy adopted by the government, and the balance struck between liberalism and central control, which will define the extent of commercialisation within the media; (2) the loosening or tightening of official control over the cultural sector as a whole; (3) the extent and forms of Western influence and intervention in the economic, political and cultural spheres; (4) more specifically, the degree of tolerance for digressions from the long-standing official guideline for children's television, which emphasizes moral and intellectual education through entertainment. Whatever may happen, however, one general trend seems to be irreversible for the foreseeable future – the commercialisation of children's television in one way or another. And when the history of this development comes to be written, a special place will need to be reserved for the Transformers' fad, since it was this incident, more than any other, that demonstrates the full potential of a coherent market strategy.

[6] From hindsight, all entrenchment policies turned out to be short-lasting strategies which come and go with the overall economic situation.

Conclusion

This piece of work has pursued a familiar, even over-familiar, research topic in the American and European literature on mass media and communication – the relationship between children and television, in the context of contemporary mainland China, where almost no systematic research has been conducted so far. This peculiar combination of abundant Western studies on the one hand, and the almost total lack of relevant work on China on the other, presented both difficulties and opportunities for me as a critical media sociologist. The most obvious difficulties were practical. In an ideal situation, it would clearly have been important to gather as much material as possible on a wide range of issues opened up by previous research. However, this was not possible, firstly because of the limited resources at my disposal, and secondly because the period of fieldwork was cut short unexpectedly by the fast moving political events that culminated in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tian An Men Square. The first restriction obliged me to be highly selective in the problems I chose for analysis. The second forced me to curtail my fieldwork some time before I had originally scheduled and before I had an opportunity to develop and deepen my emerging insights by conducting interviews and observations with parents and children in a wider range of locations within the rapidly changing social formation. I did not manage to conduct follow-up interviews with the parents and teachers in Beijing as I did in Jiaozuo for instance, and I was unable to get in touch with Beijing TV to confirm further details relating to the importation and the transmission of the Transformers cartoon series. As a consequence, the study is based on somewhat 'thinner' description than I had planned or would ever have wanted. Inevitably, therefore, the results have to be regarded as suggestive and should be evaluated more in terms of the lines of inquiry they open up for future research than the answers they offer to present questions.

The practical conditions under which the research was done were however, not entirely negative in their consequences. The very lack of relevant research conducted on China also offered opportunities. It 'freed' this piece of work from the possible theoretical and methodological confinement imposed by an established literature, and left much space for exploring new approaches. In addition, in the

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ideological thaw in midst of the pro-democracy movement, people were more willing to talk openly once I had gained their trust. After many years of cautious restraint over what they said in public or to relative strangers, they welcomed the opportunity to voice their hopes, criticisms and misgivings about the way that China was moving. It was the attempt to grasp the nature of this movement, and to puzzle out its relation to changes in people's everyday life, that lead me to formulate the critical perspective which provides the theoretical grounding for this book.

Most media researchers working on children and television in America and Europe have paid little or no attention to general movements in culture and society and how they might impinge on the interpretive practices and social activities associated with children's television viewing. Commentaries on possible connections have been left to moral entrepreneurs such as Mary Whitehouse or cultural critics such as Neil Postman. Since their conjectures have been speculative rather than systematic, and have been based on highly partial readings or misreadings of research evidence, they have been largely dismissed as irrelevant by academics working in this area. This is partly because the major focus of university-based researchers has been on the dynamics of individual response or on the micro politics of family interaction, and partly because potentially relevant changes in social and cultural formations (such as the steady increase on single parent families in the West) have been rendered more or less invisible by their relatively slow unfolding. In contrast, changes in Chinese culture and society have been both relatively rapid and highly visible. The combination of the partial move towards market competition and China's opening up to Western culture, coupled with basic social reforms such as the institution of the one-child policy, have created a highly unstable situation, marked by deep ambivalence and a continuing three-way ideological struggle between the legacy of Confucianism and other central elements in traditional Chinese culture, the still potent injunctions of the official socialist ethics of the state, and attractions of the new Western-oriented culture of market and consumption.

