Staging Corruption
Chinese Television and Politics

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## Contents

Acknowledgments / ix

Abbreviations / xii

Introduction / 3

1 Chinese Television Dramas: An Overview / 27

2 Corruption Dramas as a Mediated Space: CCTV, Intellectuals, and the Market / 65

3 Censorship, Governance Crisis, and Moral Regulation / 86

4 Anti-Corruption Melodrama and Competing Discourses / 118

5 Cynicism as a Dominant Way of Seeing / 159

6 Speaking of the “Desirable” Corrupt Official: A Case Study / 184

Conclusion / 209

Appendix: Selected Corruption Drama Titles / 222

Notes / 224

Bibliography / 252

Index / 268
Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of a decade of research during which I accumulated numerous debts to mentors, colleagues, research participants, friends, and family members. With its publication, I finally have the opportunity to extend my sincerest thanks to those whose support, feedback, and participation have been essential to my work.

This project originated at the Institute of Communications Research (ICR) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Bruce A. Williams was involved with the project from the very beginning, providing valuable direction and advice all the way to its completion. His constant belief in me tided me over the most challenging moments of my years as a young scholar. A relentless critic of commercial media in the United States, Bob McChesney was an amazing source of inspiration. His uncompromising spirit and deep-seated optimism was a major influence on my work. From different theoretical perspectives, Dan Schiller and Andrea Press offered their candid and insightful criticisms of my earlier drafts and helped me refine my arguments, saving me from future embarrassment. I am also grateful to the other faculty members at the ICR, including Clifford Christians, John Nerone, Inger Stole, and, in particular, Norman K. Denzin. Bonnie Howard, our beloved administrative assistant, provided me with unfailing practical and emotional support.

The book could not have taken its current shape without my valuable intellectual exchanges with former colleagues at the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. I am thankful to Ted Magder, Marita Sturken, Helga Tawil Souri, Rodney Benson, Brett Gary, Juan Pinon, Radha Hegde, and Arvind Rajagopal. I am fortunate to have the strong support of my current dean, chair, and colleagues at the University of Toronto: Rick Halpern, William Bowen, Neil Kortenaar, Dan Bender, Leslie Chan, Yi Gu, Ping-Chun Hsiung, Ken McLeod, Alice Maurice, Alejandro Paz, Natalie Rothman, Helen Wu, Yi-Ching Wu, Jesook Song, and Robert Vipond. I am greatly indebted to Joseph Wong, Director of the Asian Institute
at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, who proposed and organized a book workshop where my manuscript was shared with and critiqued by an interdisciplinary group of scholars, whose feedback was crucial to the final revision of the manuscript.

I am deeply grateful to the following people who read the manuscript in whole or in part and offered valuable critiques that helped bring the book to fruition: Guobin Yang, Cindy Wong, Yuezhi Zhao, Dan Bender, Meng Yue, Francis Cody, Joseph Wong, Shuyu Kong, Jesook Song, and Ying Zhu. In particular, I would like to thank Yuezhi Zhao for her multifaceted contribution to this project. She read multiple drafts of the manuscript, came all the way from Vancouver to Toronto to attend my book workshop, and offered her time and input in every possible way. The book also benefited from scholarly exchanges with Alex Cook, Zhen Zhang, Michael Keane, Jeffrey Kinkley, Xueping Zhong, Joshua Neves, Geng Song, Wanning Sun, Joseph Man Chan, and Anthony Fung.

Thanks are due to a number of individuals in China whom I was fortunate to be able to interview: Ding Daxian, Dong Weiping, Jia Xiaochen, Jin Yusheng, Liu Sha, Liu Heng, Lu Tianming, Ren Dahui, Wang Weiping, Wu Wentao, You Xiaogang, Yu Pu, Yuan Fang, Zheng Zhenxiu, Zhang Zhisheng, Zhou Meisen, and others who prefer to remain anonymous. Adam Yao Liu, Chuan Liu, Aysha Sidiq, and Wang Zhiyan provided research and editorial assistance for this book.

Crucial financial support in the form of fellowships and grants was provided by the University of Illinois, New York University, the University of Toronto, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, including a Dissertation Completion Fellowship (University of Illinois) and start-up research grants at the other two universities. With the SSHRC Aid to Research Workshops and Conferences, I was able to co-organize an international workshop at Australian National University, “Television, Power and Ideology in Postsocialist China,” where I presented part of a chapter and received extremely helpful feedback from colleagues around the world. My thanks go to the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences for its Awards to Scholarly Publications Program (ASPP), and above all to UBC Press, particularly senior editor Emily Andrew. Highly efficient and both patient and firm, she is an exemplary role model who made me want to give her 110 percent effort.

I have been blessed with a number of personal friends whom I counted on for support at different stages in my life: Ding Nannan, Su Rong, and Eloisa Mandelker. Bai Huatong and Shen Xiaocun have given me everything I
could expect from the most loving parents in the world, and I can never repay my debt to them. I could not have completed this book without my husband and best friend, Li Chen, whose unconditional love, boundless patience, and unfailing optimism went a long way in keeping this project alive and well. My children, Anthony, 9, and Aaron Chen, 3, are my ultimate joy in life. Anthony eagerly looks forward to teaching me how to play his card game now that this book no longer competes with him for my time.
A police chief in a modern Chinese metropolis sought refuge in an American consulate. He used to be the right-hand man of the city’s Party Secretary, but the relationship between the two had deteriorated to a point where the police chief found it necessary to make this desperate move. The next day, the police chief stepped out of the consulate and was taken away by state security agents who had been dispatched from Beijing to prevent him from falling into the hands of the local police. The incriminating materials that the police chief had brought with him to the consulate revealed, among other things, that his boss’s wife was a leading suspect in the murder of a British businessman close to this elite family. A month later, the Party Secretary, who had been a serious contender for a seat in the seven-person Politburo Standing Committee, the innermost core of power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was stripped of all his posts and placed under investigation by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the Party’s primary anti-corruption body. His wife was charged with murder and sentenced to life in prison. Their son, a Harrow graduate currently residing in the United States, was thrust into the global limelight for his costly education, flamboyant behaviour, and lush lifestyle. In the meantime, rumour mills went into overdrive. Why was the politician betrayed by his police chief? Did he wiretap President Hu Jintao and other top Chinese leaders? How many mistresses did he keep? Is it true that his wife had a love affair with the British businessman? Did he hoard $6 billion in overseas bank accounts while presenting himself as a guardian of socialist, egalitarian values? Did the businessman help the family funnel money out of China and then threaten to reveal the scheme to get a better commission? Had the populist Party Secretary been set up by his political enemies in Beijing? How would the storm end? To be continued ...

This is not a soap opera. The Bo Xilai scandal, which has been under the scrutiny of the global media since February 2012, poses perhaps one of the biggest political challenges and embarrassments to the CCP since the
1989 Democracy Movement. It casts into the limelight the power and wealth of the children of the CCP’s elders, and threatens to shed light on secretive power struggles and webs of corruption at the highest echelons of the Party leadership. Yet it feels like a soap opera. Like many media scandals, it has all the ingredients of a drama – treason, murder, corruption, power, money, lust, and betrayal. In the meantime, there has been in the past decade no shortage of real television dramas about crime, corruption, and power struggles among high-ranking bureaucrats set in contemporary or ancient China. Many salacious details of the Bo Xilai scandal, alleged or confirmed, were already found in those drama serials – illicit accumulation of wealth by Party-state officials, money laundering via overseas operations, murders committed to cover up previous crimes, conspiracies and betrayals, intricate webs of shifting alliances and connections among political and economic elites, decadent private lives of the powerful, and so on. In other words, the scandal, with some alteration, could have been taken from a Chinese prime-time television drama. If historical dramas are considered, with their staged political machinations among emperors, princes, and top-level bureaucrats, the parallel between entertainment and contemporary Chinese politics is all the more striking.

Because of the very limited amount of information about the disgraced Bo Xilai in the strictly censored news media, ordinary Chinese draw on a readily available cultural repertoire of narratives and discourses about high-level politics to make sense of this major political shakeup. Rumours, speculations, and fantasies turn out to be rather familiar stories based on widely held assumptions about China’s “power elite.” These popular narratives, which almost always revolve around abuses of power, are central to the public’s perceptions of the Party-state, and therefore should constitute an inherent dimension of our understanding of Chinese society and politics. In what kind of world do characters in these stories reside? What assumptions do the stories make about the contemporary political and social orders that they set out to depict and comment on? What do they say about corruption, both as one of the most prominent political and social issues and as a dominant lens or discourse through which many social problems in China are viewed? What is the significance of these narratives for the Party’s claim to legitimacy? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine television drama as a prominent genre in the production of corruption narratives.

Since the mid-1990s, corruption dramas have proliferated and shaped prime-time viewing to such an extent that it is simply not possible to
dissociate public discourses of corruption from television drama representations of the issue. In late 1995 and early 1996, *Heaven Above (Cangtian zaishang),* generally referred to as the first “anti-corruption drama,” riveted the nation’s attention with a truly novel television character – a villainous high-ranking government official and Party cadre (vice provincial governor) whose web of corruption wreaks havoc on a city within his jurisdiction. This seventeen-episode China Central Television (CCTV) drama was said to have garnered an audience rating of nearly 40 percent at its peak – roughly 400 million viewers. From then on, high-level official corruption became a legitimate topic for dramatization. Corruption dramas proliferated. Although accurate data on total output are hard to come by, the salience, at least in quantitative terms, of the theme of corruption can be inferred. By 2003, crime drama had become the most prominent drama genre in China, and roughly 30 percent of such dramas had plots featuring official corruption. In the meantime, as writers, producers, and publishers rushed to exploit synergistic possibilities, so-called anti-corruption novels flooded the book market, reaching both fans of corruption dramas and new audiences. In 2004, for reasons that will be explored in this book, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) meted out harsh discipline to the television industry by banning the topic of corruption from prime-time television. In the wake of SARFT’s clampdown, dramas that explicitly dealt with corruption among CCP officials dwindled. Around the same time, however, the theme of corruption was reincarnated in a diversity of drama genres that provided a different spin on official corruption. With a radically cynical rendering of the issue, these genres have gained a lot of attention, especially from young urban viewers.

This book examines corruption dramas as a product of the concrete historical conditions of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. How can one historicize the rise and fall of television dramas about corruption? How are these dramas shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces that are in constant, complex interplay with one another? What do the production and regulation of these corruption narratives reveal about the media order in the context of market society and political authoritarianism? Answering these questions facilitates an exploration of the politics of corruption dramas in two crucial contexts: the “commercial revolution” of the Chinese media overseen by the Party-state, and an increasingly polarized Chinese society brought about by market reform. On the one hand, corruption dramas epitomize a distinctly Chinese commercial media culture. On the other hand, providing a space in which social and political issues are
raised, they draw on social sentiments prevalent since the early 1990s: anxiety about mushrooming social problems and the integrity of the moral and social fabrics, feelings of precariousness about one’s well-being in an increasingly marketized society, indignation or unease about the radically unjust distribution of wealth and power, a newly heightened sense of citizens’ rights and a desire for change, and so on. In a sense, these popular dramas are collective dreams (or nightmares) that bring to the fore fears and desires deeply harboured in the post-socialist Chinese society. In a nutshell, this book is an inquiry into corruption dramas – how they developed, were suppressed, and became reincarnated as a result of complex interplays between the CCP, SARFT, television stations, and production companies, and how they can be studied as a crucial site where different narratives and discourses about China’s corrupt elite contradicted, supplemented, and transformed one another to shape a new ideological terrain.

The book makes the following sets of claims:

1. Chinese media may be conceptualized as a contact zone in which dominant political, economic, and social interests meet, clash, and engage with each other to create a disjunctive media order in post-socialist China. The notion of disjunctive order allows us to account for both changes and continuities in Chinese media. Different from disorder, it is a kind of order that is predicated on shifting articulations of interests. The Party’s propaganda departments, SARFT, national and provincial media conglomerates, production firms, advertising companies, and key journalistic and creative personnel engage in constant realignment and compromises to maintain the balance and stability of the media order.

2. Corruption dramas constitute a significant cultural power that reconfigures and redefines state power. State power does not exist independently of the cultural realm that shapes public perceptions of the legitimacy of the Party and the state. Featuring a panoply of Party cadres, governors, mayors, chiefs of various state agencies, bank officials, state-owned enterprise managers, customs officials, judges, prosecutors, and police officers, corruption dramas are to a large extent tales about the state, teaching moral lessons about what constitutes the legitimate exercise of state power, the proper role of the state in the market economy, and the desirable courses of action for the Party in the face of corruption.

3. Corruption dramas started off as a key component of the Party-initiated anti-corruption campaign and moral crusade, and ended up becoming part of the moral and political crisis that the Party sought to manage. The
political acceptability of corruption dramas has been predicated on their embrace of an officially ordained melodramatic imagination that frames its anti-corruption drive as a victorious battle of the righteous Party against a minority of moral delinquents. However, the melodramatic imagination turns out to be hardly sustainable by commercial media, as it competes with alternative imaginations of officialdom. Significantly, corruption dramas become entangled with the depoliticizing agenda of neoliberalism, which idolizes the private self. The end — that is, the self’s need for betterment — justifies the means, even if the means amount to corruption. It is not without irony that since SARFT’s 2004 clampdown, corruption dramas have gone a long way towards normalizing corruption.

Before proceeding, however, I ought to clarify what I mean by corruption and why it should matter as a scholarly concern.

Corruption Matters
In this book, corruption is treated as both an empirical phenomenon and a discursive category. A standard definition of corruption in political science refers to it as “behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains: or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence.” This definition is largely accepted by China’s disciplinary and legal professionals, who define corruption as “abuse of public power (gonggong quanli) by occupants of public office (gongzhi renyuan) in the state and party apparatus for private interests.” It describes most of the officially identified forms of corruption, the three most prominent of which are bribery, embezzlement, and misappropriation of public funds. Corruption in China has intensified and grown rampant since the onset of market reform. Recognizing corruption as a problem generated by the deep interpenetration of the state and the market, Wang Hui points out that a critique of corruption must be “a critique of much deeper levels of inequality and injustice involved in the asset-transfer process,” and “critiques of the state cannot be separated from critiques of the movement toward market society.” Since 1978, the post-Mao Party leaders have initiated and implemented reform measures designed to revitalize the economy via marketization. Most likely unforeseen by Deng Xiaoping but nevertheless facilitated by the prevailing pro-market ethos, plundering of public assets ensued and has unstoppably escalated as the market reform
proceeded, benefiting the very guardians of public funds and resources, i.e., bureaucrats presiding over resources allocation and managers of state-owned enterprises, as well as well-connected entrepreneurs. The organic connection between corruption and market reform policies and practices has been painstakingly documented. Put plainly, corruption in contemporary China is an effect of marketization and privatization policies implemented without any democratic participation or supervision. Furthermore, it fuels and sustains the neoliberalization of the economy by serving as a key mechanism for distributing massive wealth, assets, and resources under public ownership to private individuals. In other words, corruption is both symptomatic and constitutive of a flawed economic reform process that systematically favours political and economic elites. It has played a prominent role in the primitive accumulation of capital, the emergence of bureaucratic-capitalist classes, and the proletarianization of the working class in post-Mao years. In this sense, corruption is bound up with China’s embrace of capitalism and class reconstitution.

As a socially constructed, discursive category, corruption generates multiple ways of talking about it. It frustrates attempts by social scientists, legal professionals, and politicians to fix its meaning in the discursive realm. The discursive fluidity of corruption is partly due to the shifting and blurring boundaries of the “public” and the “private” as China moves beyond socialism. As “public interest,” “public power,” and “public office” are all being contested and redefined both in theory and in practice, variant understandings of corruption are bound to arise. Furthermore, in everyday life, ordinary Chinese do not normally fret over what counts as corruption in legal terms. Rather, their perception of corruption tends to be inflected at the affective level by an apocalyptic sense of general social decay on the one hand and a mixed dose of cynicism and moral indignation on the other. Thus, in popular consciousness, corruption signifies something much larger and more pervasive than official accounts would admit. Corruption functions as a discourse also in the sense that it provides a key lens through which the Chinese make sense of and experience the post-socialist reality. It structures people’s perception of a myriad of problems resulting from the radical social transformations in the market reform era and gives shape to collective and individual anxiety, confusion, anger, and frustration. In the strongest expression of corruption as discourse, corruption is seen as the ultimate ill of Chinese society, from which all other social problems emanate, and corrupt party and state officials are ultimately culpable for the wrong turn
Chinese society has taken. Whether as a site for contested meanings or as a dominant framing device, corruption is of fundamental importance in helping us understand the ideological conditions for escalation, dissipation, or reconfiguration of social tensions in post-socialist China.

**Corruption Dramas**

The term “corruption drama” in this book refers to Chinese television drama serials broadcast in the 1990s and 2000s that deal with the issue of corruption directly or indirectly. Corruption dramas share with most other Chinese drama serials some features that deserve mentioning at the get-go. Of limited length, a drama serial typically consists of twenty to forty episodes of about forty minutes each. In most cases, it has a continually unfolding, close-ended narrative. The narrative may or may not be divided into discrete units or ensembles, through which tensions and conflicts on a smaller scale come to temporary closure while the major plot continues until it reaches a resolution in the finale. When discrete units or ensembles are consciously deployed as a dominant narrative strategy, it would be more appropriate to speak of drama series, implying that self-contained stories are narrated in single or a small number of episodes. Some crime dramas driven by fast-paced resolution of criminal cases fall into this category. Most corruption dramas are extended narratives about a single or a very limited number of corruption cases, so it makes more sense to refer to them as serials rather than series.

Drama serials may be produced by independent production companies, but more frequently, they are co-productions among television stations, production companies, and sometimes other institutions involved in drama production for publicity and/or mercenary purposes, such as the army, the police, schools, hospitals, or, in the case of corruption dramas, the Party’s anti-corruption bodies (central or local disciplinary commissions). Those that are nationally distributed and therefore considered successes in commercial terms reach a nationwide audience either via CCTV or provincial television stations. Due to ferocious market competition, drama serials target general audiences to maximize their ratings. Nevertheless, there have been two countervailing tendencies: an urban bias that accounts for the dominance of urban settings and concerns of urban Chinese, and demographic segmentation in the 2000s as television stations compete to differentiate their drama fare through channel branding and niche marketing.

Corruption dramas were developed in the mid-1990s to speak to a national
audience about a prominent public concern; as they evolved in the following decade, they were increasingly inflected by attitudes and sentiments prevailing among young to middle-aged urban white-collar workers and professionals, as I shall discuss in Chapter 5.

Drama serials are broadcast on consecutive days until they are finished. This industrial feature conditions Chinese television viewers to follow their favourite dramas on a daily basis. With an average of two episodes shown each day, a drama serial usually finishes airing in two to three weeks, right after which viewers shift their attention to another story on the air. It is fair to say that Chinese viewers’ consumption of drama serials is both concentrated and distracted. Because of the quick obsolescence rate of drama programming, viewers’ active engagement with a particular drama normally does not last much longer than the duration of its airing. But it also means that for a limited amount of time, a drama hit may be watched avidly across the country, giving rise to a national phenomenon. This dual logic of consumption has been intensified in the digital environment, as viewers, especially younger ones, increasingly access television dramas through DVDs (pirated or officially released) and video-streaming sites, which means flexible and, often, even faster consumption.

