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Chinese Entertainment Industry, the Case of Folk *Errenzhuan*

Haili Ma

Following the past thirty years of economic development in China, a substantial amount of research on rural migrants and urbanization has emerged. However, few address traditional art forms and their related socio-economic transformation. This paper scrutinizes how errenzhuan, a Northeast folk peasant sing-song art form, developed to become a national entertainment industry within a decade, only to crumble under a change of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political direction. It argues that the trajectory path of errenzhuan reveals distinctive features of the Chinese cultural industry, which is developed under the dual pressures of economic success and CCP ideologically directed market monopoly. The party-state's ability to regulate the market, despite the industry's nationwide popularity and economic substance, exemplifies the power of the Chinese party state "central bank," which monopolizes the art market for the continued articulation and legitimacy of the CCP. Such phenomenon is identified in this paper as "cultural industries with Chinese characteristics."

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Background

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a Northeast Chinese folk performing art, *errenzhuan*, rose to form an entertainment industry with unprecedented national and international fame. *Errenzhuan* literally

means two people (*erren*) telling stories through performing different roles (*zhuan*). In 1990, the then thirty-three-year-old Zhao Benshan, an *errenzhuan* actor, was invited to perform a comedy sketch (*xiaopin*) at the China Central Television (CCTV) Chinese New Year Gala and won instant nationwide popularity. Following this, Zhao's comedy sketch became the highlight of the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala for the next twenty-one consecutive years (Du 1998).¹ The very name of Zhao Benshan has since come to symbolize grassroots comedy and *errenzhuan* laughter. In 2003, Zhao was selected as a Representative of the National People's Congress, the highest political position that may be bestowed on a private citizen in China. In the same year, Zhao established the Benshan Media Studio, using only *errenzhuan* actors to produce comic soap operas with themes around the daily lives of Northeast rural peasants. In 2004, in collaboration with Liaoning University, Zhao set up a series of *errenzhuan* BA programs. In 2007, Zhao purchased a theatre in the city center of Shenyang, naming it the Liu Laogen Dawutai (Old Liu Root Theatre).² By 2014, there were eight franchised Old Liu Root Theatres across China, each staging *errenzhuan* performances, with an annual turnover of around 148 million Yuan (Cao and Hu 2011: 55; Hou 2008: 77; Kong, Zheng, Yu, and Zhu 2011: 227).

Despite this political and economic success, *errenzhuan* as an art form has always been highly controversial. In 2010, Zhao Benshan and his favorite apprentice Xiao Shenyang or Little Shenyang led an *errenzhuan* troupe that toured in the United States. Local paper *Newsweek* published an article reporting *errenzhuan* as "vulgar," with the title referred Xiao Shenyang as "the dirtiest man in China" (Liu and Fish 2010). Han Zaifen, vice chair of the Chinese Theatre Association, condemned *errenzhuan* as "grotesque, with not a trace of cultural value and depth" (Xing 2011: 200). Criticism was targeted mainly at *errenzhuan*'s coarse and sexually connoted speech, to which Zhao responded that "*errenzhuan* is like pig's tripe, which will never be clean. Once it is thoroughly cleansed, it is no longer *errenzhuan*" (Xinhua Net 2014).

The controversy continued and peaked on 15 October 2014, after Xi Jinping delivered a speech at Beijing wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui (Beijing Forum on Literature and Art), often referred to as the Beijing Forum, following his succession to the Presidency. Xi stated: "Some art works ridicule the sublime, warp the classics, subvert history, or defile the masses and heroic characters. In others good and evil cannot be distinguished, ugliness replaces beauty, and the dark side of society is over-emphasized. Still others blindly chase and cater to public tastes and vulgar interests, chase financial gain, and provoke the ecstasy of the senses." Xi emphasized the role of artists was "to serve the mass and the Party" and arts "must not lose direction in the wave of market economy

and be the slave of capital” (Xinhua 2015). In 2014, Zhao Benshan, who had been a member of the National People’s Congress for a decade, was not reelected, nor did he appear in the subsequent CCTV New Year Gala. There has since been very little media exposure of *errenzhuan*.

China’s past thirty years of economic growth has generated a substantial amount of research on rural migrants and urbanization (Goodman 2014; Kanbur and Zhang 1999; Knight and Ramani, 2010; Wang 2006; Zhang and Song 2003). Meanwhile, a new discourse on Chinese cultural industries has emerged, examining the formation of the art market in relation to cultural policy and CCP ideological direction (Hartley and Keane 2006; Keane 2013; Kong 2014; Ma 2015; O’Connor 2009; Sternberg 2017). However, very little research has examined the socio-economic evolution of traditional art forms, especially rural peasant folk forms.