As I have tried to demonstrate, an analysis of these emerging social and cultural formations, and of the way they structure and re-structure commonsense thinking and everyday practice, is essential for a full understanding of children's changing relation to television. Not least because television, more than any other site of consumption in present day China, is simultaneously the product of social and economic changes, the focus of new forms of family interaction, and the location of ideological struggles. A fuller exploration of these intersections in future research will need to investigate in detail a number of dynamics that this present research has only been able to touch upon.

In the first place, it will be necessary to take account of the differential impact of the changes set in motion by the uneven development of market structures on the one hand and the process of 'Westernisation' or modernisation on the other. Resource constraints limited the locations in which fieldwork for this thesis could be conducted. Future work however, will need to explore, in much more detail, the contrast between families in rural and urban areas and in central and peripheral regions, paying particular attention to the new economic zones in the coastal areas. Only in this way

can the complexity in regional culture and development in relation to children's television viewing be charted.

Future work will also need to explore the ramifications of the emerging class structure in China. The important contrasts here are not simply between workers on the one hand (both rural and industrial) and non-manual group on the other, but also within the non-manual strata. It would be of particular interest to follow up Pierre Bourdieu's suggestions concerning the divisions between entrepreneurs, traditional professionals, and the new cultural professionals whilst adding, in the Chinese context, state and party officials. Are the splits between capitalists and cultural elites, old and new professionals, which he identifies, beginning to emerge in China? If so, what consequences do they have for family value systems and parent-child relations, including their orientations towards television viewing? In addition, future work will need to conduct a systematic investigation of gender differences, in terms of both the changing roles of mothers and fathers and of the differential expectations of, and treatment of female and male children. The starting point for any investigation concerning gender in China must be an adequate analysis of the interaction and overlap between the strong advocation of women's emancipation by the government and the residues of a long tradition of patriarchy in Chinese culture with a history of several thousand years.

Research into children and television, as well as seeking to develop a more adequate account of relevant context, will need to broaden its basic focus of inquiry. As the case of the Transformers demonstrates so forcefully, it is no longer just a question of addressing children's relation to broadcast television as a source of 'texts' for interpretation or as a focus of physical activity and social interaction. We now need to go on to look at the whole range of activities related to the small screen, either directly in the sense that they involve interaction with the screen (as with computer games or video cassettes), or indirectly, in the sense that they entail an extension of the screen's imaginary world into the world of children's play and their social life more generally, including their pivotal role as the pioneers of new consumption patterns.

In terms of research strategies, the most productive way to address these issues is through a combination of methodologies. In particular, the experience of this present work suggests that the optimum approach would be to employ a stratified sample survey to gather basic indexical data on a wide range of families in contrasted geographical and social locations (possibly supplemented by activity dairies kept by parents or/and children themselves) and then to use this data as a basis for selecting a range of ideal typical families for intensive qualitative interview and close observation.

However, the experience of this study also suggests that it is crucial that this work be conducted by researchers with a thorough understanding of the internal dynamics of the culture and a well developed capacity to read between the lines, when listening to responses. Failure to pick up the nuances of replies and to interpret situational clues is likely to produce misreadings which may mistake politeness for candour. Lull's recent book on Chinese television and popular culture – *China Turned On* is a case in point (Lull, 1991). As a non-Chinese speaker, Lull relies heavily on his interpreters. Although he claimed that people were happy to speak openly to a foreigner

and an overseas Chinese (2 years before the pro-democracy demonstrations), many of the quotations cited in the book bear the understandable imprint of caution and self-censorship. Unfortunately these nuances go unnoticed by Lull, perhaps inevitably given his lack of 'inner' knowledge about the culture and the people under study.