Corruption dramas vary widely in terms of setting, narrative, and style. Most are set in a fictional Chinese metropolis of the market reform era. Among these, some revolve around a corruption case, whereas others bring in plots of official corruption to support main narratives of mafia-related crimes such as drug trafficking, smuggling, gangster fights, kidnappings, and murders. Some are strictly about standard forms of corruption such as bribery and embezzlement, whereas others place corruption in the context of broader issues and questions concerning China’s political economy. In government documents, trade journals, or the popular press, these dramas are sometimes referred to as “anti-corruption drama,” hewing closely to the Party’s anti-corruption agenda. The term is too restrictive, however, and fails to capture the great variety of ways in which the issue has been approached. “Crime drama,” another officially recognized category, is both too narrow in its exclusive focus on crime vis-à-vis larger political and social issues, and too broad because a large number of conventional cop dramas have nothing to do with corruption. Thus, instead of using an existing generic category, I have coined the term “corruption drama,” which can best account for both the heterogeneity and commonality among different types of drama serials about corruption. In this study, corruption dramas also
include a number of historical dramas, including the so-called serious dramas (zhengju), which transport modern anti-corruption battles to the imperial era; historical comedies (xishuo ju), filled with lighthearted satires about corrupt officials; or court dramas (gongting ju or gongdou ju), which dramatize corruption as an inherent component of intricate interpersonal relations and complicated political struggles in an imperial court. These historical dramas are of crucial relevance as they may be readily interpreted as allegories of contemporary Chinese society.

Corruption dramas provide a privileged site for scholarly inquiry in several ways. First, they have shaped and enriched public discourses of corruption in a uniquely powerful way. Compared with investigative news programs, which became institutionalized around the same time that corruption was legitimized as a topic for television drama in the mid-1990s, corruption dramas have accommodated a wider range of discourses of corruption. Not only do they provide more freedom for their creators to narrate and imagine corruption but the serial form also allows greater space for sustained engagement with the issue. To be sure, news that exposes bureaucratic malfeasance and social ills enjoys a higher cultural status than television drama. Yet investigative journalism has always been tarnished by the mouthpiece nature of Chinese news media and has over time lost the original lustre and appeal of the 1990s. In the meantime, although corruption dramas are entertainment, they frequently adopt a realist mode of representation that leads many viewers to accept dramatized corruption as approximating real-life corruption cases. As most of these dramas deal with corruption in city and provincial governments, on which independent reporting is impossible, they provide plenty of fodder for popular imagination of corruption among high-ranking officials.

Furthermore, television drama fuels public discourses of corruption by drawing a number of intellectuals into the “domain of the popular.” A key feature of the commercialization of literary production in China is the growing synergy between book publishing and drama production, with many literary talents crossing over to the much more profitable screenwriting for television. The most influential of them, such as Lu Tianming, Zhang Ping, and Zhou Meisen, have not only played a key role in pushing political boundaries and legitimizing corruption-themed bestsellers and television dramas but have also brought some intellectual debates on corruption into commercial productions. By co-opting intellectuals, the television drama industry has been instrumental in moving the issue of corruption from
marginal spaces occupied by tabloid magazines and satirical doggerels to central domains of popular culture.

Second, corruption dramas provide an opportunity for media scholars to inquire into Chinese media and politics, because of what they can illuminate of the complicated relationship between power, media, and society in a post-socialist context. They are both commentaries on Chinese society and incarnations of societal anxiety, ambivalence, and confusion about China’s path to capitalist modernity. Not surprisingly, they are heavily regulated by political and commercial imperatives, and are enmeshed in and foreground intense interactions in the contact zone of divergent social, political, and economic interests. One would be hard pressed to find another drama genre that is so pregnant with tension and that so clearly illustrates both the potentials and limits of Chinese television in engaging with social issues. These dramas occupy both the centre and the periphery of Chinese media and popular culture. They are supplied in large volume by production companies, broadcast during prime time, and watched by hundreds of millions of viewers. Yet more than any other type of television drama, each corruption drama in this study was heavily censored at each stage of production from initial development to final broadcast. In the meantime, because the boundaries of the permissible are fluid, these dramas enable us to examine the logic of censorship in a post-socialist media system, and how the boundaries are maintained, challenged, negotiated, and redefined. One of my contentions in this book is that censorship in China, although repressive, must be seen as a dynamic process shaped by multiple forces and conflicting agendas rather than as something monolithic and unchanging.

Focusing on corruption drama as an ideological power and as a site of ideological contestation, this book attempts to answer the following questions: How did corruption, of all the pressing social issues, become a television staple? As a heavily contested and highly volatile issue, how is corruption defined and framed? Of all the opinions and sentiments of corruption, which ones have emerged as relatively stable discursive frameworks that regulate the generation and flow of meaning? From Heaven Above to recent corruption dramas, a sea change can be identified in terms of tone, style, narrative, and characterization. How does one account for the transformation of televiual corruption, especially when considering that the Party’s public stance on corruption has remained largely unchanged? What can be said about culture and hegemony in post-socialist China? To answer these questions, it is important to contextualize corruption dramas with a discussion
of the political economy of Chinese media, which I will describe below as “a disjunctive media order.”

A Disjunctive Media Order
Based on the significant body of research on Chinese media industries and policies, I choose to describe the media landscape in post-socialist China as “disjunctive.” Originally developed as a concept to encapsulate the cultural effects of global flows and ever-shifting “scapes” of capital, people, technology, ideologies, images, and narratives, disjuncture is used here to characterize a media culture emerging from the radical transformation of a propaganda-oriented media system by forces of commercialization, globalization, and technological development. Disjuncture describes an order of things that are simultaneously disconnected and interrelated, and a disjunctive media order is one in which the development of media is driven by more than one logic. To be sure, most media systems in the world are shaped by a variety of political, economic, social, and professional forces. But what makes disjuncture a dominant feature of the Chinese media is the coexistence and interpenetration of two equally powerful forces, neither of which dominates or collapses into the other: the political and the economic. State ownership and profit orientation underscore a peculiar political economy of Chinese media. On the one hand, there is the political will to exercise ideological and informational control through state ownership of media outlets so as to maintain a stable symbolic environment for the Party’s rule and the market reform. On the other hand, there are media and cultural industries born out of commercialization, supported by various kinds of capital, and strategically valued for their contribution to the market economy and the national GDP.

This disjunctive media order began taking shape in the years after 1978, when the central government decided to (1) legitimate advertising and let it become the primary source of funding for the state-owned media system, and (2) decentralize the media system by delegating to local governments powers and responsibilities for developing a self-sufficient local media infrastructure. These decisions were intended to address a pragmatic concern of how to modernize and expand the media system without further straining the already impoverished coffers of the central government, but their transformative impact was to be realized and further amplified in the establishment of a commercial media system “with Chinese characteristics.” The system in its current shape is characterized by the entrenchment of the
capital logic in both centrally and locally administered media outlets, ferocious competition among media groups, active participation of private capital, and, above all, the presence of the state, which facilitates, shapes, and oversees the formation of the increasingly capitalistic media order.

Disjuncture of China’s media order in television broadcasting can be perceived in at least six areas: (1) state policy and regulation, (2) media institutions (television stations), (3) structure of the television industry, and (4) constitution of media capital, (5) content, and (6) audience.

State Policy and Regulation
Throughout the market reform era, the Party’s media policy making has been guided by a “disjunctive” approach that emphasizes marketization on the one hand and ideological control on the other, as expressed in the official language of “material civilization and spiritual civilization.” In the 1990s, a recurring theme in official documents and speeches was how to balance the media’s “economic effects” and “social effects,” often with the implication that media in the marketized environment did not always provide healthy, uplifting, socially responsible, and politically appropriate messages. Part of the problem lay with the sheer number of media outlets, which made it hard for the state to exercise effective control, and this problem was exacerbated by the mercenary ties of local state regulators to the media outlets within their jurisdictions. By the late 1990s, recognizing the difficulties engendered by commercialization of the state media, the CCP resorted to the strategy of recentralization and conglomeration, hoping for more effective political control and faster industrial growth. The turn of the century witnessed a wave of media conglomeration, as a result of which a number of press, film, and broadcast groups emerged. The dual policy orientation was given a new twist in the cultural system reform launched in 2002 that separated non-profit cultural enterprises from the cultural industry at the conceptual level.

The cultural system reform boils down to “divestment, that is, by spinning off market-oriented operations from existing party-state media conglomerates and turning these operations into relatively autonomous market entities that are free to absorb outside capital and pursue market-oriented expansion,” so that the state can concentrate its control on the core part of media, namely, political communication — that is, news and propaganda. However, while the design intended to resolve the conflict between marketization and political control is rather neat, actual practices are much messier, and state control remains firmly in place with regard to entertainment media, which
are officially declared to be governed by the “law of the market.” Media regulation continues to reflect the double objective. From 2002 to 2014, for example, during exactly the same period in which the government was pushing for further marketization and privatization of China’s media industries, SARFT waged a “Clean Up the Screen” campaign, targeting the “excessive entertainment” and hypercommercialism on provincial television (Chapter 3). Clearly Chinese media regulators have perceived the disjuncture or disconnection between the dual objectives, and they do not see a better way of suturing the disjuncture than resorting to coercive measures.

Media Institutions
While television stations remain an essential component of the Party’s propaganda apparatus, their goals, interests, and functions have become fractured in the process of marketization. As state media, they have political and cultural obligations to fulfill. They must satisfy media officials and censors who favour programs that are politically pro-Party or at least innocuous, culturally conservative, and popular with the masses. As businesses faced with a highly competitive media environment and driven by ambitions of national or even global expansion, their daily operations are shaped by market-based calculations. Such calculations often boil down to audience ratings as they cater to advertisers who look for programs that deliver large numbers of viewers and/or the most desired demographics, depending on the marketing goals of the advertising businesses. Audience ratings aside, brand or reputation cultivation is a longer-term business strategy for many television stations. Thus launching investigative news programs may be partially understood as a strategy for a television station hoping to establish an image of respectability and professionalism. Television dramas that deal with serious social issues perform a similar function for television stations. Yet building a reputation based on hard-hitting journalism or socially relevant drama programming is a risky business strategy that has been used by powerful television stations such as CCTV. For provincial and local television stations, brand cultivation is frequently associated with youth-oriented entertainment. In any case, Chinese television stations today deal with multiple interests and demands, and in terms of content production, they are eager to establish common ground between these competing interests by airing programs that ameliorate political concerns, please advertisers, resonate with popular sentiments, and promote a public self-image that dovetails with their long-term business strategies. The very imperative of balancing the party line and the bottom line bespeaks the double logic of Chinese television.
Disjuncture also describes a television industry that has done away with the coherence of a state broadcasting system, where CCTV and local (provincial and municipal) television stations were government bureaucracies entrenched in a hierarchical relationship. For years prior to the mid-1990s, CCTV was the only meaningful player in the national market. While local television stations operated terrestrial channels that were able to reach only viewers in their own administrative territories and one or two neighbouring provinces or cities, CCTV reached a national audience as all local stations were obliged to carry its programs. Because of the power and prestige that came with its status, it was able to attract the cream of the nation’s creative talents and access the best television programs produced by local stations; directors of local television stations regarded it as an honour to have their programs aired by CCTV. This relatively stable relationship of domination and dependency came under tremendous pressure as advertising and business sponsorship replaced state subsidies to become the major source of funding for television stations. For example, local stations were more inclined to keep popular television dramas to themselves or at least negotiate with CCTV for a much better price. As a result, beginning from the early 1990s, CCTV found itself losing the most popular television programs to local stations, and viewers along with them. After the mid-1990s, CCTV’s relative strength in terms of program ratings decreased even more rapidly, as provincial television stations each operated a satellite channel, put their best programs on this channel, and transmitted them to national households. In the 2000s, a number of regional media powers have emerged, each with a provincial television station at its core. The rise and national expansion of provincial broadcasters, predicated on entertainment programming — specifically popular television dramas and reality shows — is one of the most significant developments in China’s television industry during this decade. Although they have been abetted by state policies, unintended consequences such as the erosion of CCTV’s audience base and the sheer amount of entertainment on provincial television channels, regarded as “excessive” by the Party leadership, have created tension and even antagonism between provincial broadcasters on the one hand and CCTV and SARFT on the other. In a sense, the double logic generating disjuncture in day-to-day media operations and practices is replicated at the industrial level. It should be noted that CCTV and provincial television stations are commercial media monopolies at each other’s throats, but their relationship goes beyond business competition. To the extent that CCTV remains the Party’s key propaganda
organ, its losing ground to the aggressive, more commercialized provincial television stations serves as evidence of disjuncture between the political and economic spheres.

Constitution of Media Capital
A fourth way of making sense of the disjunctive media order is to look at the heterogeneous capital composition of the broadcasting industry. Currently, the industry is underwritten mainly by four types of capital: (1) bureaucratic capital of television stations, (2) transnational capital, (3) domestic private capital specializing in television program production, (4) and domestic private capital in the form of business conglomerates in non-media sectors such as real estate and international trade. Although transnational and domestic private capital had begun entering the broadcasting sector mostly surreptitiously in the last two decades of the twentieth century, it was only in the first decade of the twenty-first that their participation in content production gained legitimate status as they were “increasingly seen, and indeed called on, as a force that can be harnessed to strengthen the national economy in general and the media and cultural sector in particular.” Thus, in accord with the general design of pro-market Chinese media policy makers, private capital has become the mainstay of television program provision (see Chapter 1). Thousands of private firms are now in operation producing, financing, and trading all kinds of television programs (except for news and current affairs programs). Furthermore, following China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), state policies that encourage media organizations to turn their non-news businesses into publicly listed companies have further integrated media production into domestic and global capital markets. Private capital functions mostly to provide content and funding for state broadcasters, is vulnerable to fickle state policies, and remains barred from television channel ownership. Nevertheless, some private firms have gained de facto operational rights to television channels by leasing sports, fashion, or entertainment channels as distribution outlets for their own programs. The penetration of private capital into the broadcasting sector means a new division of labour by which private capital generates programs, state capital reaps profits through ownership of television channels, and the government exercises political and ideological control. However, this design is not seamless, and a significant amount of tension can be identified between private production companies and television stations, between private production companies and policy makers, and between provincial television stations and government regulators, as I will illustrate in the following chapters.
Audience
Disjuncture in the political economy of Chinese media has powerful implications for the ways in which television viewers are addressed and defined, and for the shape of television programs. In the market reform era, “audience” became an increasingly powerful concept, exerting real influence on television drama production. In the era of state-operated broadcasting, viewers were conceptualized and approached as “masses,” implying the “domination and leadership by the Party both through and within the media.” Along with media commercialization, the notion of “audience” came to be widely accepted. On his research trips to Chinese cities in the late 1980s, James Lull became aware of the “growing interdependence between administrative audience research and program decision-making” and noted that “decisions to add, cancel, expand, reduce, combine, reschedule, and change the content of shows have all resulted from recent audience research.” Yong Zhang documented how in the 1990s audience research was gradually institutionalized, routinized, and normalized, and how “the basis for designing and evaluating media content ... shifted from Party policies to primarily audience needs and satisfactions.” To say that audience research is now routinized might be a little exaggerated. Although drama broadcasts are carefully measured and ranked for ratings, systematic audience research has yet to become a routine part of drama production and programming, which are still guided more by guesses based on recent hits rather than carefully constructed techniques of measuring audience preferences. Nevertheless, the notion that television viewers are audiences to be catered to has sunk in deeply.

Yet audience as commodity does not tell the whole story. While the propaganda transmission model is clearly retreating, the media are still expected to mediate between the Party and the people and to play an educative and uplifting function in Chinese society. From the Party’s perspective, audiences should not be merely indulged but also guided politically, morally, and aesthetically. The two different conceptualizations of audience as state subjects and audience as consumers do not exclude each other. One does not need to establish a total dichotomy to acknowledge the distinction, but it is exactly this distinction that creates potential disjuncture. When disjuncture materializes in reality, it sometimes takes the state's coercive power to re-establish order. It may be argued that SARFT’s revulsion against “vulgarization” of Chinese television and the “Clean Up the Screen” campaign partly arose from the tension between the two conflicting paradigms of television audience. Also pertinent to this discussion is the preference of advertisers and
television stations for affluent urban viewers versus the Party’s desire to send its messages to the entire population, especially the not-so-well-off population, whose support for the legitimacy of the Party and market reform needs to be gained and constantly renewed through ideological work. Thus, as Chinese television on the whole demonstrates a remarkable reluctance to engage rural populations and migrant workers in cities, SARFT officials have kept complaining to television stations and producers about the scarcity of programs dealing with issues and topics relevant to country life, in contrast to the abundance of glamorous images of the super rich and the “petits bourgeois” in modern cities.

Content
Disjuncture at the content level is the most manifest. A lot of studies have been carried out to examine how commercialization of media and culture has wrought major changes in the kinds of news, information, and entertainment available to the Chinese. The Chinese media can be described as multivocal or polysemic and under the pressure of addressing a plurality of audiences, a plurality engendered partly by advertisers and broadcasters seeking niche markets and partly by social changes that have resulted in heterogeneous interests, claims, and aspirations. The proliferation of voices and meanings may appear across different texts (for example, different news reports on the same event) or may be embodied in one text that is susceptible to different interpretations. One interesting question that inspired many of these studies concerns the fate of the official culture, and along with it, the Party’s claim to political and moral leadership, in the age of commercial popular culture. Or, do state discourses suffer an irreversible decline in the cultural market? The answer provided by most accounts is a resounding “no,” and hybridization is most frequently mentioned as a primary strategy of culture making in China. Examples include newspapers that carry propaganda on front pages and more diverse and entertaining content on the rest, as well as commercial films, magazines, talk shows, television dramas, and karaoke bars that package and sell politically conservative viewpoints in extremely marketable forms, all pointing to the fact that to survive in marketized authoritarianism, commercial media make propaganda on behalf of the state. It is increasingly hard to find pure political propaganda that does not ride the horse of popularity, or entertainment that explicitly trumps the political bottom line. Indeed, one could argue that the mainstream culture in China is hybrid in nature.
The other side of the hybridity argument is that mainstream culture might suffer an internal pressure to disintegrate. Hybridization never guarantees a perfect marriage between political and commercial messages, and the dominance of state ideologies is all but assured in such a symbolic environment characterized by cacophony and polysemy. The fault line is revealed at the “Aha!” moment when viewers (or readers, listeners, and so on) realize the artificial insertion of the official discourse. Indeed, ever since the term “main melody” came into use in the late 1980s to refer to officially endorsed culture vis-à-vis the expansion of a pluralizing cultural market, Chinese media officials, scholars, and producers have busied themselves with the question of whether and/or how the “main melody” can be made with audience appeal. Each year, a number of exemplary cultural products, whether film, television drama, novel, or song, would be officially touted for achieving both “economic effects” and “social effects.” Nevertheless, they are noteworthy exactly because of their rarity. Besides, even for these popular “main melody” items, it is entirely possible that users filter out the social effects in their private enjoyment. Not only for viewers but also in the minds of producers and broadcasters, the divide between the “main melody” and the commercial is never entirely bridged. “Main melody” films still have to depend on organized viewing to avoid embarrassing disasters at the box office. “Main melody” television dramas have to depend on CCTV or special windows on provincial television stations opened up by top-down propaganda directives for special events such as major anniversaries in the history of the Party and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). When planning for a television drama, the producer first positions it as either a “main melody” for CCTV or a commercial drama for provincial television stations. For a “main melody,” the producer would not ordinarily start the project without first securing an advance purchase contract with CCTV; the purpose of making a “main melody” is not to make money, since CCTV pays not much more than a meagre sum to cover the cost, but to associate the producer or the production company with the name and status of CCTV. If it were easy to incorporate “main melody” into commercial media, the distinction would have long ago disappeared. Despite cases of relatively successful hybridization, disjuncture is simply too salient to ignore.