This paper focuses on the evolution of *errenzhuan*, through which it examines the development of the Chinese art market under the dual pressures of economic, which means art institution must prove they are profit-making entities, as well as ideological censorship. Zhao Benshan is mentioned in the introduction to highlight the scale of *errenzhuan* as an entertainment industry and stress the power of the party-state in regulating the market. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this paper draws theories from folk comedy, cultural industries, and CCP legitimacy to provide an analytical structure. This paper argues that the trajectory of *errenzhuan* reveals the unique characteristics of the Chinese cultural industry, as developed under CCP’s ideologically directed market monopoly, for the continued articulation and legitimation of the CCP. In this paper, I phrase it as “cultural industries with Chinese characteristics.”

For the completion of this paper, I engaged in two months of field research between January and February 2015 at Shenyang Arts Research Institute. Shenyang is the capital of the Northeast province of Liaoning. Literature and documents about *errenzhuan* were accessed from local libraries and the institute. I attended *errenzhuan* performances at the Old Liu Root Theatre in Shenyang and nearby regions. With the assistance of Shenyang Arts Research Institute, I interviewed around twenty *errenzhuan* artists, script writers and directors, and conducted audience focus groups. They form the empirical data base for this paper.

Section One: Theoretical Structure

Bakhtin’s Carnival, “A Pint of Tripes”

A large amount of material on comedy has been published, with some focusing on China (Clasquin 2001; Davis and Chey 2013; Gao and

Pugsley 2008). However, none is more appropriate than that of Bakhtin to analyze the phenomena of *errenzhuan*. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin developed Aristotle's theory of laughter—as a unique characteristic of the human species that acts as the ultimate wisdom in folk humor. Bakhtin did not idealize folk humor, but described it as grotesque, which in this context relates to abusive language and sex (1984: 27). Bakhtin further articulates the concept of grotesque as “a pint of tripes”: “Tripe, stomach, intestines are the bowels, the belly, the very life of man. . . . It is believed that after cleaning, tripe still contained ten percent excrement which was therefore eaten with the rest of the meal” (p. 162). The folk coarse language, dirty jokes, sexual references, jugglers performing, acrobatic tricks, and masquerade figures are purely grotesque, carnivalesque themes, yet representing the vitality of folk life (p. 96). This folk grotesque laughter is therefore “the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself” (p. 91).

“A pint of tripes” has been the main reference for *errenzhuan* and the focal point of debate. As will be discussed in full later in the article, *errenzhuan*'s grotesque and coarse language, dirty jokes, sexual references, and associated folk grotesque laughter is the very power that the folk obtains to mock the official world, to reverse the authority, and to obtain folk victory. Once “a pint of tripes” is thoroughly cleaned, and the grotesque realism is eliminated under the dual pressures of economic and ideological censorship, *errenzhuan* loses its essential folk power of defiance and renewal. The ability of the Chinese party-state to maintain ideological and economic market monopoly lies in its role as the “central bank.”

CCP “Central Bank” and Legitimacy

The phrase “central bank” was coined by the famous French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Farage, 1994) who devised the concept of capital to measure social hierarchical power. Bourdieu's capital is not limited in the monetary sense, but expands to a wide range of exchange forms. In *Rethinking the State*, Bourdieu sees the modern state emerging from “performative discourse” that both legitimates and constitutes the state as the wielder of symbolic domination in the struggle for power:

The state is the *culmination of a process of concentration of different species of capital*: capital of physical forces or instruments of coercion (army, policy), economic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. It is this concentration as such which constitutes the state as the holder of a sort of meta-capital granting power over other species of capital and over their holders. (1994: 16)

China, a regime structured on the Soviet model, has many examples of the party-state acting as a “central bank” for market monopoly and its own legitimacy. Back in 1942, Mao Zedong delivered his “Talk at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” from the then CCP headquarters in Yan’an, in which he declared that there was no such thing as art for art’s sake. Rather, art was to serve the Party and the people (Mao 1965). The speech was aimed to inspire and mobilize the underclass, the peasants, and working class, to join the CCP for the revolution, with the promise of overturning a feudalistic system and for them to become the masters of a new society. This vision proliferated through diverse folk performing arts. It was through class mobilization that the CCP established the People’s Republic of China and claimed sole legitimate power in 1949, despite inferior military equipment and minimal economic power. Throughout the 1950s, the CCP carried out nationwide reform of folk performing arts, known as the *xigai* or traditional theatre reform,³ through which the government redistributed political and symbolic capitals, making folk art an institutionalized elite art form and folk performers elite professional artists. In the post-Mao era, faced with increased marketization and globalization, the CCP continued redistribution of political and symbolic capitals, making new elite art forms and artists to ensure ongoing CCP ideological articulation and legitimation (Ma 2015: 2–10), such as the case with *errenzhuan*.