In 'To Participate, to Flee or to Transcend' – an article written for the *Review Guardian*, Zhang Xianliang, a well-known contemporary Chinese writer identifies the quality of 'mysteriousness' as the primary source of Western fascination with China and also the major barrier to understanding its culture and history:

> As I have observed elsewhere (in the forward to the English edition of *Half of man is Woman*), China is a mysterious country. Difficult to understand, it is an enigma for foreigners, but also a riddle to the Chinese themselves. Yet it is this very impenetrability which makes it so attractive. Of course, the recorded part of Chinese history is what the foreign observer can best understand. The mysterious part is that cultural spirit which has never been written down. Yet that is exactly what needs to be grasped (*The Guardian*, April 30, 1992).

If China is to come to terms with its own past and to confront the complexities of its own present, more and better analysis of the mutations of this 'cultural spirit' will have to come from 'inside' the culture. Otherwise, the alternative will be to see oneself only through an investigative technology constructed elsewhere, like looking permanently through the wrong end of a telescope. The work presented here has been a modest attempt to begin this process of interrogating the present with reference to the past. Whether this project will be continued, deepened and refined, however, will depend on both political and intellectual shifts that will take place inside China.

Appendix
Fieldwork: Process and Methods

The Conduct of the Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this study, in common with many other studies conducted by research students in the social sciences, was accomplished single-handedly and without funds for data gathering. It was the time when I went back to China for a visit from April 21 to May 20, 1989, a month coinciding with the pro-democracy movement. The original plan of staying for 3 months to allow enough time for testing research strategies and modifying them in the light of practical experience, and actually conducting the study, was disrupted. The pro-democracy demonstrations in April and May in Beijing, initiated by university students and soon joined by teachers, workers, and cadres, ended in early June. I curtailed my fieldwork and flied back to the UK on the first day of the martial law. I then was obliged to work with the data that I managed to collect up until that point. For hindsight, this particular study benefited from the very open social atmosphere prevailing during the movements. It was a time of high hopes. This was particularly the case in Beijing. People were more willing to give their opinions, talk about their wishes, and articulate their grievances and complaints. The social and political atmosphere was unprecedentedly optimistic and tolerant in those days and people seemed to believe that it was time for them to speak their minds openly and publicly.

Being without funds for fieldwork posed problems for the conduct of the research, the worst of which were the restrictions it imposed on sample choices. Accordingly, samples were chosen, or had to be chosen, in two cities – Beijing, the capital city where I landed and where I studied in two universities and still had many friends and contacts, and Jiaozuo, the city where I was born and grew up and where my parents live. However, the disadvantages of fundlessness were partly compensated for by the low cost of living on the one hand, and the benefits arising from Chinese socialism – public ownership of key facilities on the other. Public ownership sometimes can mean that everybody stands a chance to fish in the pond of communal properties. A friend printed the 400 copies of the questionnaires for me 'free' of charge with the public-resources in his work unit, a quite usual practice

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among people who have legitimate access to public facilities in socialist China where the spheres of the public and the private are not so clearly separated. Similarly, all the photocopies were obtained through friends who had Xerox machines in their work units. I have to thank this system in which private property and money have not yet become sacred and started to determine everything.

Large-scale social scientific research costs money. Even in an ideal situation, with no access to funds, there is little possibility, and indeed little sense, in copying the expensive Western especially American styles of empiricist research in China, where the most acute problem at the time was still to feed and clothe a population of 1.12 billion people in the late 1980s, particularly when the chosen topic would be judged as somewhat quite distant from people's daily existence there. This political and cultural environment, plus the stringent economic situation at the time, therefore makes the establishment of social sciences in the Western sense – either positivist or critical – immensely difficult, which is also why there have been so few pieces of recent research on the topic of children and television.

Cultural and social phenomena which ought to be studied by indigenous researchers are therefore often left in the hands of social scientists from the West, who can afford to do what they want and need to do, both in terms of finance and research technology. Here lies a danger of the loss of power to define and understand the reality in one's own country. Perceived from this vantage point, the relatively expensive styles of empiricist research are the least appropriate models to be copied by Chinese researchers in exploring ways of studying their own culture and society. The mass communication research that does exist in China in the late 1980s, consists mostly of audience surveys, often linked to the needs of foreign advertising agencies and funded by foreign companies, has little to contribute to an understanding of the rapid social and cultural transformations that have been taking place in the Chinese society since late 1970s. This present piece of work can therefore be regarded, in a certain sense, as a counter to these attempts within Chinese academia to reproduce crude American empiricist social research.