The Chinese State and the Disjunctive Media Order
Whether manifested structurally or semantically, the disjunctive media order is rooted in the tension between divergent imperatives mapped onto an array of political, economic, and cultural stakeholders. The political and
economic dimensions of China’s communicative processes are certainly not irreconcilable. In fact, perhaps the most important contribution of critical scholarship to our understanding of Chinese media is that commercialization has probably contributed to the entrenchment of state control as “media organizations and media managers developed a vested interest in sustaining the current political economic order by following the party line while pursuing financial gains.” Moreover, since the mid-1990s, the Party has demonstrated a remarkable ability to harness and reincorporate the energy unleashed in the marketized media sector, energy embodied in capital-hungry media organizations experimenting with innovative ways of audience building, transnational capital clamouring for market entry, and domestic private capital surreptitiously seeping into media-related businesses. As indicated earlier, central to the Party’s enhanced capacity for media governance is a resilient approach that subjects different types of media organizations, content, and capital to different control regimes based on their perceived importance to the Party’s propaganda and legitimization needs.

The rationale underlying the differentiated control is the need to maximize the economic benefits of a growing media sector while keeping political challenges at bay. In doing so, the Party “retain[s] strategic control over media content and enables state media institutions and their senior management to secure income without having to be actually engaged in the mundane tasks of media production. In this way, Chinese state media operators are essentially restructuring themselves along the post-Fordist flexible accumulation strategies of capitalistic production, a development that has been characteristic of media industries all over the world.” Thus, despite and perhaps because of media commercialization, the Party reconstitutes its hegemony, and it does so exactly by adapting to the condition of disjuncture of the post-socialist media order with something similar to post-Fordism, as Zhao argues.

The Chinese state has redefined its role vis-à-vis the media sector and secured the “commanding heights” of China’s communication systems. Embedded in this view is the idea that hegemony is always a process – a state of always being achieved and contested – and that it is important to recognize the fault lines over which hegemonizing forces are constantly at work. As part of her political-economic critique of China’s communication systems, Zhao points to the “polysemic and hybrid nature of Chinese television discourses and their multifaceted readings, with dominant, residual, emergent, and different ideological fragments borrowing from and reinforcing each other.” This key observation is elaborated by Xueping Zhong, who
defines Chinese television dramas as constituting site of contestation and attributes their complexity and ambiguity to ideological and social tensions and contradictions in contemporary China. From a different perspective, Xiaoling Zhang examines the dialectic between the Party’s hegemony and the media’s relative freedom. She points out that Chinese media organizations are now in a better position to negotiate with the state because they are expected by the state to perform multiple functions: “To create an environment favourable for political and social stability, to construct a good image of the Party-state, to harness popular support for the government, to compete with transnational media corporations for the global flow of information, and to be commercially successful in a very crowded marketplace.”

She points to areas of negotiation between the state and media organizations, where the latter are able to exercise bargaining power to serve their own best interests. Drawing on Daniel Hallin’s conceptualization of the spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy and unacceptable controversy, Zhang reminds us that Chinese media organizations and professionals, although occupying a weak position vis-à-vis the strong state, enjoy a certain autonomy in dealing with issues in the sphere of legitimate controversy and in redefining the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate controversies. In Jacques Ranciere’s terms, they participate in shaping the “distribution of the sensible” that determines what things are visible, audible, and doable and what are not in a given society. This space of negotiation, in my view, is pregnant with uncertainties: undoubtedly it is integral to the Party’s hegemony, which is characterized by bargaining and reciprocity with a view to establishing common ground; at the same time, however, it may generate centrifugal forces that disrupt or even partially displace the distribution of the sensible. As far as critical social issues are concerned, contestations and challenges are likely to arise when media organizations and personnel, whether out of professional pride or profit-making motives, selectively interpret or simply ignore the Party’s propaganda rules or state regulations to put forth non-official and even subversive perspectives on the issues.

A key area that has not been adequately addressed in the existing scholarship of Chinese media studies is the representational realm in which the Party-state is narrated, imagined, and visualized. In my view, how the state is represented in public culture should be of immediate concern to anyone interested in issues concerning state power. If a regime’s legitimacy depends on “subjective perceptions of the regime, for example, as competent, efficient, fair, committed to the realization of the common interest while avoiding publicly manifest partiality or bias” (emphasis added), then
it follows that images, narratives, and discourses about the state that circulate in the mass media are all closely intertwined with the question of legitimacy. Because ordinary people do not usually have direct experience of, or contact with, the state – its politics, mechanisms, agents and their behaviours (perhaps with the exception of clerks in local state bureaucracies) – they depend largely on media stories, which provide them with knowledge of the state at both the national and local levels, shape their sentiments, and help them form opinions about the state. It is in media stories about the state that disjunction of the media order is seen most forcefully and concretely.

What are the advantages provided by the conceptual framework of the “disjunctive order”? In a sense, it is closely associated with the Gramscian notion of hegemony. The two terms differ, however, in that whereas hegemony is more helpful in describing and locating effects, the former focuses one’s attention on the complexities and dynamics of the present situation. The notion of “disjuncture” is sensitive to both the structurally generated differences of interests and motives as well as agency of individuals, and the possibilities of alliance, rearticulation, and conjuncture of diverse forces. Commenting on the articulation and rearticulation of various social forces in shaping the Chinese media, Zhongdang Pan fruitfully points out that “some of these forces are contradictory ideologically and that articulation of them often produces changes that defy easy categorization with our familiar theoretical arsenal. Therefore, understanding China’s social changes requires situated and grounded examinations of how such multifaceted (re)articulation takes place and is embedded in the ways in which individuals carry out their work and conduct their life.”

This book hopes to delineate the disjunctive media order through a grounded examination of corruption dramas. Further, the “distribution of the sensible” in the disjunctive media order is by no means fixed or clearly mapped out. It is one of the book’s goals to distinguish how the boundaries of the permissible shift as a result of interplays among various institutional and individual stakeholders, what fault lines are amenable to repairs so that a hegemonic equilibrium is maintained, and what fissures would persist and exacerbate the centrifugal pressure from within the disjunctive order.

Organization of This Book
The book has six main chapters. An overview of Chinese television drama production and regulation from a historical perspective, Chapter 1 contextualizes the book, concretizes the previous discussion of the disjunctive media order, and lays the groundwork for an analysis of the advent and evolution
of corruption dramas in the subsequent two chapters. It delineates the transformation of television drama from an art of propaganda to a commercial cultural form as Chinese television underwent expansion and commercialization from the late 1970s onward. It pays particular attention to the growing presence of commercial production firms from the mid-1990s onward, and assesses whether and how this development has affected the relative strengths of private capital, television stations, and media regulators in shaping the content of television dramas.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of how corruption entered prime-time television in the mid-1990s. It focuses on the circumstances surrounding the development and broadcast of the first anti-corruption drama, *Heaven Above*, by CCTV. My argument is that the initial development of corruption dramas cannot be explained in purely political or economic terms; that is, *Heaven Above* was not simply designed as a piece of anti-corruption propaganda or produced by an emboldened media outlet in a commercial environment. It resulted from interplays between political, economic, and social forces and may be interpreted as a response on the part of CCTV, the dominant power in the Chinese television industry prior to 1990, to the uncertainties of the emerging disjunctive media order. On the premise that macro forces do not interact automatically but depend on the embedded activities of individuals, I then focus my analytical attention on the creative personnel involved in the making of *Heaven Above*. I argue that media professionals play a key role in mediating differences in the contact zone of political, economic, and social interests, and that their brokering activities at the textual, programming, and discursive levels constitute an important but largely overlooked dimension of cultural production in post-socialist China. Combining macro- and micro-level analyses, I argue for the usefulness of blending political economic and anthropological approaches, especially in the study of significant moments of Chinese media – moments of conjuncture and disjuncture. To foreshadow my argument in Chapter 3 and 4 about anti-corruption melodrama as the official representational mode, I end the chapter with an analysis of the official reception of *Heaven Above* with a view to determining the terms on which corruption was legitimized as a topic for prime-time television.

Chapter 3 focuses on the breakdown of the strenuously achieved equilibrium represented in *Heaven Above* as a result of deepening commercialization in the 2000s. Such breakdown was reflected in the intensified scrutiny and censorship of corruption dramas from 2002 onward. The intensified
commercial logic gave rise to an increasing number of salacious exposés that diverged from the triumphal narrative of the good Party defeating corrupt local officials. The tacit agreement that corruption dramas must convey crystal-clear moral messages was broken, straining the relationship between market-driven producers and broadcasters on one side and SARFT censors and propaganda officials on the other. The tension reached a breaking point and was resolved with coercion, leading to the ban on prime-time broadcast of crime and corruption dramas. In a sense, this chapter is about the disjunctive media order under pressure. It takes an in-depth look at how censorship of corruption dramas is motivated and conducted.

Chapter 4 shifts the book’s analytical focus from the actions of institutional players to the text of corruption dramas. It analyzes the official mode of imagining and narrating corruption – anti-corruption melodrama. In particular, it addresses the question of why the melodramatic imagination declined and corruption dramas ceased to play the role of “moral agent.” The main argument here is that anti-corruption melodrama declined as a result of the intensified logic of capital and the absence of consensus among political as well as intellectual elites on key questions regarding the issue of corruption. The evolution of televisual corruption brings about a new set of images and narratives about good and bad government officials, as well as the desirable and undesirable exercise of state power. Thus, as opposed to the “good official” narrative that seeks a solution to corruption in morally righteous Party heroes, competing frames emerge to portray corrupt officials alternately as heroes of the economic reform and as victims of a backward Chinese culture, and “good officials” as incompetent and even hypocritical.

Chapter 5 continues to engage with the neoliberal revolution in the way corruption is narrated, and focuses on the logical outcome of the revolution – the cynical turn of corruption dramas. The cynic’s narrative resemanticses corruption as a cultural problem, as the root of corruption is said to be closely associated with a long-standing bureaucratic tradition under Confucian influences. Deeply nihilistic, the narrative posits that all individuals, as soon as they become part of the bureaucracy, become hopelessly immoral and corrupt, and that politics is all about backbiting and bootlicking for the sake of one’s personal interest in power and money. As a perfect illustration of Slavoj Žižek’s take on cynicism as a dominant ideology, the culturalist explanation for corruption turns into a fascination with corruption itself. Modelling one’s actions on behaviours and rules in the alleged
bureaucratic culture is believed to help one succeed in the workplace, family matters, school, and even romance.

Chapter 6 provides a case study of how audience members take part in the making of the cynical frame. It focuses on a 2009 drama serial, *Snail House (Woju)* and its reception to illustrate how cynicism can rework the meaning of corruption to such an extent that the new role model of the brave new age appears to be none other than a charismatic corrupt official character. In this chapter, I argue for the necessity of exploring the linkages between the cynical attitude in corruption dramas, middle-class anxieties and aspirations, and the hegemony of neoliberalism.
Conclusion

A key finding of this study is that the trajectory of televisual representations of corruption in China from the mid-1990s to the 2010s has been characterized by the waning of the melodramatic imagination and the rise of the cynical. To conclude, I would like to relate this finding to larger concerns of the book:

• The Chinese Communist Party’s efforts to incorporate the commercializing and privatizing television sector into its anti-corruption campaigns have not met with outstanding success, if by success we mean the sustaining and nourishment of the official mode of representation of corruption by commercial television stations and production companies.
• On the affective plane, corruption dramas embody moral outrage and cynical resignation simultaneously. This finding is in line with Richard Levy’s prediction, based on research in the late 1990s, that “the public will continue to oscillate between a cynical, resigned, passive acceptance of corruption and bursts of emotional resistance targeted at the manifestations of corruption rather than its roots.” The compatibility between the sentiments suggests an urgent need for a radical structural critique of corruption.
• Corruption dramas are also dramas about the Party-state. Multiple imaginations about the Chinese state and state power are conveyed through such dramas.
• The tensions and conflicts concerning the production, regulation, and consumption of corruption dramas may be seen as external manifestations of the pressure within China’s disjunctive media order.

Commercial Television and the Demise of Anti-Corruption Melodrama

The topic of official corruption was allowed into prime-time television with conditions. Based on official documents and speeches about corruption
dramas, critical reviews in officially sponsored journals and the mainstream press, and private expressions of the censors at the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), I have argued that to fully make sense of the legitimization, regulation, and censorship of corruption dramas, we need to understand the role of melodrama as a paramount mode of imagining and narrating corruption. Structured by Manichean conflicts between the incorruptible and corrupt Party and state officials, anti-corruption melodrama serves mainstream politics in many ways. It satisfies the Party’s desire for positive self-images, displaces structural critiques of corruption, and, perhaps most importantly, imparts a sense of comfort and stability associated with a morally legible world. In light of moral confusion and ideological ennui as a result of de-Maoification and the ascendance of consumerism and pragmatism in the market reform era, reasserting the existence of a moral universe and reclaiming moral leadership has never seemed so urgent a task to the ruling party. In the context of desacralization, anti-corruption crusades have taken the place of class struggles, and corrupt officials have replaced class enemies as villains, criminals, and troublemakers in Chinese society. Anti-corruption politics has a strong moral component, and public morality is bureaucratically shaped and administered. Anti-corruption melodrama, broadly or narrowly conceived, personalizes dangers, problems, and contradictions rooted in market-induced social transformations and presents them in moral terms. Anti-corruption struggles and anti-corruption television dramas are therefore homologous. However, if corruption dramas were legitimized on the condition that they fit into the anti-corruption melodramatic imagination, the commercial development of Chinese television has eroded that political condition, rendering corruption dramas susceptible to stringent regulation and censorship.

To be sure, political propaganda and commercially driven media and cultural production are not incompatible; in fact, as forcefully shown by critical scholars, they can be mutually enhancing. Commercial media would not hesitate to package political messages into saleable consumer products as long as they find it profitable to do so, and the CCP’s propaganda workers frequently resort to popular cultural forms and techniques to enhance the efficacy of their messages. Yet, this symbiotic relationship is subject to breakdown in reality. To obtain a more nuanced picture of propaganda in the age of popular culture, it is necessary to revisit a few main reasons that commercial dramas turned into an inimical force to the official mode of representation of corruption. The first is the lack of consensus among the Chinese political and intellectual elites regarding the issue of corruption,
Conclusion

an internal fissure that has a lot to do with the CCP’s imperative to deal with the “fundamental tensions between the promises of a nominally socialist state and a developmental process that has led to a highly stratified and corrupt society.” Concomitant with the Party’s anti-corruption drive has been a persistent concern among Party leaders as well as local state agents that anti-corruption might dampen local initiatives for economic development. This concern is supported by Chinese mainstream economists, who argue that a certain degree of corruption is inevitable and even necessary for the success of economic reform, and that the ultimate solution to rampant corruption lies in further withdrawal of the state from the market. Fully accommodated by this neoliberal argument is the tendency among liberal intellectuals to isolate the political from the economic so that power in the bureaucratic realm, rather than the nexus between the political and economic, is identified as problematic, thereby exonerating power in the corporate world. These views, influential among policy makers and intellectuals, trivialize the moral content of the Party’s anti-corruption rhetoric. As intellectuals are incorporated into commercial television production, corruption dramas turn into a space for liberal and neoliberal discourses as contending frames of corruption. It can therefore be argued that commercial television tends to manifest pluralism, albeit limited, when there is no consensus among the ruling elites.5

Second, the commercial nature of Chinese television renders it susceptible to the desires and sensibilities that predominate among the urban strata. The discrepancy between the CCP’s highly publicized anti-corruption struggles and the seemingly unstoppable escalation of corruption has engendered pessimism and cynicism among the general population. These sentiments have led writers and producers to conjecture that it is very hard to please urban viewers with “good-official” heroes, central characters in anti-corruption melodramas. It is surmised by media producers that realistic portrayals of corruption, preferably spiced up with mafia violence, hold stronger audience appeal than feel-good melodramas. As a result, corruption exposés soon outnumbered anti-corruption melodramas in the early 2000s. Yet the corruption exposés supply spectacles without politics. If there is any politics involved, it is personal politics that focuses on self-governance and self-advancement and that prioritizes cynicism as a rational response to corruption. Is there a necessary link between commercial television and the rise of cynicism? I have argued in the affirmative. Cynicism sells, especially among the middle classes, who mock the corrupt behaviour of government officials but are content with living with or even profiting from corruption
themselves. There seems an endless supply of cultural goods designed to help consumers train and optimize themselves, and an equally endless demand for worldly advice from young university graduates and white-collar workers – in other words, middle-class aspirants. It is not coincidental that an increasing number of corruption dramas in the past few years have been adapted from the so-called Internet literature – novella serials produced and circulated online by authors themselves, and consumed by fans who may influence the writing process with feedback. Because of the scope of this book, I have not fully explored the role of Internet literature in television drama production, but existing evidence points to a big role that cries out for further research. In any case, from the Party’s perspective, corruption dramas have transformed from a moral agent into an instance of the moral confusion that the Party had sought to dispel in the first place.

The case of corruption drama reveals that a smooth relationship between the CCP’s propaganda and commercial media is contingent on at least the following factors:

- **Strong consensus among the elites.** If the propaganda concerns an issue on which consensus among political and intellectual elites does not exist and public debates are allowed to a certain extent, the media will enjoy a certain freedom in dealing with the CCP’s propaganda needs. In this scenario, a certain amount of pluralism, albeit regulated, is expected, and the CCP’s propaganda is unlikely to monopolize public space. The anti-corruption propaganda and its dominant aesthetics are therefore not necessarily fully supported by commercial television when it can readily draw on other legitimate voices and representational forms available in the public culture.

- **Compatibility between propaganda and middle-class sensibilities.** Although the anti-corruption drive helps the Party recoup some popularity and legitimacy, the Party also has to fight against increasing fatigue and cynicism among the Chinese population. Any effort to showcase the Party’s achievements in anti-corruption must also reckon with skeptical and cynical responses calling into question the efficacy, and indeed the necessity, of the entire anti-corruption cause. These responses are not unique to, but are particularly strong among, middle-class viewers. Faced with the need to attract urban middle-class viewers, media producers are unlikely to eagerly propagate political messages that counter middle-class worldviews and sentiments.
• The media’s adherence to political and cultural conservatism. In post-Mao China, media regulation and censorship are not guided by any systematic, coherent cultural program. If there is one overarching principle, it would be to keep bad things in check. Bad things can be anything ranging from threats to the political power to nuisances defying public morality. A television program may ostensibly support the CCP’s propaganda and yet be seen as “bad.” War dramas, which were subjected to official rebukes in the “Clean up the Screen” campaign in 2012 and 2013, provide such an example. Even though these dramas are about heroism, patriotism, and the full legitimacy of the CCP-led communist revolution, “excesses of entertainment” in these dramas are frowned on for violating mainstream aesthetics. In the case of corruption dramas, the “excessive” portrayal of corruption, violence, and injustice in Chinese society is considered by SARFT officials as a threat to social stability and is therefore unacceptable.