The initial rise of *errenzhuan* in the new millennium was the result of direct CCP support through the reallocation of resources, such as access to CCTV—which is under the tight management of the CCP (Zhu and Berry 2009)—and bestow artists with political and symbolic capital, such as the case of Zhao Benshan. It was through such redistribution of political and symbolic capitals that enabled *errenzhuan* to become a nationwide entertainment industry.

Power is based on recognition, which is why the dominant group is eager to produce and reproduce their culture and beliefs. Misrecognition, on the other hand, is what Bourdieu calls the function of “symbolic violence,” which he defines as “the violence, which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (1991: 167). In other words, agents are subjected to forms of violence (treated as inferior, denied resources, limited in their social mobility and aspirations), but they do not perceive it that way; rather, their situation seems to them “the natural order of things.” Upon receiving new political and social status, *errenzhuan* artists become the “servants of the state” and lose the folk power of mocking and challenging authority. This wittingly or unwittingly exploited position is an act of symbolic violence. It is within the system of party-state control of “central bank” capitals that *errenzhuan* developed as a cultural industry.

Cultural Industries with Chinese Characteristics

When Adorno first coined the phrase Culture Industry in the 1940s, he did not use it to celebrate a new economic opportunity, but to describe the entrapment of artistic value. Adorno criticized the capitalist market and profit-driven production which causes the merging of both high and low cultural forms: “under capitalism all production is for the market; goods are produced not in order to meet human needs and desires but for the sake of profit, for the sake of acquiring further capital” (Adorno 1991: 5). Adorno therefore reminded readers not to take the phrase “industry” too literally as it referred to the standardization of cultural forms, which cause both the high and popular art forms to lose their tradition and spirituality (Adorno 1991: 100).

The process of *errenzhuan*'s transformation from a distinct folk art form to a standardized entertainment is precisely due to the market requirement for making profit. However, the pressure was not just from the necessity for economic market development, but was also ideologically directed. Pan and Chan highlight that China's party-state has full involvement in promoting indigenous art forms as nationalism to bolster Communist Party legitimacy (Pan and Chan 2000). China is increasingly on the same wavelength in terms of the use of indigenous culture as soft power to enhance its position in global politics (Huang and Sheng 2006; Xi 2014: 116).

When *errenzhuan* was perceived as being controversial to the representation of China's global cultural image, the CCP was able to regulate the entire *errenzhuan* industry by withdrawing the two most important capital forms—political and symbolic. This was exemplified by Zhao Benshan's exclusion from Xi Jinping's 2014 speech at *Forum on Literature and Art* and the membership of the National People's Congress. Consequently, *errenzhuan* lost these capitals which had previously been converted into economic capitals for development within the cultural market. The fate of *errenzhuan* therefore highlights the distinction of Chinese cultural markets, which have developed under the dual pressures of economic pressure and ideological censorship. This phenomenon may be best interpreted as “cultural industries with Chinese characteristics.”

Section Two: The Origin of *Errenzhuan*

Errenzhuan literally means two people (*erren*) telling stories through performing different roles (*zhuan*). With no pre-fixed character, no special costumes, the actors are able to perform the world through (*yi*)*zhuan**sheng*, making a turn, hence the saying “*qianjun*

wanma, jiushi zanliang (thousands of army and millions of horses, only the two of us (to reign).” *Errenzhuan* focuses on folk love stories, artistically having the following characteristics: *chang* (singing), *zuo* (performing), *wu* (dancing), *shuo* (speaking), and *jue* (unique skills). The name *errenzhuan* first appeared in *Taidong Ribao* (Tai Dong Daily) in 1934 and was officially recorded in 1953 (Tian 2008: 4).

Scholars trace the origin of *errenzhuan* to two sources: a Northeastern ancient fertility-praying dance and a beggars’ story-telling performance which entered the Northeast from central China (Li 2007; Wang 2009). Traditionally, after a day’s toil, especially in the long harsh winter, laborers would gather together on top of a Dongbei heated brick bed to chat and to sing *errenzhuan*. The singing absorbs various traditional Chinese *qupai* (music structures). One of the most frequently used is *wuhaihai*, with distinctive “*aihai, aihaihai*” at the end of each sentence to enhance expressive feelings (Zhao 2003: 66).

When the singing becomes lively, *wu* (dancing) would take place. The dancing combines styles of the ancient fertility-praying and Northeastern *yangge* (rice field dance)⁴ with movements focusing on hips, following an 8-shaped pattern. In *errenzhuan*, the female is regarded as the “Goddess” and traditionally takes the lead role or *shangzhuang* in *chang*, *zuo*, and *wu*, to be followed by the male role, known as *xiazhuang* or *chou* (the clown). *Xiazhuang* would ensure to be slightly lower than *shangzhuang*, with the focal point of following and supporting *shangzhuang* fixed on her hips. Females may use a handkerchief and males a fan as props (Zhang 2014: 89). With the actors’ ability to *zhuan* (performing different roles), the limited space within a house is transformed into the world stage.