It is always helpful to have some knowledge about the internal structure and hierarchy of the institutions – primary schools, families, and television stations in the case of this study – before one attempts conducting research in them. The approach I adopted to the question of access (with the exception of families) was by way of a formal work unit – *dan wei*. This proved to be an effective way to approach schools and other institutions. Before I started conducting my fieldwork, I went to acquire some *jie shao xin*, 'introductory letters', from my 'work unit' – The People's University of China in Beijing. Such official letters are provided by work units, certifying the holder's formal status and purpose of trip when traveling on business. The letters I got were addressed to the schools and institutions I intended to visit, and briefly explained the purpose of my fieldwork and courteously asked for help and co-operation if I needed them. Above all, these *jie shao xin* were solemnly stamped with the seal of my 'work unit' – Department of Journalism, the People's University of China, where I was a postgraduate student and I was awarded the scholarship to study in the UK. This legacy from China's socialist past when co-operation and mutual trust were easily made possible by a short introductory letter, greatly facilitated and

accelerated the whole process of fieldwork and enabled me to collect much of the important data in a relatively short time. I was never rejected, if not always genuinely welcomed, by the schools and media institutions I visited. At the primary school in Beijing, for instance, I went directly to the headmistress' office with the letter. She immediately granted me full access to the staff and pupils, and appointed a female teacher to help me with my work there. This is in line with the fraternal co-operation between work units advocated by the state.

However, it was important for me to distinguish between the occasions when I should deploy the 'introductory letters' and those when I would do better without them. My interview with the head of the City Radio and Television Bureau in Jiaozuo, for example, was done through a mutual friend. In this case, arriving with the 'introductory letter' would have been unnecessary and too formal. In this case, the 'introductory letter' could even be counter-productive. A personal approach, when possible, is often more effective than a formal one, in shortening the distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. The talk with him, for example, gave me a great deal of very valuable background information not only on the officially defined reality in local television broadcasting, but also on the hidden side of the new 'liberal' social environment in which he operated, such as the expansion of commercial video halls in the late 1980s, showing tapes smuggled in from Hong Kong or Taiwan containing undesirable shots of sex and violence.

A Western tourist summarised in his memoirs the multiple connotations of the Chinese laugh, which are often beyond the perception of foreigners (see Bonavia, 1989: 74–75). This can be taken as an illustration of the 'subtlety' and 'sophistication' of many people in China. But such subtlety and sophistication are more usefully seen as an outcome of the fact that people are trained to read between the lines and listen between the intonations. Throughout history, traditional paternalism of the state and the family left very little space for individuals to express their opinions freely and directly. Consequently, indirectness in personal communications has become a perceivable 'cultural trait', which often takes the form of courtesy and diplomacy, and which has to be dealt with carefully in any social scientific research. This means that the answers elicited by interview questions or questionnaire items cannot be taken at face value. On the contrary, they require the intensive interpretation and contextualisation that, arguably, only a researcher with an interior knowledge of the culture can adequately provide.

Research Methods

The present study employed a variety of research methods including questionnaire surveys, unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews, and participant and non-participant observations. Very often observations involved interviews and vice versa. The samples for the questionnaire survey consisted of 200 grade-two (8–9-year-old) and grade-three (10–11-year-old) pupils from two primary schools in Beijing and Jiaozuo respectively, together with their parents. The children's

questionnaire consisted solely of open-ended questions, which, I believed, would be less distorting than a multiple choice format because they avoided imposing fixed categories on the children. The parents' questionnaire however, consisted of both multiple choice items and open-ended questions, depending on the specific information being sought after. Although the open-ended questions posed more difficulties for coding at a later stage, they turned out to be more informative than the closed choices.