One crucial caveat needs to be made concerning the demise of anti-corruption melodrama on Chinese television. It cannot be deduced that moral condemnation of corruption is no longer relevant in contemporary China. In fact, the melodramatic continues to provide a dominant lens for many Chinese to make sense of corruption. Judging from the numerous collective actions at least partially galvanized by official corruption, and the waves of Internet vigilantism targeting individual corrupt officials, it is clear that moral indignation over corruption has remained a crucial part of the picture. Collective actions both online and offline suggest that the moral indictment against corruption has not lost social efficacy; from these collective actions emerges an alternative melodramatic imagination in which the centre of action is not the Party but ordinary citizens.

Moral Outrage and Cynical Resignation
As I stated at the outset of this book, corruption in contemporary China must not be understood as a moral or behavioural problem. It is nothing but systematic commodification and privatization of state power, playing a midwife’s role in the formation of Chinese capitalism. Therefore, an effective critique of corruption must also be a critique of the incestuous relationship between political and economic power in post-communist/post-socialist regimes. Furthermore, a critique of corruption must also be alert to the power of the discourse of corruption. To speak of “corruption” is often to
assume relative stability in the meanings of the public and private; however, in the post-socialist reality, the “public” and the “private” are essentially contested terms, and the very act of defining the boundary between the public and the private is inevitably intertwined with the exercise of state power. When such exercise of state power is undertaken to benefit a few, it must be subject to critical, public scrutiny. Laws, regulations, and policies that grant legitimacy to privatization of state assets without democratic participation are in themselves corrupt, or “legally corrupt.” The discourse of corruption, however, naturalizes the distinction between criminalized and legalized forms of privatization; by designating certain acts as deviant, it legitimizes the others so that the ensemble of the capitalistic reform may proceed relatively unhindered. As such, a critique of corruption has the potential to both empower and debilitate; therefore, it is crucial that an expansive perspective be adopted so that power, rather than corruption per se, is interrogated.

Corruption dramas do not question the structural linkage between corruption, the state, and capitalism. As a result, they constrain rather than facilitate public debates on corruption. Inability or unwillingness to carry out a radical, class-based critique of corruption leads to two responses: moral indictment of individual corrupt officials and a damning generalization of Chinese bureaucracy, and by extension Chinese culture, as decaying. It is exactly these two responses that have been given full play in the corruption dramas of the past two decades. I have shown how morally based critiques of corruption are well contained in the Party’s anti-corruption narrative, to which Party heroes are central. I am not aware of any corruption drama in which ordinary Chinese taking collective action against corruption play a central role, although it should be noted that in a few dramas, middle-class characters such as journalists, lawyers, and doctors assume relatively more agency compared with the working classes. As for the culturalist critique, at its best when appropriated by liberal intellectuals, it advocates improved political governance; at its worst, it encourages cynical resignation. As corruption dramas evolve in an environment defined by political censorship, commercial media, and the ideological aggression of neoliberalism, they shift to cynical entertainment. Not only do those dramas rationalize corruption but they are increasingly viewed as all-in-one courses providing useful instruction for young people on how to commodify one’s interpersonal relations and cultivate networks with the powerful in order to achieve one’s ambitions. It is worth reiterating that despite the cultural saliency of cynicism, it remains one of many modes of imagining, talking about, and indeed
performing corruption; that cynicism might be a dominant mood in certain social groups and less so in others; and that cynicism does not exclude the possibility of other affects such as anger. A potentially fruitful line of inquiry could revolve around manifestations, implications, and conditions of cynicism (or the disappearance thereof) in the age of scandals.

The Chinese State in Popular Culture
What stories do corruption dramas tell about the CCP and the Chinese state? Anti-corruption melodramas isolate “bad apples” from the Party-state and reassert the power of the CCP and its anti-corruption organ, the Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). The local state in these melodramas is portrayed with a certain ambivalence. It is in the local government that corruption takes place, calling into question the Chinese state’s governance capacity at the local level. It is also in the local government that the main anti-corruption hero is located. As a result, anti-corruption struggles are depicted primarily as a localized matter, and the local state is portrayed as a conflicted space. As the melodrama unfolds, the local state is cleansed and redeemed, with local state power seized from the wrong hands and placed in the hands of upright local leaders. The Party leadership in anti-corruption melodramas is shown to stand firmly on the side of the local hero and, embodied as CCDI officers, almost always descends on the scene near the end of the drama, when it is desperately needed to save the situation. The always timely and fortuitous advent of CCDI officers underscores the centrality of the CCP to the anti-corruption cause; paradoxically, however, it also exposes the shaky and unpredictable foundation on which anti-corruption struggles are waged, for it invites the question of “what if” – what if the CCDI had failed to show up? The power of the central Party-state is simultaneously asserted and undermined. Citizens in anti-corruption melodramas are mostly from lower classes, such as workers and farmers, whose livelihood is injured by corrupt officials. They stage sit-ins but their anger is well-contained and their actions strictly localized. They mainly play the role of aggrieved persons in need of protection from the Party-state.

As anti-corruption melodrama gave way to competing modes of representation, imaginations about the Party-state changed vastly. In corruption dramas that depict an irresistibly powerful mafia world intertwined with local government, the local state is portrayed as completely captured by criminal businesses and entirely incapable of normal governance. While there are good people in the local state agencies, these characters appear to be planted in the story to satisfy censors rather than to drive the narrative.
The same is true for characters that represent the Party leadership. These dramas portray a nearly apocalyptic picture of Chinese society unprotected from the raw power of capitalism. In this picture, local state power is criminalized, and the central Party-state power is debilitated, laying bare the governance crisis with which the CCP has had to cope with increasingly urgency in the 2000s. In these dramas, ordinary Chinese appear as victims of ruthless dark forces; they are cowered into silence or are killed off before getting a chance to voice their grievances. These dramas called into question the Party’s ruling legitimacy and caused the entire genre of crime drama to be all but wiped out in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

To cater to middle-class sensibilities by avoiding the simplistic, didactic good-official narrative, many corruption dramas treat corrupt officials humanistically and locate the causes of corruption not in individuals but in larger forces such as the political system or social milieu. By portraying local state agents simply as human beings, these dramas go a long way towards softening the image of the local state, despite corruption. Those that explore the roots of corruption in political power raise questions of how state power should be distributed and what mechanisms should be in place to ensure the fair and responsible exercise of state power, that is, questions of political governance. Ordinary citizens in these dramas are not active participants in the debates on corruption, for both questions and answers are provided by intellectuals as screenwriters. These dramas isolate political power from economic power and exonerate the latter as a major source of corruption. Such a narrow conceptualization of state power renders these dramas vulnerable to a political-economic critique of corruption.

Neoliberal tales of corruption are of particular interest to this book because they turn the CCP’s anti-corruption discourse on its head. These dramas go further than sympathetic portrayals of corrupt officials to make the point that often those who are considered corrupt officials are also those who contribute to economic marketization and GDP growth, and therefore should be recognized as national heroes. Here state power is relevant only to the extent that it should be used to shatter the legacy of a socialist command economy and advance the capitalistic mode of production. It is not important whether state agents are moral or not, for economic development is outside the sphere of morality. In fact, in these dramas, “good officials” or morally upright bureaucrats are often portrayed as inept economic managers or obstacles to the efficient exercise of state power. In the same vein, ordinary citizens in the dramas do not show much interest in matters of justice, but
are mainly concerned with their own economic well-being as private persons. Corruption dramas of this type are entirely celebratory of the Party-state through the firm endorsement of its market reform policies.

Finally, none of these contending discursive frameworks competes with the most powerful mode of imagining corruption in the twenty-first century: the cynical. In fact, the apocalyptic, the humanistic, and the neoliberal ways of seeing are not only compatible with but also contribute to the cultural hegemony of the cynic’s tale of corruption. To the cynic, all Party and state officials are players in political games; they are all self-serving, self-aggrandizing private individuals regardless of their professed allegiance to the CCP. In the realm of officialdom, state power is up for grabs by everyone using any possible means; once acquired, state power is then used very naturally to serve one’s private interest, be it material or political. Cynics are inherently nihilistic. They recognize everything the CCP proclaims as a lie and pride themselves on not being deceived; cynics certainly hold no illusion about or belief in the CCP’s ruling legitimacy. However, cynics are not interested in challenging state power either. As long as they have a chance to partake in such power or its abuse, they would do it, because, to quote Žižek again, “they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it anyway.” In the cynic’s tale, ordinary citizens are exhorted to learn the arts of survival in the political realm so as to apply them in other spheres, such as workplaces, for faster promotion. In other words, the state, whether local government in contemporary China or the imperial palace, is a jungle where the fittest survive; it is a microcosm of Chinese society in the jungle of raw capitalism.

Maintaining the Stability of the Disjunctive Media Order
The state, commercial media, intellectuals, and audiences constitute disparate yet interrelated dimensions of a disjunctive media order. What does the cynical turn of corruption dramas under the watchful eye of the Party and SARFT reveal about the media order in question? The marginalization of the official anti-corruption melodrama is rooted in the disjuncture between political and market imperatives. Whereas the Party had hoped to harness the power of television entertainment in the service of its anti-corruption struggles and the state-making process in general, commercial television has proven uncooperative, resistant, and even subversive to this particular agenda. In response, the state attempted to reassert its control over television by launching a decade-long “Clean Up the Screen” initiative. Strengthened regulation and censorship do not cause the disjuncture to
disappear, however. Instead, the theme of corruption has returned to prime time in altered forms, articulating itself in the narrative of “officialdom” or guanchang. A variety of corruption dramas have mushroomed, either in contemporary urban settings as in Snail House or portraying struggles among empresses and concubines in the private court of an imperial palace.7 Advocating the law of the jungle, they are seen by SARFT officials as cultural pollutants and have triggered another round of criticism and regulation since 2011.

The drastic, unpredictable SARFT measures taken to rein in corruption dramas reflect dissonance among different objectives and missions attributed to the media by political and economic stakeholders. They also bring to the fore the unwieldiness of the state’s media policy, which is designed to have it both ways: establishing a powerful cultural industry by means of commercialization and privatization on the one hand, and aligning this cultural industry with the state’s political and cultural goals. Given the absolute dominance of private capital in television drama production, the stormy relations between SARFT and commercial media also suggest that private capital, once incorporated into the media sector, tends to follow its own logic. Given the capital-intensive nature of television drama production, the logic of capital has a particularly powerful impact. As far as corruption dramas are concerned, it can even be argued that representations of the state in television entertainment have been largely incorporated into the realm of capital.

What, then, keeps the disjunctive media order from disintegrating? Coercion in the form of outright bans is deployed, as mentioned earlier. Because it lays bare the weakness of the regime, coercion seems to be the last resort for the state. The functioning of the media order has depended on the willingness of various stakeholders – Party leaders, SARFT officials, media managers, production companies, advertisers, and so on – to make compromises. The making of compromises is in turn premised on the softening of the boundaries of the permissible on prime-time television. As we have seen in the case of corruption dramas, the boundaries of television entertainment have been constantly made and remade. Redefining boundaries does not occur automatically. I highlighted the role of cultural mediation taken up by Chinese intellectuals since the early 1990s. Intellectuals include writers, producers, and other media professionals centrally involved in the making of television dramas. These “cultural brokers” play a key role not only in legitimizing corruption as prime-time subject matter but also in shaping how corruption should be portrayed. By virtue of their mediating
activities, structurally engendered differences in the disjunctive media order are ameliorated and smoothed over. I have also argued that the cultural brokerage role of intellectuals does not mean that intellectual interventions are no longer possible. Rather, it means that intellectual interventions are predicated on a willingness to play the game in the commercial media environment in the first place. In any case, disjuncture and conjuncture are two sides of the same coin. The notion of disjuncture does not foreclose the possibilities of alliance, rearticulation, and conjuncture of diverse forces in dynamic interplay with one another. The strength and longevity of such conjuncture are contingent on the extent to which the interests of different stakeholders overlap, and in the case of partial overlapping, how elastic the boundaries can be that delimit the legitimate and the illegitimate. In the case of strong consensus among dominant political, economic, and intellectual forces, commercial media may form a strong ally with the state. This book shows that commercial media never question the dominant assumption about market reform, the single most important item on the Party’s political agenda. As well, while commercial media produce a great number of corruption exposés, they never touch on corruption at the core of the Party leadership. In these instances, there is a perfect alignment and tacit agreement between commercial and political imperatives. It is in the area of weak consensus that compromises and negotiations take place and deals are made or broken. Questions that belong in this area are: Who has the authority to speak about and act on the issue of corruption? How is corruption framed so that certain actors, actions, explanations, and solutions become part of the picture while others are left out? Which voices and emotions are legitimate and recognizable, and which are not? It is exactly with regard to these questions that disjuncture manifests itself most unmistakably, and where a great deal of mediation is needed to “maintain the stability” of the disjunctive order.

Corruption Dramas and Internet-Facilitated Corruption Scandals
Finally, I would like to end this book with some reflections on the implications of this study for our understanding of the culture of scandal in twenty-first-century China. As of this writing, the Internet in China has become a site for corruption scandals to break out. Each year since the middle of the first decade, a number of scandals have been exposed through the Internet. My own incomplete account records more than seventy Internet-facilitated scandals involving local party and state officials from 2008 to 2013. These scandals share several characteristics:
• Citizens take the lead in getting a scandal going (although whistleblowers are differently motivated), sustaining it, amplifying it, and forcing relevant government authorities to take action.
• The salience of sex scandals is unprecedented. Previously, the sexual misdemeanours of officials involved in scandals were exposed as a “by-product” of investigation; sex was never the primary offence and was always treated with restraint in official and mainstream commercial media. Now it is often sex scandals that power subsequent investigations into financial or power scandals.
• Not infrequently, political scandals originate right in the media. Officials get into trouble for inappropriate remarks that they make, ill-calculated facial expressions, expensive wristwatches that they wear, and boorish manners that they put on, captured by professional, amateur, or surveillance cameras and spread over the Internet. Similar to sexual wrongdoings, these accidental appearances are frequently interpreted by netizens as signs of deeper truths, be they abuses of power or financial wrongdoings.
• The Internet-powered scandal culture derives much of its influence from visuals. Widely circulating on the Internet are sex tapes, lewd photos, diaries filled with details of bribery, power brokering, and sexual adventures, pictures of luxurious accessories, copies of itemized receipts detailing overseas travel costs or expensive purchases, and so on. These spectacles turn political scandals into highly colourful and entertaining events, and in some cases activate the so-called human flesh search engine – collective intelligence gathering – in order to identify wrongdoers.

Both corruption dramas and Internet-generated political scandals provide a large number of corruption narratives mediated by popular culture. Because of crucial differences in terms of mode of production, distribution, and consumption, they should be treated as entirely different genres. Yet they are also closely related. If corruption dramas initiated a visual turn in public discourses of corruption, it is the Internet that has generated something that may be called a visual culture of corruption. If corruption dramas, by bringing the otherwise backstage behaviour and politics to the living room, tested the bounds of publicity that the Party-state and its officials had warily guarded, it is the digital media and communication technologies that facilitate citizen surveillance, thereby making it increasingly difficult for politicians to manage and control their visibility. Furthermore, the dominant
affective modes in corruption dramas – moral outrage and cynicism – are also identified in Internet forums. As noted earlier, the same emotions might manifest differently with varying implications. For example, moral indignation that ultimately places hope for revenge in the CCP is clearly different from outrage that leads citizens to take matters into their own hands. Clearly, the political implications of the culture of scandals still remain to be distinguished. Future research in this area may well benefit from a broad perspective on the co-evolution of corruption and popular culture in general.
Notes

Introduction
1 The scandal came to a resolution when Bo Xilai was sentenced to life in prison on 22 September 2013, on charges of bribery, embezzlement, and abuse of power.
2 Bo Xilai is the son of Bo Yibo, a highly influential senior CCP leader in the 1980s and 1990s.
3 James Lull and Stephen Hinerman propose that “a media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change.” See Lull and Hinerman, “The Search for Scandal,” in Media Scandals, edited by James Lull and Stephen Hinerman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3.
4 Cangtian zaishang [Heaven above], directed by Zhou Huan, produced and broadcast by China Central Television, 1995; novel and script written by Lu Tianming. Cited hereinafter as Heaven Above.
5 This is the only information available on the ratings of the drama serial. It is widely quoted in newspapers and trade magazines as well as by scholars. See Tian Anli, Quan Hua, and Wu Qian, Dianshi de jiyi [Memories of television] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2009); Yan Yanwen, “Cangtian zaishang yu shiji zhijiao de Zhongguo wenxue [Heaven Above and Chinese literature at the turn of the century],” Guangming ribao [Guangming Daily], 28 February 1996; Jeffrey Kinkley, Corruption and Realism in Late Socialist China: The Return of the Political Novel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 26.
7 This figure is an estimate by an industry insider whom I interviewed in 2009. I confirmed it through a close reading of the abstracts of hundreds of crime drama titles on a popular online video store in China, Dangdang.com (http://www.dangdang.com).
8 See Kinkley, Corruption and Realism, 14-18.
9 SARFT merged with the State Administration of Press and Publication to form the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television in 2013.
10 Yuezhi Zhao, Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 76.
11 In this book, “post-socialist China” refers to China since 1992, the year that signalled the formal advent of market economy in China.
12 Neoliberalism may be understood as “a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2. It may also refer to a means of biopolitics, a technology of governing human life “in order to harness and extract life...
forces”; this technology “relies on market knowledge and calculations for a politics of subjection and subject-making that continually places in question the political existence of modern human beings.” Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 13. In this book, both of these interrelated interpretations are deployed.


14 Quoted in Yan Sun, *Corruption and Market in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). 3. Disagreement exists, though, on how this broad definition should be interpreted. What counts as public power? Are managers of state-owned firms considered occupants of public office? What does “abuse” mean? Should “abuse of public power” be quantitatively defined? For example, Chu Wenkai, a CCDI researcher, believes that for a behaviour to be considered an instance of corruption, it must “bring great damage to the interests of the state and the people.” Chu Wenkai, “Fubai gainian de fānhuà he jiédìng” [Generalization and delimitation of the concept of corruption], Zhongguo jiancha [Supervision in China] 16 (2005): 51-52.


17 Ibid., 55.


19 CCTV’s monopoly of the national market as the only national television network was broken when provincial television stations were allowed to launch their own satellite-transmitted channels. See Chapter 1 for more details.

20 Zhao, *Communication in China*, 88-89.

21 Producers of “serious dramas” claim to adopt a conscientious and sombre attitude towards representing historical figures and events. The difference between “serious drama” and
other historical dramas is overblown, since they are all modern-day tales dressed up in ancient costumes. I argue that the difference is manufactured to achieve product differentiation within a homogeneous genre.


24 Shuyu Kong, Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Jianying Zha, China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers are Transforming a Culture (New York: New Press, 1995). Both authors noted the role of intellectuals in the making of Chinese popular culture in the 1990s.


27 Zhao, Communications in China, 112.


29 Media officials see television as an ideological instrument. Popular television programs are valued by officials for their ability to disseminate official messages to many viewers. Chapter 2 will further elaborate this point.


31 Zhao, Communication in China, 207.


34 Zhang, "From Masses to Audience," 629.

Chapter 1: Chinese Television Dramas


3 The provincial television stations included Shanghai TV, Guangdazhou TV, Harbin TV, Tianjin TV, and Changchun TV. Beijing TV broadcast 90 of them, followed by Guangzhou TV (about 40), Shanghai TV (about 40), and Harbin TV (about 20). See Wu Hui and Zhang Zhijun, Dianshiju shehuixue [Sociology of television] (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2002), 6.