In an interview I conducted with the *errenzhuan* star Zhao Haiyan in 2015, Zhao showed me the clip *Xixiang guanhua* (Watching Flowers at the Western Chamber), and explained in detail how the above artistic characters are executed. Today, it is one of the most popularly performed traditional *errenzhuan* pieces. In this clip, the *shangzhuang* character Cui Yingying is followed closely by the *xiazhuang* character, the maid Hongniang (Red Lady), performed in this case by Zhao’s husband Yan Guangming. *Xiazhuang* does not have any special costume nor makeup to resemble Hongniang, and in the full stage production, he switches instantaneously between the play’s supporting roles of Hongniang, Cui’s lover Zhangsheng, Cui’s mother, monks, and other roles. Every role is performed in full through the two performers’ ability of *zhuan*. The dancing style in this video is refined, but *yangge* movement is apparent, and the *wuhaihai qupai* forms a clear musical structure amidst modern instruments (Zhao 2015):

CUI YINGYING: As soon as I, Cui Yingying, enter the garden, aihai, aihaihai;

HONGNIANG: I raise head to see, aihai, aihaihai;

CUI YINGYING: The flowers and grass of the garden, aihai, aihaihai;

HONGNIANG: Blooming extra beautifully, aihai, aihaihai.
(Zhao and Yan: 0:11–0:33)

Grotesque realism, dirty jokes, and coarse language are essential to *errenzhuan*, and these parts are led by the male *chou*, through *shuo* and *jue*. In this part of the performance, the male *chou* will lead the narration, sexually teasing his partner, interacting with and amusing the audience. Symbolic erotic acting with sexual connotation is performed through physical touching. This is the reason why *errenzhuan* stage partners are exclusively married couples (Hou 2008; Hu 2013; Yang 2007). However, the most animated sections are traditionally performed with a time and location restriction—either following a midnight rule at home, when children have been put to bed or in the “red light” districts. Yang Pu, a professor specializing in *errenzhuan* and Director of the Northeast Arts Research Center at Jilin University, explains the reasons for the highly charged sexual connotation and its related popularity associated with historical migrants to *Guanwai* (literally “outside the border” [of north China], another name for Northeast China):

Guanwai men have historically lived in an environment with little sex and love, simply because they didn’t have the financial means to pursue it. Many laborers came to the Northeast to work in mines and forests. These groups of laborers had very little opportunity to meet females. Under harsh economic and social conditions, many could not afford to get married. Even among married people, most of them had arranged marriages, with little love. Lack of sexual opportunity and satisfied sexual activities lead to strong desires for sex and love. Explicit sexual dirty storytelling provided satisfaction for the illusion of fulfilled sexual desire. (Yang 2010: 149)

However, I would like to push this analysis further by arguing that the grotesque sexual connotation of the performance not only comforts the folk but allows them to challenge the official world. For example, the poem “Jingyuesi” (Homesick in the Moonlit Night), which was composed by Chinese poet Li Bai during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and has long been regarded as the exemplary literature of the learned class, is also popular in *errenzhuan*. Instead of the official lines of “raising my head to look at the bright moon, lowering my head and miss my hometown,” in *errenzhuan*, the actor sings the couplet as “raise my head to look at the bright moon, lower my head to pull down

my trousers (to masturbate)” (Wang 2009: 45). The humor arises from rhymed metaphors aligned with erotic sexuality with emphasis placed on lower body sexual organs, which is the very essence of folk life, as Bakhtin highlights, and through which the official world is mocked and power reversed.

Such explicit sexual connotation and folk laughter not only create an alternative world for the lower-class male, but also for females who suffer the dual repressions of class and gender. In the Chinese classical literature, *Xixiangji* (Romance of the Western Chamber), one episode involves the young maid Hongniang who facilitates her mistress to secretly meet her beloved young scholar as a symbolic rebellion against the will of the family. In all other Chinese theatrical versions, the story focuses on Hongniang’s linguistic wit. However, the *errenzhuan* adaptation of the Western Chamber meeting has specific emphasis on the actual sexual intercourse: after Zhang Junrui meets Cui Yingying in the chamber, due to excitement and anxiety Zhang cannot obtain an erection. In order to “save the rarely obtained occasion,” Hongniang decides to sexually “sacrifice” herself to arouse both Zhang and Cui. Afterwards, Zhang asks Hongniang how she could be so “knowledgeable” at such a young age and her reply is: “If the old master had not been dead, I could easily be your number two mother-in-law” (Wang 2009: 77). Such an angle of storytelling offers an explicit challenge to the Confucian patriarchal system, where females, especially young female servants, were placed at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of gender, class, and age. In this alternative world, a servant girl obtains superiority through sex and publicly announces her victory based on her sexual performativity.