The questionnaires were distributed at the schools. I was allowed to use the weekly non-academic hour of class-meeting – *ban hui* – to distribute both children's and parents questionnaires and to collect the former on the spot. After handing in their own questionnaires, children were asked to take a parents' questionnaire home and to bring it back the next day after they had been completed by one of their parents. In this way, the distribution and collection of the questionnaires was accomplished both smoothly and efficiently. However, in the process of conducting the questionnaire survey, some unexpected problems cropped up as a result of the use of 'new' social scientific research methods in Chinese context of the late 1980s. Since it was the first time that these pupils, and their parents, had to fill in a questionnaire, I carefully explained the nature of the survey before handing out the schedules. However, there was still a basic misunderstanding of its purpose, which I only found out later, during an interview with the Jiaozuo parents. One boy mistook the questionnaire as examination paper. He went home and told his father to answer some questions set by the 'teacher'. After his father had completed the questionnaire, the boy insisted on reading through his answers to see if there were correct. 'Otherwise, you might fail,' said the boy to his father very seriously. Although the father was fairly sure that an examination for him would not make any sense, he was still a bit confused by the boy's certainty, and double checked with me.

The boy (who was most probably not the only one) had his reasons for this misunderstanding since the oil printed questions on thin low-quality paper resembled very closely the usual school examination paper at the time. This misunderstanding very possibly affected the answers to the extent that it imposed a perceived need to give the 'right' answers. My inability to anticipate a misunderstanding of this kind is one reason why the data generated from the questionnaire survey, which was the most time consuming part of the study, involving questionnaire design, printing, distributing, collecting, coding, and processing, turned out to be less fruitful in generating useable insights than the depth interviews, observations, and even secondary data. The two basic weaknesses of the questionnaire survey – the sample choice, which was limited by the lack of supplementary funds for the fieldwork, and possible misunderstandings about the nature the survey, coupled with a growing orientation, on my own part, towards critical ethnography, lead me to demote the questionnaire results to secondary position when I came to write up the study, whereas originally I had envisaged them playing a rather central role.

The follow-up interviews were conducted with two groups of children, in Beijing and Jiaozuo, one group of teachers and one group of parents in Jiaozuo, plus the head of Jiaozuo City Radio and Television Bureau, and one cameraman from China Central Television in Beijing. In Jiaozuo, ten children were selected to take part in a group discussion by the teacher responsible for the grade-two class, while in

Beijing, five children of both grade-two and grade-three were chosen by the teacher who was appointed by the headmistress to help me. These children often turned out to be more 'sophisticated' than I had expected and interviews with them could be 'tricky' at certain points. For example, at the beginning of the group interview with the Jiaozuo children, the usual classroom manners prevailed and children raised their hands to ask for permission to speak. But as soon as they noticed that they were not having a class in the usual sense, and moreover, I was not a really severe 'teacher', they discarded the proper classroom etiquette and started shouting things like 'let me talk', 'it's my turn now', and even 'you shut up, I'll answer'. The normal courtesy and discipline were forgotten and abandoned. However, the resulting free and relaxed atmosphere, which is not allowed in formal classes, was actually favorable to the generation of spontaneous answers, which often revealed more than the more well-prepared 'correct' answers.

Moreover, I noticed that children often tried to speculate on the 'right' answer, which they presumed I wanted. One of their motivations for doing this was to 'please' me – the person then in charge. Fortunately it was not too difficult for me to detect such occasions, given my own experience of being a school pupil in China myself. The same search for 'correct' acceptable answer was also evident in the questionnaire survey. For example, to the question 'what do you usually do after school', most children mentioned that they helped their parents with housework. This was contradicted in discussions with parents. According to them, most of the lone children at home did nothing more than completing their own homework assigned at school and then enjoying themselves, including watching television. A mother told me during the interview something 'quite funny' (in her own words) about her daughter. The daughter asked whether the mother had told the 'teacher' (that is me) that she helped her with the housework at home. 'But what housework can she do at home? Sweeping the floor and making more mess?' she commented. It is too simplistic to regard the children's 'false' answers as mere lying. They are more usefully seen as an expression of their conformity to the mainstream values that good pupils not only behave themselves at school but also at home – that is, obey their parents and help them with some housework.