4 Cao Hui, “Zhongguo zaoqi dianshiju fazhan gaikuang” [A survey of China’s early television dramas], in Huisu yuantou, edited by Li Peisen, 18-29.

5 They were Kaochang shang de fanxiu douzheng (An Anti-Revisionist Struggle at the Test Site) (1967), Gongshe dangwei shuji de nü’er (Daughter of the Commune’s Party Secretary) (1975), and Shensheng de zhize (Sacred Duties) (1975).


8 Cao Hui, “Zhongguo zaoqi dianshiju fazhan gaikuang.”

9 For example, Wang Fulin (b. 1931), a director of twenty live dramas, went on to make China’s first popular drama serial, Diying shibian (Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp) (9 episodes, 1981), Honglou meng (Dreams in the Red Chamber) (36 episodes, 1987), and Sanguo yanyi (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) (84 episodes, 1994). The latter two are now considered as classical televisual adaptations of Chinese literary classics. Cao Hui, who participated in eight live productions as screenwriter, director, or both, would take
part in the following decades in a number of major productions such as CCTV’s historical dramas *Nu’erhachi* (Nurhachi) (16 episodes, 1986) and *Tang minghuang* (Emperor Ming of Tang) (40 episodes, 1990). Zhou Huan (b. 1943), who appeared in at least four live dramas prior to the Cultural Revolution, later directed the first anti-corruption drama, *Heaven Above* (17 episodes, 1995).


12 See Zhao, *Communication in China*, 96.


14 Ibid.


16 In 1994, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had a total of ten drama production units. See Ming Zhenjiang, “Jianchi gao biaozhun, hongyang zhuxuanlu” [Maintain high standards and promote the main melody], *Zhongguo dianshi* [Chinese television], 6 (1994): 25-26. Based on quarterly statistics of television drama distribution permits released on the SARFT website, between 2006 and 2011 the PLA’s affiliated production units made a little more than one hundred drama serials. The most actively involved is the August First Film Studio, the PLA’s only film studio, followed by the PLA Air Force, the General Logistics Department of the PLA General Headquarters, Second Artillery Corps, Shenyang Military Region, and so on. Data are available at http://dsj.sarft.gov.cn/tims/site/views/applications.shanty?appName=announce.

17 Zhang Huashan, “Difang dianshi ju de guanli” [Administration of local television dramas], in *Dianshi xuanhuan guanli lunji* [Anthology of television propaganda and regulation], edited by Wang Chuanyu and Zhao Qun (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 437-65.

18 Ibid.


20 Yuezhi Zhao recounts the story of a Chinese industrialist, Lou Zhongfu, who founded the Guangsha Group, the country’s largest private construction company. Lou’s interest in sponsoring cultural activities dated back at least to 1985, when he sponsored a television drama serial produced by Zhejiang Television (a provincial television station of Zhejiang, a coastal province in eastern China). His sponsorship of television drama production was a normal practice in the 1980s (Zhao, *Communication in China*).

21 Zhang Huashan, “Difang dianshi ju de guanli.”

22 Wang Feng, “Tuanjie qilai, wei fanrong woguo dianshi yishu er fendou” [Be united and strive for the development of television drama art in our country], *Zhongguo dianshi* [Chinese Television], 6 (1991): 40-45.

24 Ibid.
25 During my interviews in 2003, Ren Dahui and Jin Yusheng, two senior (or “first-generation”) television drama producers at CCTV, discussed the relationship between directors and production chiefs in the 1980s.
28 CCTV imported dramas and movies from a wide variety of countries, including the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, Holland, Norway, France, West Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Egypt, Hungary, Romania, Poland, East Germany, Yugoslavia, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Japan, the Soviet Union, Mexico, and so on.
29 These shows, though considered second-rate in the United States, fascinated the Chinese immediately. Mark Harris of The Man from Atlantis impressed viewers inadvertently with his sunglasses. Following the show’s screening, it became fashionable for Chinese youths to wear sunglasses, known locally as “maike [“Mark”] glasses.” Garrison’s Gorillas caused more polarized opinions. Critical viewers, including some senior Party leaders, condemned the show as violent, meaningless, and bourgeois. See Wu and Zhang, Dianshiju shehuixue.
30 Examples include Isaura the Slave and Biance Vidal. Lucilia Santos, who played Isaura, was so popular among the Chinese that she won the first Golden Eagle Award for best foreign actress in 1985.
34 For example, in early 1990, before Yearnings became a hit, MRFT vice minister Wang Feng called for drama producers to learn from Japanese, Mexican, Brazilian, and Taiwanese soap operas to improve the productivity and production values of Chinese television dramas. He mentioned studio shooting and multiple camera positions, which were being experimented with at CCTV and BTAC. See Wang Feng, “Tongchou guihua, jiaqiang guanli, fahui xitong youshi, zhuyi zonghe xiaoyi: Wangfeng fubuzhang zai quanguo dianshiju guihuahui he yinjin haiwai dianshiju guanli gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua” [Plan concertedly, strengthen regulation, exploit systemic advantages, and stress comprehensive effects: speech of deputy minister Wang Feng at the national television drama planning conference/work conference for regulating imported television dramas], Zhongguo dianshi [Chinese Television] 8 (1990): 2-7.
35 See Wang Feng, “Tuanje qilai.” This awareness of the need for a paradigmatic shift in drama production became dominant at BTAC. Zheng Xiaolong, a BTAC official and producer, also expressed the belief that it would no longer be effective to depend on literary and artistic talents alone, and that television dramas should be mass-manufactured like regular factory products instead of as artifacts. See Wang Shuo, “Wo kan dazhong...
wenhua gangtai wenhua ji qita” [My views on popular culture, Hong Kong and Taiwan culture, and others], in Wuzhizhe wuwei [The ignorant fears nothing], edited by Wang Shuo (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 2-46.

36 In the words of an official critic named Meng Fanshu, “from Yearnings, we know how to tell stories through television dramas. An appealing television drama must be (1) popular but not vulgar; (2) loved by ordinary people; and (3) heart-wrenching. Television dramas are for ordinary audience, mainly composed of women, children and the elderly. They are faithful and easy to be moved.” Ni Min, “Guochan dianshiju zemme neng genghaokan” [How to make more appealing television dramas], Zhongguo xiaofeizhe bao [Chinese Consumers News], 11 May 2001.

37 Based on the ¥135,000 sponsorship agreement between Bailong, a manufacturer of mineral water dispensers, and BTAC, a Bailong water dispenser had to appear in each episode for no less than five minutes, and the two main actors, Ge You and Lu Liping, had to appear in an ad for the product. Zhi Rang, “Liuxingyu guanggao duoyin fansi: neidiju guanggao zhiru dashiji” [Product placement in rain of meteors causes debates: a chronology of product placement in Chinese television dramas], Netease, http://ent.163.com/09/0818/19/5H18GRU300031GV5.html.

38 Yin Hong, “Yiyi, shengchan, xiaofei: Zhongguo dianshiju fazhan de zhengzhi jingji fenxi” [Meanings, production, and consumption: a political economy analysis of Chinese television drama], in Yingshi wenhua qianyan [At the front of a film and television culture], edited by Hu Zhifeng (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2004), 105-36.


41 Wanning Sun, “Dancing with Chains,” 195.

42 My thanks go to Guobin Yang for this insight.


45 Ibid., 41.


48 Each year from then on, special state funds were allocated for “main melody” film and dramatic productions, television stations were obligated to make and broadcast a certain number of “main melody” dramas, public institutions were often required to purchase group tickets for their employees to watch “main melody” films, and so on.

49 Data are gleaned from Lu Di, Zhongguo dianshi chanye de weiji yu zhuangji [Crises and opportunities for Chinese television industry] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2002); Huang Shengmin, “2004 nian Zhongguo guanggao shichang diaocha” [Survey of 2004 Chinese advertising market], in Zhongguo chuanmei chanye fazhan baogao [Report on development of China’s media industry (2004-2005)], edited by
Cui Baoguo (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2005); and annual reports (2000-3) of China’s advertising industry from “Chinese Advertising Online” (http://www.a.com.cn).

50 See Lu Di, Zhongguo dianshi chanye de weiji yu zhuangji; She Xianjun, Dianshi guanggao yingxiao [Television advertisement and marketing] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2004); and Chen Rongyong, “Xinmeiti shidai dianshi meiti de yingxiangli” [Influence of television medium in the age of new media], Zhongguo guanggao [China Advertising] 5 (2011): 40-42.

51 It has been observed that CCTV actually yields more money in taxation than the nominal subsidy it receives from the government each year. According to Li, the government provides no more than 0.5 percent of total CCTV income. Li Xiaoping, “‘Focus’ (Jiaodian Fangtan).”


53 For example, in 1997 it grossed ¥4.1 billion in advertising income, whereas the combined advertising income of the ten largest provincial stations was only ¥3.146 billion. See Xie Yungeng, “2006 zhongguo dianshi guanggao shichang baogao” [Report on China’s television advertising market in 2006], Xinwen zhanxian [News Front] 3 (2007): 54-56.


56 Personal interview with Yuan Fang, 17 August 2005. At the time of the interview, Yuan Fang was the director of the CTR market research company, a joint venture between TNS (Taylor Nelson Sofres) and CCTV.

57 Shen Hua, “Dianshiju guanggao shichang de kunju yu zhuangji.”


60 Zhao Wenxia, “Dianshiju guanggao shouru heshi neng fanbu zhizuofang” [When will drama production companies truly partake of the advertising pie], Beijing ribao [Beijing Daily], 5 June 2009.

61 Cheng Ying, “Cong woguo dianshiju shichang de fazhan licheng kan er yuany qudong de tongxiangxing yu nixiangxing” [Analyzing the development of our country’s television drama market under the dual control of the state and the market], Nanfang dianshi xuekan [South China Television Journal] 4 (2004): 38-40.

62 Also see Bonnie Rui Liu, “Chinese TV Changes Face: The Rise of Independents,” Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture 7, 1 (2010): 73-91. There is some overlap between Liu’s findings and mine, although we conducted research on this topic independently.


64 Examples include Heidong (Black Hole), Guojia gongsu (Prosecuted by the State), and Weixie (Threats).
See “Guowuyuan guanyu feiyou jinru wenhua chanye de jueding” [The State Council’s decisions concerning the entry of non-public capital into the cultural industry] (2005), http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content_64188.htm.


In 2005, Poly Huayi, which controlled Xinbaoyuan and Yingshi Film and Television, sold half of its shares to the Youli Group, a Sichuan-based real estate group listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, thereby gaining indirect access to the stock market.

Zhao, Communication in China, 231.

“Shipin wangzhan shouci touqian pai dianshiju; Leshiwang yinian huoli 600 wan” [First attempt to invest in television drama by videostreaming site; LeTV grossed a profit of ¥6 million in a year] (13 February 2011), http://tech.gmw.cn/2011-02/13/content_1607665.htm.


It made a total of fourteen dramas in 2005, and the number decreased to ten in 2006, six in 2007, seven in 2008, thirteen in 2009 (2009 was packed with important anniversaries for the Party and the PRC, such as 1919, 1949, and 1979, which probably explained the small surge in the Center’s output), six in 2010, and three in 2011. The information is gleaned from the SARFT website, in the section that publicizes quarterly reports on television drama distribution permits.


Wang Lanzhu, “Zhiji Zhongguo dianshiju shichang.”


The cost of purchasing a permit is usually a small fraction of the total production cost, ranging from a nominal amount if the two parties have a congenial relationship to a generous 1 percent of the total budget. Based on my interviews with producers, the cost of a permit was not a big concern to them. For example, a permit might just cost ¥20,000 to ¥30,000, compared with a total budget of ¥4 million to ¥7 million. Personal interview with Zheng Zhenxiu, producer.


92 Liu Xiliang, “Jiaqiang guanli shi cujin dianshiju chuangzuo fanrong de guanjian” [The key to invigorating television drama production is to strengthen regulation], *Zhongguo dianshi [Chinese Television]* 4 (1996): 4-10.


94 Wang Weiguo, “Zhuxuanlü dianshiju shenmeihua chuyi” [A preliminary discussion of the aesthetics of main melody dramas], in *Yingshi wenhua qianyan: “Zhuanxingqi” dazhong shenmei wenhua toushi* [At the forefront of the film and television culture: popular aesthetics and culture during the “transitional” period], edited by Hu Zhifeng (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2004), 212-21.


97 Ibid.


99 For example, there were more than two hundred attendees in the 2000 conference, including the SARFT director, the director of CCTV, the deputy chair of the Chinese


101 Chen Xiaochun and Zhang Hong, Dianshiju zhipian guanli: cong xiangmu cehua dao shichang yingxiao [Management of television drama production: from project planning to marketing] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005), 95.

102 A television drama is submitted to either a central government agency or its provincial bureau, depending on the administrative level of its production unit (licence holder).


105 Data are compiled from SARFT’s monthly reports released at its website, http://dsj.sarft.gov.cn/tims/site/views/applications.shanty?appName=note.


111 Ibid., Article 5.


115 See Ying Zhu, Television in Post-Reform China.

116 It can only be speculated whether the Party leadership (Hu Jintao) was involved and what specifically about the reinterpretation really caused the problem.

Chapter 2: Corruption Dramas as a Mediated Space

1 See, e.g., SMG (Shanghai Media Group), *Guangyin ruju zhi cangtian zaishang* [Time of drama], broadcast on 8 June 2008 by the News and General Channel of Shanghai Television, 60 minutes. The transcript is available at http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-06-10/121315714982.shtml; also available in Tian Anli, Quan Hua, and Wu Qian, eds., *Dianshi de jiyi* [Memories of television] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2009).

It should be noted from the outset that *Heaven Above* was not the first television drama to portray a corrupt Party cadre. In 1986, CCTV broadcast a twelve-episode mini-series, *New Star* [Xinxing], which was about how a young reform-minded Party official fought a conservative, corrupt, and inefficient bureaucracy (see Lull, *China Turned On*). A critical, reflexive look at the suffocating Chinese bureaucracy, it may arguably be seen as a predecessor of corruption dramas; the same is true of a few other 1980s dramas that exposed the ills of bureaucratism. I argue, however, that they were too different from corruption dramas to be included in this study. They belonged to the discourse of reform rather than of corruption. They were remembered as “television dramas of reform,” a term that can be traced back to its literary counterpart, “literature of reform.” Reform was an ascendant discourse in the 1980s, and the term “literature of reform” was coined by literary critics to refer to novels that dealt with the theme of reforming and modernizing Chinese society. The critical impulse reflected in *New Star* was of a piece with the prevailing mood – characterized by sombre soul searching and irrepressible desire for change – among Chinese intellectuals and ordinary people in the 1980s, a mood that culminated in the 1988 television documentary *River Elegy* and the 1989 Democracy Movement. The highly controversial *River Elegy* was a scathing condemnation of Chinese traditional culture and triggered a nationwide debate about the past and future of China. Though different in tone and conceptual framework, both *New Star* and *River Elegy* can be seen as Chinese intellectuals’ interventions that were driven by a deep sense of crisis and change. The critical fervor would be extinguished in the ill-fated 1989 Democracy Movement; when Chinese television became once again politically engaged in the 1990s, its social meanings and significance would no longer be the same. *New Star* and other dramas of reform had greater affinity with the cultural fever of the 1980s than with the anti-corruption dramas of the 1990s.


4 Manion, *Corruption by Design*, 190.


6 “Jiang Zemin zai zhongjiwei diliuci quanti huiyishang jianghua” [Jiang Zemin’s speech at the CCDI’s Sixth Plenum], *Renmin ribao [People’s Daily]*, 27 January 1996.

7 Zhao, “Watchdogs on Party Leashes?” 582.

8 Zhao, *Communication in China*, 215.

9 Yang Shuying, “Zhongyang dianshijia bofang de dianshiju cong he er lai?”

10 Wu Hui and Zhang Zhijun, *Dianshiju shehuixue*. 

Notes to pages 63-71

Zhao, “Watchdogs on Party Leashes?”


Rong Xiaojing, “Guochan dianshi jiemu jingcheng buzhen” [Domestic television programs compete in Beijing], Beijing qingnian bao [Beijing Youth Daily], 15 September 1996; personal interview with Zhou Huan, director of Heaven Above.


The account of the production of Heaven Above in this section is based on my interviews with Lu Tianming unless otherwise specified.

Shi Yi, Chen Hanyuan fangtan [Interviews with Chen Hanyuan] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2008), 238-39.


It was based on two novels written by a well-known Chinese writer, Liu Zhenyun. More in Chapter 5.


Zhou Huan, personal communication, 2005.


You Xiaogang later became a heavyweight drama producer known for his commercial blockbuster series Qinggong mishi (Secret Files of the Qing Court).


Xu Chunping, ibid.


Personal interview, Zhou Huan.

Such competition for discursive control had significant implications at the textual level. For one thing, the name of the drama, Heaven Above, would not have been viable if the
CCDI had had any major influence on the production process. One tends to invoke the power of heaven when help is not available on earth. Lu Tianming intended the title *Heaven Above* to express a collective desire for justice in the face of rampant corruption. The title conveyed a populist message. However, the CCDI found it offensive because it implied a lack of confidence in the anti-corruption mechanism set up in this world. A television drama made with the CCDI’s participation would almost certainly have focused on discipline inspection officers pitting themselves heroically against corrupt government officials while allowing little room for other discourses.


Kinkley, *Corruption and Realism in Late Socialist China*, 11.

Shi Yi, *Chen Hanyuan fangtan*, 236.


Xu Min, “*Cangtian zaishang*: Fanfu changlian de jingshi zhizuo” [Heaven Above: a drama of admonition for anti-corruption], *Fazhi ribao* [Legal Daily], 15 January 1996.

“*Cangtian zaishang* dashiji” [A chronology of *Heaven Above*], *Fazhi ribao* [Legal Daily], 15 January 1996.

Luo Jinsong, “Sixiang de zhenhan: dianshiju *Cangtian zaishang* yantaohui jiyao” [A touch in the heart: summary of speeches at the TV drama *Heaven Above* seminar], *Beijing qingnian bao* [Beijing Youth Daily], 16 January 1996.

Lu Tianming, *Cangtian zaishang* [Heaven Above] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1995).

Yan Yanwen, “*Cangtian zaishang* ju shiji zhijiao de zhongguo wenxue”; Luo Jinsong, “*Cangtian zaishang* de danzi yu dianzi” [Courage and intelligence of *Heaven Above*], *Beijing qingnian bao* [Beijing Youth Daily], 2 March 1996; Jiang Zengpei, “*Cangtian zaishang* suigan” [Casual thoughts on *Heaven Above*], *Renmin ribao* [People’s Daily], 14 February 1996.

Shang Deqi, “*Cangtian zaishang* de danzi yu dianzi.”