Through the carnival aspects of linguistic “grotesque realism” and degradation, *errenzhuan* builds “its own world in opposition to the official world, its own state versus the official state” (Bakhtin 1984: 21), and those involved obtain renewal and revival. In Northeast China, locals describe their devotion to *errenzhuan* by saying that they “would rather spare a meal than *errenzhuan*.” Food, to the lower social class is the most precious of goods. To prioritize the consumption of *errenzhuan* over food demonstrates the extreme popularity of this art form amongst the locals (Yang 2007; Yang and Sun 2013). Under the aforementioned traditional theatre reform implemented in the Mao era, while *errenzhuan* as a folk form achieved unprecedented artistic standards and peasant singers gained elite status, the once intimate actor–audience relationship was nonetheless broken. Accordingly, the form’s folk power to mock the official world was diminished, leading to the decline of *errenzhuan*’s popularity. Since the post-Mao market reform of the 1980s, in particular from the 1992 marketization onward,

there has been rapid emergence of a body of independent *errenzhuan* performers who actively turned *errenzhuan* into a popular regional art form, leading to the state-sponsored *errenzhuan* entertainment industry in the new millennium.

Section Three: Cultural Industries with Chinese Characteristics

Dual Censorship: Economic and Ideological

While the world has witnessed the unprecedented speed and scale of China's marketization and globalization over the past thirty years, China also experienced large-scale human migration, especially that from the countryside to the city. Lacking modern education and skills, the immigrants have mostly taken on low skilled labor work at construction sites or in factories (Sargeson 2016; Wang 2006). In the Northeast region, however, there is another job opportunity that is open to the peasants: to sing *errenzhuan*.

In the mid-1990s, in the medium sized city Changchun alone, there were half a dozen small- to medium-sized theatres that specialized in *errenzhuan*, with over ten thousand independent *errenzhuan* actors actively searching for work. Nearly all were rural peasants (Tian 1996: 160). Each night, theatre managers would invite around five pairs of *errenzhuan* actors, each given a performing slot of between twenty to thirty minutes. Zhao Benshan, when looking back at his early career, describes the limited time as "tough": "if you could not make the audience laugh, you would be kicked out of the theatre by the manager and there was no coming back" (Zhao 2006).

However, it was increasingly difficult to make audiences laugh through traditional *errenzhuan* storytelling. The main audience who had the economic capital to attend theatres in the 1990s was the youth that grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. They had little exposure to traditional literature and the *errenzhuan* art form. Meanwhile, overwhelming numbers of national and international entertainments poured onto the Chinese market competing for consumers. Zhang Bangsong, a journalist from *Qianxi zhoubao* (New Millennium Weekly) describes the situation in the 1990s as: "No audience liked to hear traditional *errenzhuan* singing. Most of the time, performers were shoed off the stage halfway through their performance" (quoted in Wang and Cheng 2011: 179). Faced with new market demand, the independent *errenzhuan* artists showed little hesitation in evolving the art form to please the consumers.

Actors keenly adopted diverse high art and popular art forms, ranging from humor clips, pop songs, and Western dance, to strengthen

their own performing styles. For the *errenzhuan* actors, there was only one purpose: to make the audience laugh. However, the performers' agenda was no longer for simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, but for economic gain (Tian 1996; Wang and Cheng 2011; Zhao 2006). By the late 1990s, *errenzhuan* had become a popular regional entertainment form, mainly amongst the Northeast working class and peasant audience. Locals described the scene of *errenzhuan* troupes performing in the rural countryside as "millions of people watching *errenzhuan*" (*wanren weiguan errenzhuan*) (Zhang 2014: 12). *Errenzhuan* could have remained a regional popular culture; however, a new CCP ideological direction of promoting indigenous folk culture propelled *errenzhuan* to develop an entertainment industry at a national level.

In the 1990s, China experienced a TV boom. By 2000, 1.19 billion had access to television, representing 92 percent of the population (Hazelbarth 1997: 1; Li 2010). Alongside the rising number of television consumers was an increasing flow of television stations, both nationally and internationally, targeting the Chinese-speaking consumers (Zhu and Berry 2009: 12). There was a growing awareness of using native culture to build a national identity, and *errenzhuan*, by then a traditional folk form turned regional popular culture for the working class and peasants, was recognized as being an ideal subject to reinforce the CCP founding ideology and legitimacy (Dai 2001; Jiang 2003; Su 2011). Various regional TV stations began to invite *errenzhuan* actors onto their programs, and the most prominent among them was the CCTV (Zhang 2014: 9–34). Yu Xiaofei, an *errenzhuan* star performer, describes the sudden access to media and the rise of *errenzhuan*'s national popularity:

It all started in the early 2000s; Zhao Benshan was already famous then. But suddenly many (*errenzhuan* actors) were invited. The first program I recorded was called *Fangniuwa* (The Cow Herd). It was a comedy sketch about my vocal skills in imitating the sound of rural life. Well, the moment it was broadcasted, I became famous. Countless people wrote to CCTV, wanting to see more of my shows. I was invited back three times to record further programs. Once I was famous on CCTV, I was invited to record programs in many regional television channels. I toured more than a hundred cities in China and dozens abroad. There is very little or no fee for recording a television program, but once you are famous on TV, all theatres want you and they do pay very handsomely. (Yu 2015)

There are several key issues revealed by Yu: Firstly, the link between media promotion and *errenzhuan*'s national rise in popularity. The extensive broadcasting by central and then regional TV stations redistributed 'central bank' capital, that facilitated *errenzhuan*'s quick rise to national fame. Secondly, instead of inviting *errenzhuan* couples to

perform traditional *errenzhuan*, it mainly targeted the clown role, often with excellent acting skills, to perform script-based comical sketches. Thirdly, and most importantly, is the increasingly fierce competition within the *errenzhuan* entertainment market. These three factors resulted in *errenzhuan*'s artistic evolution.

Following the rise in CCTV exposure, more peasants saw learning *errenzhuan* as the way to gain fame and capital. Growing numbers of peasant children enrolled in *errenzhuan* schools, leading to an expansion of the *errenzhuan* education market. By 2005, nearly every city in the Northeast had at least one *errenzhuan* school; in Jiling city, Zhao Benshan's hometown, there were over thirty *errenzhuan* schools, many recruiting between three hundred and five hundred students annually, the majority of whom from rural countryside (Zhang 2014: 128). Despite the growing supply of trained *errenzhuan* actors, market demand for *errenzhuan* remained limited. Yu Xiaofei stated that there was no financial gain for appearing on TV and that the theatre was the only means of making a living. This means increasing numbers of actors were competing for limited performing opportunities, leading to the standardization of the art form where actors were only differentiated by the increasing amounts of sexual connotation they were prepared to insert into their performance. Yan Guoqing, manager of Harbin Longjiang Theatre, describes the *errenzhuan* market in the late 2000s as follows:

Errenzhuan allows peasants to earn tens of thousands a year. It is unthinkable for peasants in any other trade. However, 99% of *errenzhuan* performers are from the rural countryside. To take myself as an example, I have received only primary education. Most *errenzhuan* performers are illiterate. In order to earn money and to make the audience laugh, they would do anything. But most *errenzhuan* performers are mediocre. Facing increasing market competition, the easiest and the quickest way to make money is to imitate others and to increase sexual reference to attract audience. The result? We have the "bottle neck" effect—whichever the theatre you attend, you see the same *errenzhuan* content with increased coarse language and erotic jokes (*huang duanzi*). (Yan 2015)

For folk oral art, imitation and repetition are important parts of creativity (Walter 1982). To improvise through memory and to incorporate learned skills into artistic development is key to many oral art forms across the world (Ma 2015). Traditionally, it has been key for *errenzhuan* actors to watch their peers, to learn and imitate their skills and incorporate them into their own performance to improve their artistic creativity. However, the era of media recording has changed the rules of the game, and the concept and practice of creativity. Instead of testing one's memory and improvisational skills, direct imitation from recorded media forms has been the norm.

Errenzhuan becomes increasingly normalized and standardized, often named *errenxiu*.

The late character of the term, “xiu” is a phonetic translation of “show.” *Errenxiu* refers to two actors performing brief clips of traditional singing, modern dance, instrument playing, and acrobatics, interspersed with coarse jokes. Here is a typical *errenxiu* performed by Xiao Shenyang and his wife Shen Chunyang in 2008 at a Tianjin local festival. In the near ten minutes of their performance, the traditional *errenzhuan* artistic order of *chang* (singing), *zuo* (performing), *wu* (dancing), *shuo* (speaking), and *jue* (unique skills) has been changed to the following formula:

- 1) 0:00–3:40 *shuo*, shared by both female *shangzhuang* and male *xiazhuang chou* role; the *chou* Xiao Shenyang, dressed in a female floral blouse and wearing a green hairpin, hops onto the stage, where his wife Shen Chuyang calls him an Australian kangaroo that is unable to (evolve) to a human.
- 2) 3:40–4:40 *chang* (traditional *errenzhuan*), led by *shangzhuang* and followed by *xiazhuang*; toward the end, *xiazhuang* does a *jue*, by running from the side stage to central stage with a piece of flower and jumps into the air before landing in front of *shangzhuang*, offering the flower to her.
- 3) 4:40–6:20 *shuo*, led by *xiazhuang chou* role, who interacts with the audience.
- 4) 6:20–8:30 *chang* (a pop song) by *xiazhuang chou*, in Cantonese and from the famous film *Qiannu youhun* (A Ghost Story), while walking amongst the audience greeting them and asking for more applause.
- 5) 8:30–8:55 *shuo*, led by *xiazhuang chou* role who interacts with the audience.
- 6) 8:55–9:45 *chang* (continuing the previous pop song).
- 7) 9:45–9:55 *shuo*, led by *xiazhuang chou* who comments on the selected audience interaction skills as “you are like a tomb to me; you scare me to death” (Tengxun Media 2008).