Unlike children, adults under usual circumstances tended to be more cautious in the beginning about what they should say. But soon they would open up to talk and sometimes could not stop. Chatting is a way of life in China. One chats about almost everything. The Western sense of privacy was not an issue at the time. One can easily capture this communal way of life if one takes a look in the public parks or travels in a train in the 1980s. In fact, ordinary people in China are often far more open, spontaneous, cheerful and indeed, happier, than they are perceived and portrayed in Western media and literature, as many people in the West still tend to stick to the lingering Cold War mentality of repressive 'communism'. They can hardly see the often vibrant and 'anarchist' reality as a matter of fact. 'Truth' in China therefore, is often beyond the reach of the great majority of people in the West. Getting at this 'truth' is of course the ultimate purpose of this book.

In the Jiaozuo School, I asked the teacher responsible for the grade-two class to help me approach some parents to talk to. She said that the best time would be when

they came to fetch their children in the afternoon after school. Although five of the parents agreed to stay for a chat with me, I could sense some of their hesitation or reluctance at the beginning. After a day's work, they may understandably want to fetch their children and go home directly rather than staying to talk to a stranger. But they found it difficult to dismiss the request from the teacher of their children. They stayed and then went home with me, retaining some uncertainty and curiosity about me. I lived five minutes walk away from the school. In the beginning of the discussion, they either remained passive or gave very brief and courteous answers to my questions. What was needed at that time was to locate some common ground that I shared with them, which could help to eliminate the uncertainty they held about me.

To break the ice, I told them that I had been a student in the same school 16 years ago and how shocked I was to see that no obvious improvement in conditions had been made. I received immediate confirmative responses from the parents. One by one they articulated their own comments on and criticism of the school and the general dismal situation in primary education. One parent complained that the government spent too much on higher education and little was left for basic education in primary and middle school. I explained the nature of my research and emphasized my status as an independent critical researcher to gain more mutual trust. Their initial passivity soon dissolved and the discussions went deeper and deeper. They touched on other topics besides children and television - including their dissatisfaction with some of the school teachers, the one-child policy and the resulting difficulties in bringing up a lone child. They told me many anecdotes about their children. It is never boring for Chinese parents to talk about their children, and once they started they tended to carry on by themselves. Taken as a whole, the depth interviews, although they were less time and energy consuming compared with the questionnaire survey, turned out to be the most fruitful part of the fieldwork in generating both data and insights.

Observations cannot be neatly separated from interviews in the case of this study. Their relative weight in any particular situation varied, but both the major observations I conducted were substantially involved with interviews. The first can be classified in a loose sense as participant observation whereas the other was an instance of non-participant observation. The participant observation was conducted in a Beijing family and focused on a single child living with her grandparents. The non-participant observation was conducted in a toy shop in Beijing as part of the study of the Transformers toy ranges. Both of these exercises were heavily interwoven with interviews, and both proved to be very fruitful in generating useful data.

Methods and Problems

In an ideal situation, all the data collected for a study should be capable of throwing light upon the main research problems and should play a significant role in writing-up the final report. In the case of this piece of work however, the first-hand data gathered through depth interviews, and the secondary data collected from newspapers

and other documentary sources play a more central role than originally envisaged, whilst the questionnaire survey was most often used to confirm the trends and patterns that the qualitative material suggested. This is perhaps not that surprising since the relationship between problem formation and data collection is a dialectical one: not only does the initial definition of research problems structure what sort of data are to be collected and by what methods, but the data actually collected also affects the formation and modification of research problems. Taking advantage of the two-way traffic formation demands flexibility and sensitivity on the part of the researcher. Sensitivity is required to detect and grasp new problems and flexibility to modify and redefine the original formulation of problems whenever necessary.