See Ma Ye’s comments in Ji Wen, “*Cangtian zaishang* deshi tan” [Talking about strengths and weakness of *Heaven Above*], *Renmin ribao* [People’s Daily], 8 March 1996; Wang Yongjiang, “Dianshiju *cangtian zaishang* de quehan” [Regrettable weakness of TV drama *Heaven Above*], *Dianying wenxue* [Film Literature], no. 9 (1996): 43-44; Li Shujie, “Yishushang zuojin jianzhu” [Impoverished art], *Gongren ribao* [Workers’ Daily], 13 February 1996.
Chapter 3: Censorship, Governance Crisis, and Moral Regulation

1 Based on my own accounting, during this period CCTV broadcast four corruption dramas set in contemporary China, including *Party Member Erleng Ma (Dangyuan Erleng Ma, 1996)*, *Black Face (Hei lian, 1996)*, *Passing through Liuyuan (Zouguo liuyuan, 1998)*, and *Choice (Jueze, 1999)*. These dramas are noteworthy for their portrayal of corruption among rural Party cadres (with the exception of *Choice*). Corruption in rural areas was frequently ignored in the highly commercialized television dramas of the first decade of the twenty-first century, which catered to urban viewers by focusing on corruption in cities. Even fewer corruption dramas were broadcast by local television stations. Only two came up in my research: *Director of Anti-Corruption Bureau (Fantan juzhang, 1996)* broadcast by Beijing Television, and *Anti-Corruption Storm (Fantan fengbao, 1997)*. They did not appear to have much impact and soon fell into oblivion.

2 Cheng Kejie was governor of Guangxi, a southwestern province, from 1992 to 1998, and served as deputy chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress from 1998 to 1999. From 1994 to 1998, Cheng helped Yinxing, a real estate company, obtain a shopping mall construction project in the capital city of Guangxi, obtained bank loans and diverted government funds for the project, and greatly underpriced the land. Before becoming Jiangxi deputy governor in 1998, Hu Changqing was chief of the National Tax Agency and deputy chief of the National Religious Affairs Agency. He took bribes of no less than ¥5.45 million for securing bank loans, construction projects, business licences, permanent residency in Hong Kong, and so on for the bribers. Another major charge was his decadent lifestyle, including his lavish consumption and uncontrolled sexual desire.

3 Hai Rui was a “model official” in the Ming Dynasty, famous for his moral rectitude, honesty, and perseverance in fighting corruption.

4 Zhang Ping, *Jueze (Choice)* (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1997). For an elaborate discussion of the novel, see Kinkley, *Corruption and Realism*.

5 On 24 August 2000, the director of the film *Shengsi jueze (A Life-and-Death Choice)*, Yu Bencheng, and *People’s Daily* reporter Xiang Bing chatted with participants in the “Strengthen the Nation Forum” hosted by *People’s Daily*. Some excerpts from the chat are available at http://www2.qglt.com.cn/wsrmlt/jbft/200%8/xb.html.

6 Chen Fang, *Tiannu: fantanju zai xingdong [Heaven’s Wrath: the anti-corruption bureau in action]* (Huhehaote: Yuanfang chubanshe, 1996). For a detailed discussion of *Heaven’s Wrath*, see Kinkley, *Corruption and Realism*.


8 This movie was also based on Zhang Ping’s novel of the same title. Yu Bencheng (director). *Shengsi jueze (A Life-and-Death Choice)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Film Studio, 2000).


11 Peng Li, “Kangkai yinmu zhengqi ge.”


17 In 1995, the Ministry issued a related “Notice on Further Strengthening and Improving the Regulation of Importation and Broadcast of Foreign Films and Television Dramas.” There, the specifically regulated time frame changed to 19:00-22:00. The document was also endorsed by the General Office of the CCP’s Central Party Committee and the General Office of the State Council.

18 “Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang dianshiju yinjin hepai he bofang guanli de tongzhi.”

19 Zeng Qingrui, “Yishu shiye, wenhua chanye yu dazhong wenhua de hundun yu mishi: lue lun zhongguo dianshiju de shehui jueze he wenhua celue ping yu yin hong xiansheng shangque” [Confused and entangled relations of art, cultural industry and popular culture: debating with Yin Hong on the social function of Chinese television dramas and cultural strategies], in Yingshi wenhua qianyan: “zhuanxingqi” dazhong shenme wenhua toushi [At the forefront of film and television culture: popular aesthetics and culture in the transitional period], edited by Hu Zhifen (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2004), 137-75; Wei Jingna, “18 jia dianshitai tongbo Tianlong babu” [Eighteen television stations broadcast The Demi-Gods and the Semi-Devils], Beijing chenbao [Beijing Morning News], 22 February 1999; Lin Jiefei, “34 jia shengji dianshitai tongbo Tianlong babu” [34 provincial television stations broadcast The Demi-Gods and the Semi-Devils], Yangcheng wanbao [Yangcheng Evening News], 4 April 1999.


21 Kinkley, Corruption and Realism, 18.

22 Kong, Consuming Literature, 21-22.

23 “Zhiqingren jiemi neimu: zhongguo bianju de sida shengcun xianzhuang” [Insiders’ information: four truths about Chinese screenwriters] (9 May 2005), http://yule.sohu.com/20050509/n225481892.shtml. According to an insider, ¥50,000 per episode is the minimum they would have to pay for any screenwriter with several years of experience; for top-calibre people, the going rate has risen to over ¥200,000 (W. Wu, personal communication).

24 These writers include Lu Tianming, author of Cangtian zaishang (Heaven Above), Daxue wuwen (Pure as Snow), Shengwei shuji (Provincial Party Secretary), and Gao weidu zhanli (Tremor at the High Altitude); Zhang Ping, author of Tianwang (Heaven’s Web), Jueze (Choice), and Guojia ganbu (Government Officials); Zhou Meisen, author of Juedui quanli (Absolute Power), Guojia gongsu (The Public Procurator), Zhigao liyi (Supreme Interest), Wozhu chenfu (The Leader), etc.; Zhang Chenggong, author of Heidong (Black Hole), Heibing (Black Ice), Heiwu (Black Fog), Yingxiong lei (Heroes’ Tears), and Xuan feng bao (Tornado Storm); Chen Xinhao, author of Hongse kangnaixin (Red Carnation); and Zhang Hongsen, author of Da faguang (Chief Judge), among others.
For an estimate, I conducted a basic statistical analysis of all crime dramas in DVD or HDVD sold at dangdang.com, a commercial website specializing in books and audiovisual products. Over 900 items can be found in the crime drama category; after excluding duplicate items and dramas in historical settings or made by overseas producers, 565 remain. Dangdang.com has a separate category for anti-corruption dramas, which add up to 118 after a similar screening exercise. All 118 have corruption plots. To determine how many crime dramas have corruption plots, I randomly sampled 132 of the 565 crime dramas and scrutinized their abstracts and, in cases of vague abstracts, the synopses for individual episodes. Twenty-nine of the 132, or 21.9 percent, have at least one corrupt government official. If we subsume anti-corruption drama under the broader “crime drama” category, then 35.4 percent of crime dramas have plots involving corruption.

Of course, not all listed dramas have been actually broadcast. In fact, many are sold directly to video stores.

My informant estimated that about 30 percent of all crime dramas touch on the issue of corruption.

Lu Chuan and Zhang Chenggong (writers). Heidong (Black Hole) (Beijing: Beijing Jinyingma Film and Television Culture, 2001).

These seven dramas were Juelu (Dead End), Heidong (Black Hole), Jinji zhuibu (Hot Pursuit), Diba jingqu (The Eighth Police Zone), Jisi yao'an zu (Anti-Smuggling Unit), Baofeng fating (Stormy Court), and Fuhua beihou (Behind the Glitters).


Kinkley writes in Corruption and Realism that major literary magazines stopped serializing anti-corruption novels in the summer.

“Liu Bin: huangjin shidai bi heidong gengyou tiaozhan xing” [Liu Bin: Golden Age is more challenging than Black Hole], 19 May 2003, http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2003-05-19/1426150163.htm. As a result, Black Fog was changed to Cloud and Fog (tianzhiyun, dizhiwu), and Black Gold was changed to Winter Solstice.

Liu Jianghua and Yu Jing, “She’an ju, fanfuju, ying bimian yidaoqie” [Do not lump all crime dramas and anti-corruption dramas together], Beijing qingnian bao [Beijing Youth Daily], 11 April 2004.


Xu Guangchun, “Zai 2004 nian quanguo dianshiju ticai guihua huiyi shang de jianghua.”

Ibid.


At a 2012 international workshop on Chinese television, “Television, Power and Ideology in Postsocialist China,” Wanning Sun suggested that the term “media ecology” might help make sense of SARFT’s motives behind the “Clean up the Screen” campaign.

43 Strictly speaking, it was a co-production, with the participation of the Jilin Provincial Bureau of Culture, Changchun Film Studio, Jilin Golden Shield Film and Television Center, Jilin Juqing Cultural Communication Company, and Beijing Jinshi Yingshu Culture Communication Company. As discussed in Chapter 1, in a typical drama co-production, the private firm takes the lead in financing and organizing the production, while the state entities help secure a production permit and provide facilitation and advice.

44 The other two are Daxue wuhen (Pure as Snow, 2001) – see Ruoyun Bai, “‘Clean Officials,’ Emotional Moral Community, and Anti-Corruption Television Dramas,” in TV Drama in China, edited by Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 47-60 – and Dajiang dongqu (Rumbling Rivers) (2003) (see Chapter 4). Pure as Snow was a CCTV broadcast, written by Lu Tianming, whereas Rumbling Rivers, like I’ll Never Let You Off, was typical of the highly commercialized corruption dramas of the first decade of the century.


47 Zhang Xiuan, “Zhidao sanbuqu; shanliang yikexin – fang zhuming daoyan Lei Xianhe” [Directed a trilogy with a sincere heart: interview with famous director Lei Xianhe], Jilin ribao [Jilin Daily], 8 September 2002.

48 The director’s name has been removed to protect his identity.

49 The censor’s private communication with Lei Xianhe.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Wang Kuilong, “Juebu fangguo ni, Kangxi wangchao.”


59 Ibid., 7.


61 Ibid., 21.

This finding is line with Kang Liu’s argument concerning the relevance of Maoist revolutionary ideology in China, and Yuezhi Zhao’s argument that the Party has rearticulated communist ideologies rooted in the revolutionary era to the present time. Kang Liu, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*.

Wanning Sun, “Localizing Chinese Media.”

For a detailed account of the “Clean Up the Screen” campaign, see Ruoyun Bai, “‘Clean Up the Screen: Regulating Television Entertainment in the 2000’s,’” in *Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century: Entertaining the Nation*, edited by Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song (London: Routledge, forthcoming).


“Guangbo yingshi jiaqiang he gaijin weichengnian ren sixiang daode jianshe de shishi fang’an” [Plans for implementation by the broadcast sector to strengthen and improve moral education for minors] (issued by SARFT, 30 April 2004), http://www.lawyee.net/act/act_display.asp?rid=242155.

Ibid.


Ibid.

For discussions of “red classics” drama serials, see Qian Gong, “A Trip Down the Memory Lane: Remaking and Re-Reading Red Classics,” in *TV Drama in China*, edited by Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 157-71; Zhao, *Communication in China*, 217-19.


Ibid.

Zhao Yunying (writer). *Laoniang lei (Mother’s Tears)* (Beijing: CCTV, 2006). It was directed by Lei Xianhe. He was also to direct another corruption drama for CCTV, *Red Leaves in the Mountains* (2010), which was based on a real-life role model, a female discipline inspection officer.

“Yangshi qinqingju Laoniang lei zhuanjia yantaohui shilu.”

Ibid.
Chapter 4: Anti-Corruption Melodrama and Competing Discourses
1 Bai, “‘Clean Officials.’” I used “clean official” there as a literal translation of the Chinese original, qingguan.
3 See Ding Zhaoqin, Su wenxue zhong de Baogong [Judge Bao in popular culture] (Taipei: Weijin chubanshe, 2000).
4 Such figures include Song Ci and Di Renjie of the Song Dynasty; Hai Rui of the Ming Dynasty; and Yu Chenglong, Ji Xiaolan, Liu Yong, and Li Wei of the Qing Dynasty.
5 Jeffrey C. Kinkley, Chinese Justice, the Fiction: Law and Literature in Modern China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
6 For an insightful account of the revived Confucianism and Chinese television dramas, see Zhu, Television in Post-Reform China.
7 Lu Tianming (writer), Daxue wuhén [Pure as snow] (Beijing: CCTV, 2001).
8 Its production crew included a number of people whose names were famously associated with corruption dramas. Lu Tianming, who wrote Pure as Snow in both drama and novel form, authored Heaven Above and would write three more corruption dramas from 2003 to 2008. Lei Xianhe, the director, directed at least four other corruption dramas: I’ll Never Let You Off, Rumbling Rivers, Mother’s Tears, and Red Leaves in the Mountains.
10 Ibid., 36.
12 Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, 42.
13 See Bai, “‘Clean Officials.’”
14 Daxue wuhén, Episode 11.
15 Ibid., Episode 2.
16 Lu Tianming, Cangtian zaishang, 350.
17 Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, 42.
18 Chen Xinhao (writer). Hongse kangnaixin (Red Carnations) (Beijing: China International Television Corporation, 2001).
19 For a detailed discussion of these two drama serials, see Zhong, Mainstream Culture Refocused.
21 Jiang Wei and Lin Lisheng (writers). Fuhua beihou (Behind the Glitters) (Beijing: Beijing Jintiandi Culture, 2002).
22 Zhu, Television in Post-Reform China; Zhong, Mainstream Culture Refocused.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
29 Xu Guangrong and Wang Ning (writers), Dajianguo [Rumbling rivers] (Shenyang: Shenyang Sunshine Film and TV Company, 2003).
30 Zhou Meisen (writer), Wozhu chenfu [The leaders] (Nanjing: Jiangsu TV, 2005).
31 Ibid., Episode 3.
Chapter 5: Cynicism as a Dominant Way of Seeing


Lu Xueyi’s Dangdai zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao [Report on the social stratification research in contemporary China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002) came out of the first systematic nationwide study of social stratification between 1999 and 2001. Ironically, at a time when class polarization and re-formation are taking place rapidly, the term “class” has been dropped from official parlance, social science research, the media, and everyday discourse, for it evokes the defunct communist ideology and also draws unwanted attention to class tension in market reform China. Modifying the definition to focus on the service nature of middle-class occupations, He Li defines middle-class membership as private entrepreneurs, the mid-level managerial stratum, professionals and intellectuals, and the less influential but sizeable mass of urban white-collar workers, lower-level managers, and staff workers in the service sector. He Li, “Emergence of the Chinese Middle Class and Its Implications,” Asian Affairs: An American Review 33, 2 (2006): 67-83.


8 Ibid.


12 Unger, “China’s Conservative Middle Class,” 28.


14 Mark Liechty notes that “class culture is always a work-in-progress, a perpetual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the ‘concrete’ of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who jointly negotiate their social identities.” Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4, quoted by Xu, ibid., 154. In China, the sense of middle-class “work in progress” is all the more strong because of the newness of this category.

15 Leo Ou-fan Lee and Andrew Nathan, “The Beginnings of Mass Culture: Journalism and Fiction in the Late Ch’ing and Beyond,” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, edited by David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 360–95.


19 Li, *Houheixue*.


22 Wang, *Fin-de-siecle Splendor*, 330.

23 Quan Yongxian (writer). *Suiyue* (Passage of Time) (Beijing: Beijing Hualu Baina Film and Television, 2007).

24 Cultural critic Xie Xizhang states: “Genre novels suffer from a high degree of homogenization. One can tell from the titles of guanchang novels what they are about. The titles describe titles and ranks from chauffeurs and secretaries to chief of Beijing Office of provincial government and provincial party secretaries. People joke, right now only two positions are left untouched: one is Prime Minister and the other is General Party Secretary. Guanchang novel has reached a dead end.” See Xie Xizhang, “Zhongguo leixing xiaoshuo zoujin shihongtong; chule renao he chiqua haiyou shenme?” [Chinese genre novels are reaching a dead end: is there anything left besides sensationalism?], *Beijing qingnian bao* [Beijing Youth Daily], 6 November 2009, http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2009/2009-09-07/76566.html. The following titles, casually picked, are suggestive of the extent of cloning: *New Provincial Party Secretary, Municipal Party Secretary, Each Step Higher,*
According to a 2008 bestseller list, 4 guanchang novels were among the top 20 most popular titles. In a list of most-clicked novels at http://www.sina.com, guanchang novel is the second most popular genre, and among the 30 most popular novels, one finds 8 guanchang titles. In the first quarter of 2009, 123 guanchang novels were reportedly published, more than the total output of this genre in 2008. See “Ruhe kandai ‘guanchang xiaoshuo’ de shengwen?” [How to make sense of the popularity of guanchang novels?], Wenhui bao [Wenhui Daily], 6 November 2009, http://book.yzdsb.com.cn/system/2009/10/26/010196986.shtml.


For a discussion of Dossier on Smuggling, see Kinkley, Corruption and Realism, 127.

Li Chunping’s curriculum vitae is available at http://www.aktc.net.cn/zwx/News_View.asp?NewsID=100.


Liu Zhenyun (writer). Yidi jimao (Chicken Feathers on the Ground) (Beijing: Beijing Television Art Center, 1994).

Qin Peichun, Shi Ling, Zhang Rui, and Bai Hua (writers). Zaixiang Liu luoguo (Prime Minister Hunchback Liu) (Beijing: Beijing Chengxiang Film and Television Production, 1996).


See Michael Keane, “By the Way, FUCK YOU!” for a fuller discussion of Chicken Feathers.

Mengduan zijincheng [Dreams in the Forbidden City], Da tanguan He Shen [Big Tanguan He Shen], Qipin qinchai Liu Luoguo [Seventh-Grade Imperial Commissioner Hunchback Liu], Canghai bainian [A Hundred Years of Vicissitudes], Tie jiangjun A Gui [Iron Army General A Gui], Buyi tianzi [Emperor in Plain Clothing], Shaonian da qinchai [Young Imperial Commissioner], Shaonian jiaqing [Young Jiaqing], Qingtian yamen [Clean Local Government], and Qianlong wangchao [Qianlong Dynasty].

The series revolves around the relationships of Emperor Qianlong, Liu Yong, and He Shen.

“Wanggang zuoke ban he shen” [Wang Gang Plays He Shen], in Yong Le Hui, a CCTV talk show hosted by Li Yong, 8 June 2009. The video clip is available at http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/1GFu7z53l10/.

Tiechi tongya Ji Xiaolan [Eloquent Ji Xiaolan], Episode 4.

Interview with Wang Gang, in Zujiang xiangzhe (Best Live Show), a program on Beijing Television (BTV), 30 November 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63bvC1XJs0k.

See Feichang shuoming (Meet with Celebrities), a program on the Science and Education Channel of Beijing Television (BTV), 30 June 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XmVQrQIPWI.

Zhou Meisen, Wozhu chenfu, Episode 15.

Ibid., Episode 17.
Yet the connection between the novel and the drama serial was never made explicit anywhere in the opening credits of the drama, the promotional materials, or press interviews with the production crew, perhaps to deflect unwanted attention from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). Rather, the drama was initially titled *Urban Spring (Chengshi li de chuntian)* and promoted as a love story. Despite such marketing ploys, SARFT was not to be hoodwinked. In the wake of the 2004 ban, *Passage of Time* was kept off the air. Between 2008 and 2010, some local television stations began showing it without much publicity, judging from the meagre amount of press coverage it generated.


Tao, "Making Fun of the Canon in Contemporary China,” 206.

These two databases, *China Academic Journals (Zhongguo qikan quanwen shujuju)* and *Century Journals Project (Zhongguo qikan quanwen shujuju – shiji qikan)*, were accessed from the University of Toronto Library.

An example is *Go Lala Go!* (also translated as *Du Lala’s Promotion*), a novel depicting women in *zhichang*. It was adapted into a movie and a drama serial, both released in 2010.