In total, there is only one-minute *chang* (traditional *errenzhuan*), compared to four-minute *chang* (pop song) and seven-minute *shuo*, which includes four minutes of interaction with the audience. This form of performance has become “standard *errenxiu*.”

Increasingly, an army of peasant performers are trained in *errenxiu* to enter the wider entertainment industry such as tourist theme parks, or as extras in large-scale performances and other minor acting roles. The evolution of *errenzhuan*, from once powerful folk grotesque realism for renewal and revival to twenty-first century *errenxiu* as standardized entertainment for service-based mass consumption, illustrates vividly what Adorno warned us in the 1940s about the corruption of economic censorship and the loss of authenticity and creativity of art form, be it high or popular (Adorno 1991:10–13). The

distinction of Chinese cultural industries is highlighted through the corruption of *errenzhuan* under the dual pressures of economic success and ideological censorship.

Possible Clean Tripe?

In 2009, the *errenzhuan* star Xiao Shenyang was invited to Jiangsu provincial TV studio for a live interview. It was chaired by nationally renowned female host Zhao Danjun. During the recording, Xiao Shenyang addressed Zhao as *chou buyaoliande*, which literally means “stinky shameless one” but amidst *errenzhuan* coarse language is only a mild tease, similar to the English expression of “piss off.” However, to utter such a phrase to a female TV host, in a mass media venue with millions viewing, was perceived by Zhao as a serious insult. Zhao demanded an apology and when it was not delivered, she walked out of the recording studio and the show was cancelled. The story did not end there. Through social media, the story was circulated across the nation and interestingly, most netizens showed support to Xiao Shenyang. The phrase “stinky shameless one” became an instant popular youth expression nationwide ([Chongqing News 2009](#)).

The CCP may have favored *errenzhuan* in the early 2000s as positive folk culture in support of soft power, but by the mid-2010s its attitude began to change. By 2012 China’s internet users soared to the top in the world, followed by the United States ([Global Internet Report 2016](#)). Nearly 46 percent of the total population of internet users in China are youth ([CNNIC 2016](#); [DeBell and Chapman 2006](#); [Lei 2011](#)). There is increasing concern over regulating public media use and much talk of internet security ([Cheung 2009](#); [Jing 2014](#)). Whereas traditional *errenzhuan* used to have a mid-night or “red light” time and location restriction, and television and theatre *errenzhuan* or *errenxiu* performances in the new millennium could be regulated, internet surfers had more freedom in selecting their preferred clips for viewing. It was the sketches with the most explicit sexual dialogue that became the most widely downloaded and viewed, often by audiences who were curious about what *errenzhuan* was and its associated reputation of “a pint of tripes.” Although humor’s subversive quality may not be able to overturn a social system ([Westwood 2004: 11](#)), *errenzhuan*’s nationwide popularity, associated with grotesque image and sexual language as well as wide internet accessibility, caused increasing uneasiness amongst CCP promoters of ideological tendency and national identity building ([Zhang 2010](#)). Mounting scrutiny was placed on *errenzhuan*, focusing on its training schools and theatres. We hear the following from the Director of a Shenyang *errenzhuan* School:

Errenzhuan schools nowadays forbid students to learn any sexual related jokes—no matter how mild they may be. There is a female *errenzhuan* performer, famous for saying rude jokes. Yes, she was extremely popular in theatre circles, but she did not last long. Why? Once she was invited to Jilin TV studio to record a performance and it was never shown. There were far too many dirty jokes. Since then, she has hardly received any invitations for stage performance. No theatre wants any trouble from the government. (Anonymous 2015)

Zhao Benshan may have once boldly dismissed criticism of *errenzhuan* as “pig’s tripe” and insisted that “once the tripe has been cleansed thoroughly, it is no longer *errenzhuan*,” but under aggregated pressure, Zhao led the promotion of “Green *Errenzhuan*.” Green in this context refers to clean and purified, as opposed to yellow and pornographic. Zhao would allegedly fine any actor who told any coarse jokes in his franchised theatres. It has now become the joint determination, of both the CCP and the *errenzhuan* actors, to have the pig’s tripe thoroughly cleansed.