In the case of this piece of work on children and television in China, the research problems were initially defined on the basis of a review of past studies in the area with special attention being accorded to their relevance to the Chinese case. Research problems generated by this procedure included: (1) a general description of Chinese children's television viewing behaviour ('classical' questions such as how much television they watch, what they watch, how they watch); (2) organisation of parental control and mediation over children's viewing and its links to the general pattern of parental control over all aspects of children's life in China; (3) the interplay between schoolwork and television viewing, predicated on the prevailing overemphasis on children's school performance in China. These well established problems remained meaningful in the new context of children and television in China, but were necessarily modified and redefined in the process of data collection, while, at the same time, new problems were discovered.

Take the problem of parental control for example. When the research was first formulated, this was conceived as a relatively straightforward topic for investigation. During the interviews with parents and teachers in Jiaozuo however, I began to realise the centrality of parental control for an understanding of children's television viewing in China. As research progressed, more aspects of the dynamics involved revealed themselves: To what extent do parents control their children's viewing? How do they achieve the control? How strict is the control? What are the structural forces that underpin it but often remain opaque to the parents themselves? And last but not least, how can we interpret regimes of control in the context of wider changes in Chinese culture and society? Two particular aspects of parents' control over children's television viewing emerged as particularly interesting in the process of data collection – the fact that parents forbid children to watch 'love scenes' and that they actively encourage them to watch what they think of as 'educationally significant shows'. To allow these aspects to be fully explored, parental control, which was originally envisaged as a subsection within a chapter, extended itself into an independent chapter of and on its own.

The case study of the *Transformers* cartoon series and linked toy range is an even more unexpected byproduct in the process of data gathering. The first time that I came across the Transformers was when I went shopping with my sister and my nephew in my home city Jiaozuo. My 7-year-old nephew asked for a fist-sized toy of multi-colored plastic parts. It was a toy called Transformer, which was at the time all new to me. He was very upset when his demand was refused because of the unrea-

sonable price. The second time that I came across the Transformers was during my interview with the Beijing children. I started the interview with the very general cliche – 'let's talk about television'. But the children's immediate response was very specific – 'talk about the Transformers?' Only then did I realise the significance of this so-called Transformers in the life of these children and decide to track it down in my research. The problem of the Transformers therefore cropped up unexpectedly but forcefully. It was then grasped and traced, and the final result of this was an additional chapter on the cartoon series and linked toys. This case study of the Transformers, I believe, is important for our understanding of the role of television in the lives of the generation of Chinese children in the late 1980s. This is because it forces us to take seriously a context that a more narrowly focused investigation of children in front of the small screen could easily ignore, namely, the burgeoning market economy in the late1980s and the rapid expansion of a consumerist culture with Chinese characteristics.[1]

To sum up this reflective account of research process and methods, we can go back once again to C. Wright Mills and his warning of two major pitfalls for social inquiries – 'grand theory' and 'abstracted empiricism'. To avoid falling unconsciously into one of the two pitfalls, a problem-centred approach to research methods is adopted at the very beginning when this study of children and television in China was first envisaged and designed. This means that a range of tried and tested methods were considered relevant as long as they served the purpose of helping to tackle the defined and redefined research problems. Only this approach, I believe, can do justice to the immensely complicated social and cultural formations in contemporary China, and is conducive to the illumination of historically significant social phenomena in a rapidly changing Chinese culture and society. With the further unfolding of marketization and its dividing effects in the decades to come, ciritical research on all aspects of Chinese society – political, economic, scocial and cultural – should certainly and urgently be put on the agenda. This study on children and television in China should be seen as a modest but serious attempt by a young critical sociologist at the beginning of her career in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Now after more than twenty years, at a time when it seems that capital is sweeping the world with little effective and meaningful resistance, I would like to end this book with a slogan: long live critical thinking!

[1] To further understand the process of the rise of mass consumerism in post-Mao China, see my article 'Consumerism, Confucianism, Communism: Making Sense of China Today', *New Left Review*, 222, March/April, 1997.

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