Chapter 6: Speaking of the “Desirable” Corrupt Official

*Snail House* was especially popular among urban Chinese in their twenties and thirties, as it addresses pressing social problems that immediately concern these age groups, such
as unaffordable housing, changing sexual morality, and so on. It has been observed that the drama, although garnering high audience ratings for television stations, has had its greatest impact through the Internet, a medium that attracts more young people than television. See “Beijing tai shoushi baogao chulu; Qianfu chengwang, Woju shishou” [Beijing TV stations’ audience rating report released: Moles defeated Snail House], Xin jinbao [New Beijing News], 29 December 2009, http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/10668750.html.


4 For example, a survey conducted by China Radio International Online in 2009 found that 2,900 of the polled population picked Song Siming as their favourite character, almost double the number of viewers whose favourite character was Haizao’s ex-boyfriend, Xiaobei. See “Woju li shui zuishou xiai? Nüren yuanzuo Song Siming xiaosan de shida liyou” [Who is your favorite character in Snail House? Top ten reasons for women wanting to become Song Siming’s mistresses], 25 November 2009, http://gb.cri.cn/27564/2009/1125/132626868721.htm. Another survey at China’s most popular social networking site, Tencent, produced a similar result, with 171,261 preferring Song Siming to Xiaobei and 89,214 in the opposite camp (“Xiao Bei vs. Song Siming: Who Would You Choose if You Were Haizao”? 19 November 2009, http://lady.qq.com/a/20091119/000253.htm. Similarly, a CCTV online survey asked: “If you were Haizao, would you choose Song Siming (who gives you a shortcut to a better material life) or Xiaobei (who gives you untainted love)?” Of the 1,067 respondents, 32.61 percent voted for Song Siming and 26.34 percent for Xiaobei; another 32.52 percent were unable to make a choice because they felt “really divided.” Liu Wei, “Woju de jiazhi xuanze” [The value orientation of Snail House], Liaowang xinwen zhoukan [Outlook News Weekly], 49 (December 2009): 43. On Youku.com, a major video-sharing website, someone posted a survey, “I am having a crush on Secretary Song. What about you?” By 29 January 2010, a total of 3,140 people had responded, with 2,537 (78 percent) choosing “I am also having a crush on him” and another 165 (5 percent) choosing “I am having a temporary crush on him” (available at http://kanba.youku.com/bar_barPost/barid_D2BQNA5gVWAIPA==_subjectid_1860260). The thread is posted in “Woju ba” [Snail House Café] at Youku.com. It was listed on page 6 of all postings in this forum on 9 September 2010.

5 One can gain a broad sense of who participated in discussions of the drama from available information about the current state of the Internet and its users, published in a 2010 report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC). The report recorded 384 million Internet users as of 2009, and reveals a stark class, geographical, and, to a lesser extent, gender bias in Internet use in China. More men than women use the Internet (a ratio of 54.2:45.8); 60.4 percent are young users between the ages of 10 and 29; and 72 percent live in towns and cities. In terms of occupation, students constitute the largest group of users, accounting for nearly 30 percent of the total online population. Farmers and workers combined, including migrant workers, make up only 9.6 percent of all Internet users. The balance consists mainly of business managers (3.1 percent), bureaucrats and rank-and-file civil servants (7.5 percent), engineers and other specially trained personnel (10.4 percent), self-employed/freelancers (13 percent), and white-collar clerks (15 percent). See CNNIC, “Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao” [The twenty-fifth statistical report on Internet development in China], 15 January 2010, http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwzyj/hlwzzb/201001/P020120709345300487558.pdf.
Wang Xiaoming, “Banbianlian de shenhua” [The myth of a half-face], in Zai xin yishixing-tai de longzhao xia: 90 niandai de wenhua he wenxue fenxi [In the shadow of the new ideology: cultural and literary studies of the 1990s], edited by Wang Xiaoming (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 29.

7 See, e.g., an anonymous posting at 17:20 on 16 November 2009: “As a woman, I have to say that Song Siming touched me with just one sentence: I will make wind and rain at her beck and call.”

8 See a post by a user named qianxu202: “Zuowei nanren, wo budebu shuo Song Siming shi ge zhenzheng de nanren” [As a man, I have to say that Song Siming is a real man], http://tieba.baidu.com/f?z=665531891&ct=335544320&lm=0&sc=0&rn=30&tn=baidupostbrowser&word=%CE%CF%BE%D3&pn=0.

9 Woju [Snail House], Episode 29.

10 Ibid., Episode 18.

11 Ibid., Episode 10.

12 This is one of the replies to a post titled “Wo zhishuo Song” [Only talk about Song]. The thread can be found at http://movie.xunlei.com/comment/68577. This reply is on the second comment page, posted at 16:05, 18 November 2009.

13 This is the thirty-third reply to “Faxian ziji hao milian Song mishu, nine?” [I am having a crush on Secretary Song. What about you?], http://kanba.youku.com/bar_barPost/barid_D2BQNA5gVWAIpa=._size_20_subjectid_1860260_page_2.html, or the second comment page, posted by yueyaorong at 11:20, 28 November 2009. The thread “I am having a crush on Secretary Song. What about you?” was posted by Lengleng tatyang yueguang baobei [Cold sun and moonlight babe] at 21:08, 26 November 2009.

14 Woju, Finale.

15 Ibid., Episode 11.

16 Ibid., Episode 33.

17 The thread is titled “Sun Shuju shuo guan shi wei shenme fuwu de, tianxia shi renmin de. Ni ganjue ci’er ma?” (Secretary Sun said that officials should serve whatever and the country belongs to the people. Do you find him offensive?) and is found at: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=673225632.

18 Ibid.

19 See note 13 in this chapter.

20 See note 12 in this chapter.

21 Reply to “Wo zhishuo Song” [Only talk about Song], posted at 19:50, 18 November 2009.

22 Ibid., posted at 18:55, 23 November 2009.

23 Ibid., posted at 23:37, 22 November 2009.


25 Reply to “Wo zhishuo Song” [Only talk about Song], posted at 00:59, 21 November 2009.

26 Ibid., posted at 18:11, 2 December 2009.

27 This is the seventeenth reply to “I am having a crush on Secretary Song. What about you?”. 

28 Reply to “Wo zhishuo song” [Only talk about Song], at Xunlei.com, posted at 17:49, 4 December 2009.


30 Reply to “Wo zhishuo Song” [Only talk about Song], at Xunlei.com, posted at 05:35, 8 December 2009.

31 Ibid., posted at 00:26, 29 January 2010.

32 Ibid., posted at 01:49, 3 May 2010.

34 See the 87th reply to “Wo milian Song mishu” [I am having a crush on Secretary Song], posted by Xingxing hanghang.

35 Reply to a review piece titled “Moran huishou ...” [Awakening], http://movie.xunlei.com/comment/75810. The reply is on the second comment page, posted at 15:03, 25 November 2009.


37 The 184th reply to “Wo milian Song mishu” [I am having a crush on Secretary Song], posted by Laolao shuai le [Super handsome].

38 Posted by 211.138.184 at 14:22, 21 November 2009.


40 The 184th reply to “Wo milian Song mishu” [I am having a crush on Secretary Song], posted by Laolao shuai le [Super handsome].

41 The 37th reply to ibid., posted by Xueluofuqu at 12:14, 3 December 2009.

42 Reply to “Wo zhishuo Song” [Only talk about Song], at 16:40, 30 November 2009.

43 Woju, Episode 15.

44 Sun, Corruption and Market in Contemporary China, 165.

45 Woju, Episode 19.

46 Ibid.

47 See a recent report by Bill Schiller, “Ant Tribe’ Chases Chinese Dream,” Toronto Star, 4 October 2010.


50 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 3.


55 Li Jingsheng, a SARFT official, disparaged Snail House for catering to vulgar interests with dirty language, guanchang, and sex. “Guangdian zongju guanyuan pi Woju kao hunduanzi xing huati chaozuo” [SARFT official criticizes Snail House for dirty language and sex topics], Yangzi wanbao [Yangzi Evening News], 12 December 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2009-12/12/content_12634070.htm. The drama was pulled off the air by the Science and Education Channel of BTV halfway through its broadcast, although no one has confirmed the exact reason for censorship.


57 I am grateful to Yuezhi Zhao, who pointed out this limitation to me.
Conclusion


3 See Barme, In the Red; Ann-Marie Brady, Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); Zhao, Media, Market, and Democracy in China.


5 This argument is in line with critical media scholarship in the Western context. See, for example, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).


7 A perfect example is Zhenhuan zhuan (Legends of Zhenhuan, also translated as Empresses in the Palace). This seventy-six-episode drama serial revolves around a female character, Zhenhuan, who completes her transformation from a kind, innocent girl to a manipulative, ruthless, powerful woman in the treacherous imperial palace, where each empress/concubine of the emperor connives to trap and avoid being trapped by others. Victimized by numerous cruel setups, Zhenhuan gradually learns to get what she needs. She defeats the empress and all her enemies among the concubines, wins the heart of the emperor through deception, endears her adopted son to the emperor, and eventually becomes the most powerful woman in China, the empress dowager. The palace is a place in which kindness leads to suffering and the ability to outsmart the others is rewarded. It is also a place in which friendship is fragile and alliances are always shifting. This is a universe defined by the irrelevance of morality and the triumph of self-interest and self-optimization. Liu Lianzi and Wang Xiaoping (writers). Zhenhuan zhuan (Legends of Zhenhuan) (Beijing: Beijing Television Art Center, 2011).
Index

Note: “(a)” following a page number indicates Appendix; “(f)” following a page number indicates a figure; “(t)” following a page number indicates a table

Absolute Power (Juedui quanli): as liberal-reformist critique, 139-41
advertising, 30; CCTV department, 228n11; revenues, 41-42, 42(t); vs. state subsidies, 16; on television dramas, 33-34, 43-44
Ai Zhisheng, 55
Anagnost, Ann, 161
Ang, Ien, 121
anti-corruption: campaigns, 65-66, 67, 68-69, 87, 133, 210-11; dramas (see anti-corruption melodrama); as a moral fight, 129; novels (see novels, anti-corruption); as a theme, 68-69, 88
anti-corruption melodrama, 5, 116, 122-23; case study, 123-24, 125-30; changed theme of, 99; vs. corruption dramas, 10, 170-72; corruption officials in, 184; corruption plots in, 240n25; cynicism and, 130, 159-60; demise of, 209-13; as moral agent, 127; as an official narrative, 118; Party leadership in, 215-16; and social stability, 99-100
anti-corruption official, 145-46, 152, 154
audience: conceptualizations of, 18-19; plurality of, 19, 38; research, 18, 93-94, 192-94, 194-201, 204
Baidu.com, 186, 194
Bao Zheng, 120-21, 131
Beijing Television: movies, 31; popular productions of, 70. See also China Central Television (CCTV)
Beijing Television Art Center (BTAC), 32, 36-40, 230n37
Beijing Television Production Studio, 31-32
Beijing Youth Channel, 63
Beijingers in New York (Beijing ren zai niuyue), 37
bias: in Internet use, 248n5; middle-class, 160-62, 181-82, 207; urban, 9-10, 184-85, 207, 238n1
Black Hole (Heidong), 94, 134, 135
Bo Xilai scandal, 3-4, 224nn1-2
boundaries: of the acceptable, 98, 99-101; of the permissible, 114, 218; between the political and the popular, 82-83; of prime-time television, 100
Brooks, Peter, 125
Buffett, Warren, 192
bureaucrats, 4, 8, 11, 179; and guanchang discourse, 166; new style, 148; portrait- als of, 72-73, 75-76, 95, 129, 138-39, 164-65, 167
capital: bureaucratic, 17, 47, 54; logic of, 218; political, 17, 32, 66, 70, 71, 72-73, 74; private, 34, 44-45, 45-47, 53-54; social, 175, 182; transnational, 17, 21
capitalism, 110; and class reconstitution, 8; corruption and, 213-15; global, 151; power of, 215-17
censorship: 2004 ban, 75-76, 86-87, 98-103, 115-17, 242n69; of corruption dramas, 77-78, 103-9, 250n55; as disincentive, 87-88; effects of, 24-25; of exposé literature, 72; logic of, 98-100, 106; and media order, 217-19; moral
CCTV. See China Central Television (CCTV)
crisis and, 110-11, 114; political crisis and, 109-10; politics of, 72-73, 86, 234n115; and recalled productions, 63; rules, 56, 62, 97-98; of television drama topics, 58-60, 61; of television dramas, 12-13, 98-103, 103-8, 122-23, 167, 170-71, 175-76. See also Central Propaganda Department (CPD); State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)

Central Broadcast Bureau, 28, 31, 55
Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), 65; and anti-corruption ban, 115; and good-official narrative, 122; and Heaven Above, 77-78, 78-79, 236n34; and A Life-and-Death Choice, 89
Central Propaganda Department (CPD): and Dangerous Situation in the City, 88; and Heaven Above, 73, 75-76, 77, 78, 83-84; and Mother’s Tears, 116
Central Radio and Television Experimental Drama Group (Zhongyang guangbo dianshi shiyan jutuan), 29
Chen Daoming, 75
Chen Fang, 88
Chen Fang, 88
Chen Hanyuan, 73, 74, 75, 79-80
Chen Xitong, 68, 88
Cheng Kejie, 87, 238n2
Chi Yufeng, 46
China Advertising Yearbooks, 42(t)
China Central Television (CCTV): and advertising, 41-42, 42(t), 44, 228n11, 231n53; and anti-corruption campaign, 66; audience share, 43(t); and CCDI, 77-78; vs. commercial competition, 70-73, 74; and corruption dramas, 24, 41, 63, 116, 238n1; early days, 27-29; and FTAD, 49-50; imported television dramas, 35-36; incentives to producers, 32-33; Internet users and, 180; investigative journalism, 69; and main melody productions, 20; market share, 41-42, 42(t); monopoly broken, 225n19; and political communication, 15; pre-distribution review, 61-63; production units, 48-49; vs. provincial broadcasters, 16, 37-38, 96-97; state funding, 231n51. See also Drama Center
China Drama Production Center Company Ltd., 49
China Film Company, 31
China Film Group, 47
China Hualu Group, 47
China International Television Corporation (CITVC), 48-49
China Television Drama Production Center of CCTV (Zhongguo dianshi zuojia zhizuo zongxin). See Drama Center
China Television Media (CTM), 48-49, 50
China TV Drama Report, 93, 94(t)
Chinese Communist Party (CCP): anti-corruption campaigns, 65-66, 67, 68-69, 87, 133, 210-11; and CCTV professionals, 66; and Chinese state, 215; cultural system reform, 14-15, 54-63, 70; elite, 3-4, 105, 106-7; hegemony, 21-22, 54, 102, 111, 131; as hero, 28; hypocrisy of, 159; ideological innovations, 111, 125; perceived crises of, 86-87, 109-11; political agenda, 115, 219; propaganda apparatus, 15, 16-17, 58-59, 63, 101; public views of, 133, 135; and television sector, 39, 88-89, 121-22, 209-13
Choice (Jueze), 88, 89
Ci, Jiwei, 110
Clean Up the Screen campaign, 15, 18-19, 86
commercialization: and censorship, 24-25; and competition, 33, 69-73; of cultural production, 11-12, 37, 44-45, 48-50, 91-92; and disjuncture, 17; and notions of audience, 18; and Party hegemony, 21-22; vs. state ownership, 13-14
Confucianism, 25, 38, 40, 79, 112, 119-20, 122, 159
corrupt official (tanguan): appeal of, 134, 184, 185, 188-92, 201, 248n4, 249nn7-8; audience views of, 191-92, 194-200, 202-3; as discursive category, 119; humanization of, 134-35; lionization of, 147; and marketization, 216-17; portrayals of, 126, 128-30, 235n1; as victim, 145-46, 155
corruption: abuse of power, 4, 129-30, 139-41, 156, 217, 224n1, 225n14; as agility, 201; bribery, 143, 144-45, 146-47, 169, 224n1, 238n2; corporatization and, 132-33, 146-47; criminal, 156-57;
defined/redefined, 7, 129-30, 154-55, 184, 185, 203-7, 225n14; as discursive frame, 3-4, 8-9, 196-97; elites’ views of, 210-11; embezzlement, 68, 127, 140-41, 169, 200, 224n1; escalation of, 210-11; forms of, 7-8; framing, 101-2; intellectual debates on, 11-12; and middle-class dream, 203-7; naturalization of, 147-57, 152, 159-60, 185, 197-203; in Party leadership, 3-4, 49, 68, 74, 87; persistence of, 179-80; political governance and, 7-8, 115, 136-42, 157-58, 225n18, 238n2; and promotion, 168, 169-70, 169-70, 173-74, 175, 251n7; public discourse of, 3-4, 8-9, 65; representations of, 11, 126, 159-60, 167-68, 183, 207-8; and social issues, 25, 142-47, 184-85; SOE-related, 67, 136-37, 137-38, 138-39; ubiquitous vs. normal, 199; venues for engaging with, 116-17

corruption dramas, 4-5; 2004 ban on, 86-87, 98-3, 103-9, 115-17, 242n69; vs. castigatory novels, 175-76; CCTV, 71-73, 96-97; censorship of, 25, 75-76, 77-78, 103-9, 250n55; in contemporary settings, 170-72, 173-74, 174-76, 238n1; of the cynic, 159; effect on public debates, 11-12, 214; evolution of, 6-7, 9-10, 24-26, 235n1; formulaic characteristics of, 94-98, 171-72; and guanchang narrative, 166-76; vs. investigative journalism, 11; limits of, 157-58, 207-8; main melody, 20, 73, 230n48; and middle-class sensibilities, 216; and moral confusion, 101-2, 212; political climate and, 5-6, 6-7, 87-89, 89-91; and post-socialist reality, 12; titles, 223-24(a).