In January 2015, I attended *errenzhuan* performances in the famous Shenyang Old Liu Root Theatre. It was the very first franchised theatre acquired by Zhao Benshan and has the reputation of producing the most authentic and highest quality *errenzhuan* nationwide. The three-hour performance consisted of pairs of actors delivering their performances. Each primarily involved dialogue sketches or skits, interspersed with clips of traditional *errenzhuan* singing and dancing, mild slapstick comedy, imitation of popular songs, acrobatic performance, and interactive dialogues with the audience. The entire show contained no coarse jokes, in fact no sexual reference at all. Instead, throughout the night, during switches between pairs of actors, there were video clips projected onto the theatre screen, narrating how *errenzhuan* has evolved from a coarse folk peasant art form to the “Green *Errenzhuan*,” fit for the consumption of any one, any age, under CCP’s leadership.

Despite this submission, the turning point finally arrived. In late 2014, Zhao Benshan, the representative figure of *errenzhuan*, having served for a decade as a member of the National People’s Congress, was not invited to attend Xi Jinping’s speech at the *Forum on Literature and Art* at Beijing. In February 2015, after twenty-one years of consecutive performance, Zhao did not appear in the CCTV New Year Gala. There has since been very little media exposure of *errenzhuan* and related entertainment forms, as if the entire industry disappeared overnight (South China Morning Post, 2015). Westwood vividly described how the power of folk humor and its subversive qualities cannot always be managed (2004: 775). However, with the Chinese party-state’s role as the “central bank,” any form of cultural industry can fall as fast as it was

allowed to rise. The evolution of *errenzhuan* highlights the distinction of the Chinese art market, which is developed under the dual pressures of economic success as well as ideological censorship, for the continued articulation of CCP legitimacy.

Conclusion

By tracing the evolution of *errenzhuan* from a Northeast folk performing art to a popular nationwide entertainment industry, only to crumble under one stroke of CCP political redirection, this paper has examined the uniqueness of the Chinese art market, which is developed under the dual pressures of economic success and CCP ideological censorship. The standardized *errenzhuan* created under these dual pressures led to the diminishment of its original folk power and authenticity, annulling the possibility for the folks to build an alternative world, to mock and to renew.

Writing in the era of Soviet totalitarian power, Bakhtin saw folk laughter as the force to challenge the official ideology and was arrested for his work. However, Lunacharsky, one of Bakhtin's contemporaries who set up a Soviet government commission to study satiric genres, especially their connection with folk festivals such as the carnival, stressed that "carnival was a kind of safety valve for passions the common people might otherwise direct to revolution," which lightened Bakhtin's original sentence after his arrest in 1929 (Bakhtin 1984: xviii). Laughter is indispensable in balancing the totalitarian rule, to act as the safety valve for the very existence of the official institution.

I would like to end this paper with this piece of news: in December 2015, after Zhao Benshan's year-long disappearance from the public sphere, and rumors of the uncertain fate of *errenzhuan*, the Old Liu Root Theatre's Beijing branch reopened. The lowest ticket price was set at 580 yuan (about 90 USD), which was enough to deter any of the ordinary audience members who may be interested in viewing *errenzhuan*. It is difficult to say if such a high price was purposely marked by the government to highlight the commercialization of *errenzhuan* or otherwise. There are also now very occasional TV programs with invited *errenzhuan* actors performing their latest comedy sketches on CCTV. Meanwhile, in the Northeast region, *errenzhuan* remains as a popular performance, in both traditional male-female sing-song performance as well as the midnight explicit sexual story entertainment. The important thing is that *errenzhuan* continues to exist.

The new millennium's media and cultural industries have brought the folk art form of *errenzhuan* new opportunities as well as new challenges. With Xi Jinping's emphasis on the artists' role "to serve the mass and the Party," artists and art forms will continue to negotiate their

space for survival between the gaps of economic and ideological censorship. This paper provides a glimpse of the conditions of the Chinese cultural market, which is developed under economic pressure as well as CCP ideologically directed monopolization. The party-state's ability to regulate the market, despite the industry's extreme market success, exemplifies the power of the Chinese party-state "central bank," which monopolizes the art market for the continued articulation and legitimation of the CCP.

NOTES

1. Zhao missed the 1994 performance due to late arrival.

2. Old Liu Root or *Liu Laogen* originated from a successful comic soap opera series of the same name, directed by and starring Zhao Benshan. The program was broadcast in 2002 by CCTV and gained instant national popularity. Old Liu Root has since become the brand name for Zhao Benshan artistic work.

3. Xigai or traditional theatre reforms took place in the 1950s are often referred as *sangai* (three reforms). They involved a process of establishing state folk theatre houses (*gaizhi* or reform the system), elevating folk actor's historical underclass status to that of professional artists (*gairen* or reform the artists), and changing traditional folk improvisational style of productions to compulsory written scripts (*gaixi* or reform of performance), with superstitious and sexual connotation eliminated. Chinese traditional theatre companies in the new millennium have continued to exist under the structure of the reform.

4. *Yangge* is a popular Northern China folk dance. It consists of the movements of three steps forward and one step backward, pause, and repeat. Props involve a fan, a handkerchief, and a fake donkey.

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