See also guanchang narrative; specific corruption dramas
crime dramas, 59-60, 93-94, 98-99, 240n25, 240n27. See also corruption dramas

critical realism, 80-81, 159
cultural mediation. See intellectuals, as cultural brokers
cultural system reform, 14-15, 54-63, 70
culture: of corruption, 201, 220; and hegemony, 12, 70; hybridization and, 19-20; mainstream, 19-20; media, 13, 86, 135-36; moral, 110; official vs. popular, 19-20, 40, 112; political, 121-22, 130, 139-41; public, 65, 83, 84, 112; of scandal, 219-21; traditional, 60, 112, 168-69; youth, 112-13, 180. See also popular culture
cynicism: vs. anti-corruption melodrama, 130, 159-60; context of, 112, 119, 160; vs. critical realism, 9-10; as dominant ideology, 25-26, 182-83, 217; of guanchang discourse, 198-200; and guanchang narrative, 159, 170, 179-83; as a mode of understanding, 25-26, 159-60, 164-86, 194-95; vs. moral outrage, 213-15; and representations of corruption, 130, 159-60, 207-8; rise of, 209, 211-12
dangdang.com, 224n7, 240n25
Dark Face (Heilian), 121
Deep Blue Breakers (Canglang zhishui), 165, 166; vs. Passage of Time, 175-76
Demi-Gods and the Semi-Devils, The (Tianlong babu), 90-91
Democracy Movement (1989), 37, 70, 102, 109
Deng Xiaoping, 7, 72, 101, 109, 121;
Southern Tour, 37
discourse: of anti-corruption, 154, 159, 216-17; of corruption, 84, 101-2, 105, 116, 130, 136, 146, 160, 185, 213-15; guanchang, 162-63, 166, 170-71, 198-200, 202-3; of moral crisis, 110-11; neoliberal, 200-3, 203-4; normalizing, 197; online, 185, 224n7 (see also specific social-network websites; video-related websites); public, 141-42; of reform, 235n1
disjunctive media order: and conceptualizations of audience, 18-19; at content level, 19-20; and corruption dramas, 23, 118, 157, 209; cultural mediation and, 79-83, 80-82; defined, 5-7, 13-14; drama production units and, 49-50; industry structure and, 16-17, 64, 66-67; institutions and, 15; media capital and, 17; of political economy of television, 15-17; regulation and, 14-15, 20-25; stability of, 217-19
distribution of the sensible, 22, 23
Dongyang Revelers Film and TV Company Ltd., 48
Dragon Dossiers (Longnian dang’an), 173-74
Drama Center, 29, 32, 48-49, 69-70, 74-75, 77-78, 232n72
drama production: and business conglomerates, 47-48; Drama Center’s, 232n72; economic dimension of, 33, 34, 37, 77, 88, 232n80; expansion of, 31-33, 229-30n35; People’s Liberation Army’s, 228n16; personnel, 35, 92, 239nn23-24; reinvigoration of, 89-91

Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng), 33-34, 37
economic reform. See market reform entertainment: boundaries of, 218; cynical, 214; excessive, 15, 86, 101, 102, 112, 127, 128-29, 213; media, 14-15, 43(t), 112, 177; and politics, 4, 15, 19, 37, 40, 70, 82, 217; programming, 97, 112-14; realistic, 11, 220; and television expansion, 16-17, 45-47, 47-48, 48-51; value of sex, 146, 202
entrepreneurs, 151, 244n34

Feitian Awards, 32-33, 79
Feng Ji scandal, 49
fight (fendou ), socialist vs. neoliberal formulations of, 205-7
Film and Television Administration Department (FTAD), 48, 49
Five Ones Awards, 78
Focus (Jiaodian fangtan), 69, 106-7, 121
Four Generations under One Roof (Sishi tongtang), 37

Gong Xueping, 89
good force (zheng qi), 108, 115-16
good official (qingguan): Hai Rui, 238n3; Judge Bao, 120-21, 131; in A Life-and-Death Choice, 127-28; market-oriented definition of, 201; and moral order, 30-31; portrayal of, 134; in Pure as Snow, 128-30; in Red Leaves in the Mountains, 242n72; roles of, 118-19, 119-23, 131-33, 143-44, 145-46; as socialist, 125; transformation of, 134-35, 137, 139
“good official” narrative: CCDI and, 65, 122-23; decline of, 118-19, 133-36; defined, 119-23; function of, 131-33; as good-Party narrative, 122, 131-33, 134; and justice, 118-19, 135; moral universe of, 125-30
governance: capacity, 215-16; crisis of, 86, 109-10; of media, 21-22, 54-63; political, 7-8, 115, 136-42, 157-58, 225n18, 238n2; of television dramas, 56-57

guanchang (realm of officialdom): corruption in, 179-80; defined, 159, 162-64; discourse, 162-63, 166, 170-71, 198-200, 202-3; as discursive frame, 197-200; masters, 174-76; politics within, 202; protocols, 167-71, 170-73, 173-74, 177-79
guanchang narrative, 218; vs. anti-corruption novels, 159, 166; vs. corruption dramas, 166-76; as court drama, 118, 176-79, 251n7; and cynicism, 159, 170, 179-83; function of, 159, 171-72; as interpretive framework, 166; on prime-time television, 166-67; prototypical characters, 168-70, 173-74, 175; revival of, 164-65, 180; and “thick and black” practice, 163, 169; viewers’ construction of, 176-79; and the workplace, 181-82. See also zhichang narrative

Guo Yunde, 83

Hai Rui, 88
Hallin, Daniel, 22
Harvey, David, 224n12
He Shen, 168-70
He Zizhuang, 89

Heaven Above (Cangtian zaishang), 24; and anti-corruption struggles, 5, 68-69; CCDI and, 77-78, 78-79, 236n36; commercialization and, 69-73; conditions for emergence of, 79; CPD and, 73, 75-76, 77, 78, 83-84; as critical realism, 80-81, 137-38; formulaic characteristics of, 94-95; innovation of, 66, 82-83; official reception of, 83-84, 122-23; parallels with River Elegy, 75; popularity of, 78; production of, 73-79; title, 236n36; vs. Yearnings (Kewang), 74

Heaven’s Wrath (Tiannu), 88
hegemony: cultural, 70, 91, 207, 217; neoliberal, 25-26, 151; Party, 21-23, 54, 102, 111, 131

Hinerman, Stephen, 224n3
historical dramas, 11, 167-70; vs. serious drama, 225-26n21
Hu Changqing, 87, 238n2
Hu Jintao, 98, 101, 109, 111, 113, 122
Hu Zhanfan, 99-100
Hua Guofeng, 105
Huace Film and Television, 46-47
Hualu Baina Film and Television, 47
Huang, Yu, 31
Huayi Brothers, 46, 47, 48
Hunan Broadcasting Group, 48

I Love You Absolutely (Aini mei shangliang), 37
I’ll Never Let You Off (Juebu fangguo ni), 63, 103-9, 122-23; and Mother’s Tears, 115
ideology: and “class,” 244n5; cynicism as, 25-26, 182-83, 217; good-official, 122; market, 14-15, 151-52, 153-54; Party, 111, 125; revolutionary, 242n63. See also neoliberalism
intellectuals: and critical intervention, 80-81; as cultural brokers, 66-67, 79-82, 218-19, 235n1, 237n37; and culture of television drama, 135-36; in domain of the popular, 11-12, 142; and guanchang discourse, 163-65; marginalization of, 36-37; marginalized, 36-37, 38
Internet: service providers, 48; surveys, 248n4, 249n7-8; users, 248n5; vigilantism, 207-8, 213, 219-21

Ji Bingxuan, 55-56
Jiang Wei, 179
Jiang Zemin, 56, 68, 89, 98, 101, 122
Jiangsu Television, 53
Jinyingma Film and Television Culture Company, 46
Journey to the West (Xi you ji), 37
Judge Bao. See Bao Zheng
justice: censorship and, 106-7, 115-16, 213, 236-37n36; collective action and, 133; good-official narratives and, 95, 121-22, 125, 127, 131, 135, 216; icons of, 120-22, 238n3; social issues and, 7, 109, 111, 204, 225n18

Ke Yunlu, 173
Keane, Michael, 229n26, 230n39, 236n26, 237n37, 241n44, 242n71, 244n36, 246n33
Kinkley, Jeffrey, 80, 91, 92, 121
Kong, Shuyu, 92

Leaders, The (Wozhu chenfu), 147-57, 171-72
legitimacy: of advertising, 30; of corruption as a drama topic, 65, 66, 68-69, 93; of corruption dramas, 118; of Heaven Above, 76; of the Party-state, 22-23, 111, 157-58; of privatization, 214
Lei Xianhe, 103, 105, 106, 143, 243n8
LeTV.com, 48
Levy, Richard, 209
Li Boyuan, 162
Li Chunping, 166
Li Liangqing, 31
Li Peisen, 115
Li Peng, 39
Li Riuhuan, 39, 54
Li Zongwu, 163-64
Liang Xudong, 103, 115
Liebman, Benjamin, 74
Life-and-Death Choice, A (Shengsi jueze), 46, 88-89, 127
Link, Perry, 72, 75
literati. See intellectuals
Liu, Kang, 54
Liu Liying, 121, 131
Liu Ping, 166
Liu Xiliang, 55
Liu Yunshan, 116
Liu Zhenyun, 164-65
Lü Liang, 155
Lu Tianming: anti-corruption novels, 91-92, 166; corruption dramas, 73, 114, 243n8; as cultural broker, 11, 79-80, 81-82, 93; and Heaven Above, 73-74, 76-77, 79-80, 82, 83, 134-35, 236n36; and Pure as Snow, 137-38
Lull, James, 224n3

Ma Xiangdong, 143, 166
main melody: corruption dramas, 20, 73, 230n48; meaning, 40; and the moral order, 60; productions, 20; slogan, 39; state funding for, 230n48
makeshift troupes (caotai banzi), and licensing, 34, 45

INDEX
Manichaeism, 125-30
Mao Zedong, 28, 105, 106
Marching towards the Republic, 63
marginalization: of discourse of anti-corruption, 154; of intellectuals, 36-37; of official anti-corruption melodrama, 217
market elite. See entrepreneurs
market reform: and class tension, 25, 109, 142-47, 161, 184-85, 244n5; commercial media and, 30-32, 33-34, 111-12, 219; corrupt officials and, 216-17; and corruption, 7-8, 118, 147-57, 211; cultural, 54; discourse of, 200-3; endorsed by corruption dramas, 215-17; formal advent of, 224n11; and ideological control, 14-15; ideology, 14-15, 151-52, 153-54; intellectuals’ view of, 142; and public morality, 101-2; representations of, 149-50, 156-57; social effects of, 7, 109, 111, 179, 204, 206-7, 225n18; and SOEs, 59
media: anti-corruption campaigns and, 69; central task of, 39-40; conservatism of, 212-13; ecology of, 100-1, 240n41; functions of, 22; ideological environment of, 66; institutions, 13-14, 15; organizations, 22, 74; review institutions, 61-63; and social stability, 109; watchdog role, 69. See also disjunctive media order; regulation
Meisner, Maurice, 151
melodrama: corruption and, 118-19; cynicism and, 130; of economic reform, 149-50; and excessiveness, 101, 102, 112, 127, 128-29; moral, 38, 84-85; replaced by cynicism, 139-60; and tragedy, 137, 139. See also anti-corruption melodrama
Meng Fansheng, 115
Meng Fanshu, 230n36
middle class. See middle stratum (zhongchan jieceng)
middle stratum (zhongchan jieceng), 159, 181-82; defined, 160-62, 244n1, 244n5; dream and concerns, 184-85, 203-7; and propaganda, 212
Ministry of Public Security (MPS), 98
Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT), 32, 34, 56, 57. See also State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)
Mo Yan, 165-66
Moles (Qianfu), 176, 177-79
moral order: alternative, 130; in corruption dramas, 101-2; cultural liberalization and, 38; depraved, 122, 192-94, 195-97; good-official-centred, 130-31; and image of CCP, 101; liberalization of, 38, 39-40; main melody and, 60; market reform and, 101-2; in melodrama, 38, 84-85; socialist, 39; state-centred, 130-33; traditional, 40; transgression of, 101-2, 106, 107-8; Yearnings and, 60
morality: corruption dramas and, 6, 25; crisis of, 86-87, 110-11; in good-official narratives, 130-31; in guanchang dramas, 175-76, 251n7; legible universe of, 125-30; of minors, 112-13; narratives of, 118-19; public, 111; socialist norms of, 39, 101; traditional, 40
Mother’s Tears (laoniang lei), 115
Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake, A, 27-28, 29
Mu Suixin, 143-44
narratives. See “good official” narrative; guanchang narrative; zhichang narrative
National Conference for Feature Film Production, 39-40
National Portrait (Guohua), 165, 166
National Television Program Meeting, 31
neoliberalism: and Chinese economy, 7-8; corruption and, 118; and corruption dramas, 25-26; defined, 224n12; depoliticizing agenda of, 7; discourse of, 200-3, 203-4; as discursive frame, 197; and fight (fendou), 205-7; hegemony of, 25-26, 151; and survival, 206-7
New Star (Xinxing), 173, 235n1
news. See political communication
News Network (Xinwen lianbo), 106
novels: anti-corruption, 5, 76, 80-81, 88, 91-92, 91-93, 131; bestsellers, 91-92, 246n25; castigatory, 162, 165, 175-76 (see also satire); guanchang, 164-66, 246nn25-26; Internet, 180; Red Classics, 56, 113; vs. television drama, 175-76
officialdom, realm of. See guanchang (realm of officialdom)
officials. See bureaucrats; corrupt official (tanguan); good official (qingguan)
online audiovisual service providers, 48
Pan, Zhongdang, 23
Party Central Committee: Resolution Concerning Guidelines on Building Socialist Spiritual Civilization, 39, 40
Passage of Time (Suiyue), 174-76, 247n45
People's Daily, 77, 88, 109
Perfect World, 46
permits: censorship and, 88; cost of, 232n80; distribution, 51, 61-63; production, 34, 45, 52-53, 57, 234n101
political climate: after 2000, 87-89
political communication, 14-5
political economy: of Chinese media, 14-23
politics: anti-corruption, 210; of corruption dramas, 5-6; within guanchang, 202; of mockery, 180; workplace, 160-62, 181-82
Poly Group, 46, 47
Poly Huayi, 47
popular culture, 12, 19-20, 36-37, 56, 65, 92-93, 114, 146; Chinese state in, 215-17; co-opted by CCP, 70; disdainful attitude of, 180; literature and, 92-93
post-socialist reality, 8-9
power: of bureaucrats, 179; of capitalism, 215-17; of CCTV, political and cultural, 69-70, 72-73; of central Party-state, 215-16; and corruption, 139-41; cultural vs. state, 6; of cynicism, 182-83; economic, 142, 204-5; of guanchang, 167; of guanchang discourse, 166; ideological, 12-13; maximization formula, 172-73; political, 139-40; political, and money, 146-47; political and economic, 213-15; political vs. economic, 216; of private production firms, 52-53; public discourse about, 141-42; of state vs. free market, 203-4; of television dramas, 55
power elite: assumptions about, 4
Prime Minister Hunchback Liu (Zaixiang Liu luoguo), 167, 168, 169
privatization: of SOEs, 67; of state assets, 214
production firms, 51(t); private, 45-46, 50-54; and production permits, 52-53; publicly listed, 46-47, 50; vs. television stations, 52; types, 52(t), 53-54. See also specific production firms
production permits, 34, 45
propaganda: anti-corruption, 65-66; apparatus, 15, 16-17; CCTV vs. provincial networks, 97; celebratory, 63; and commercially driven media, 210-11, 212-13; of "good official" narratives, 134; imperatives for television dramas, 58-59; purpose of, 109; themes, 28. See also political communication
Provincial Party Secretary (Shengwei shuji), 73
Provisional Rule Regarding the Television Drama Production Permits, 34
public interest: meaning of, 129
Pure as Snow (Daxue wuhen): character relationships, 138-39; corruption in, 132-33; emotional excess in, 128-29; melodrama in, 125-30; production crew, 243n8; synopsis, 123-24
Rajagopal, Arvind, 71
Ranciere, Jacques, 22
realism: critical, 80-81, 159; emotional, 121
Red Carnations (Hongse kangnaixin), 134, 136-37
regulation: of corruption dramas, 98-103; double objective of, 14-15; licensing system, 56-57; of media order, 217-19; paradoxical impact of, 87; pre-distribution review, 61-63, 234n101; role of, 54-56; of television dramas, 58-59, 90-91, 239n17; and violations of rules, 156-57
Ren, Hai, 161
Renren.com, 185
representation: of the Party-state, 22-23
Resolution on Several Important Matters about Socialist Spiritual Civilization, 55
River Elegy, 235n1
Rofel, Lisa, 38
Rosen, Stanley, 205-6
Rumbling Rivers (Dajiang dongqu), 134, 143-47
satire, 162-67; of hunger for power, 172-73
scandals: Bo Xilai, 3-4, 224nn1-2; culture of, 118-19, 219-21; FTAD (Feng Ji), 49; and guanchang fiction, 180; Internet-facilitated, 207-8, 213, 219-21; media, 4, 110, 224n3; Shenyang, 143; Wang Baosen and Chen Xitong, 68
Shanghai Film Studio, 89
Shengda, 48
Shenyang Sunshine Film and TV Company Ltd., 143-47
Index 275

Shenzhen Stock Exchange, 47
Sina.com, 177

Snail House (Woju), 63; audience emotional reactions to, 206; audience reading of characters, 194, 195-203, 204-5; desirable corrupt official, 188-92; as guanchang narrative, 197-200; messages about individualism, 206-7; moral vision, 192-94; online surveys, 248n4, 249nn7-8; popularity, 247n1; reception of, 184-85; and social issues, 203-5; synopsis, 186-88; uniqueness of, 202-3

social context, 247-48n1; of corruption dramas, 6; justice issues, 109; of television, 12

Song Jigao, 89

State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT): 2004 ban on corruption dramas, 98-3, 103-8; and anti-corruption dramas, 115; ban on corruption dramas, 5; Clean Up the Screen campaign, 15, 18-19, 86-87, 112-15; and corruption dramas, 213, 217-18; criticism of, 82; criticism of I'll Never Let You Off, 105; distribution permits, 51; licensing, 52-53; and A Life-and-Death Choice, 89; and Passage of Time, 247n45; praise for Mother's Tears, 116; pre-distribution review, 61-63; production permits, 34, 45; and provincial broadcasters, 16; and Red Classics, 113; regulation of foreign television dramas, 90-91; regulations, 56-57; and Snail House, 207, 250n55; and television drama planning, 58-60

State Council, 46-47, 58-59

State-owned enterprises (SOEs): and corruption, 67; in corruption dramas, 95, 114, 124, 125-32, 136-40, 147, 154; privatization of, 132-33; vs. red hat firms, 147; reforms, 95; syndrome of 59, 136-37

Stories in the Editor's Office (Bianjibu de gushi), 37

Sun, Wanning, 36, 38, 240n41

Supreme Interest (Zhigao liyi), 140-41

Tao Dongfeng, 180, 182, 229n33
television: before 1978, 28-29; 1980s expansion of, 29-30, 30(t); and book publishing, 79-80, 88, 91-93; double logic of, 15; ecological crisis of, 86, 111-15; ecology of, 100-1; entertainment vs. reality shows, 112-14; as an ideological instrument, 226n29; and rise of cynicism, 211-12; and social changes, 38; structure of industry, 16-17

Television Art Association, 32

television broadcasting: four-tier development of, 30-31

Television Drama Planning Conference, national, 55-56, 59, 98, 229n34, 233-34n99
television dramas: in the 1980s, 29-36, 70; adaptations of guanchang novels, 166; adaptations of literary classics, 227n9; adaptations of novels, 92, 239nn23-24, 247n45, 247n57; as advertiser's medium, 40-44; advertising revenue, 43-44; as anti-corruption propaganda, 65-66; beginnings, 27-29; co-production, 241n43; commoditization of, 37; criteria for appeal, 230n36; of the Cultural Revolution, 28; distribution, 58; dominant genre, 43-44; expanded production of, 31-33; global practices, 71; government enabling of, 54-63; ideal, 56; imported, 35-36, 229nn28-30; Internet distribution rights, 48; main melody, 20; markets, 52; mass-produced, 229-30n35; as moral agent, 36, 38-40; parallels with media scandals, 4; power of, 55; pre-distribution review, 61-63; production, 44-45; production companies, 50-54; propaganda imperatives for, 58-59; and public discourses, 202-3; of reform, 235n1; regulatory rules, 56-57; serials, 36-40, 227n9; soap opera, 37, 229n34; socialism and, 55; sponsorship for, 33-34, 228n20, 230n37; State Council and, 58-59; targeted by SARFT, 59-60, 61; transformation of, 23-24; vulgarization of, 55-56, 59-60, 114. See also anti-corruption melodrama; corruption dramas television stations: advertising revenue, 41-42, 42(t); audience share, 43(t); cartoon channels, 42; and CCP, 55-56; functions of, 55; provincial, 42, 225n19, 227n3; satellite channels, 43

Tencent, 48

Thick and Black Learning (Houheixue), 163, 164

thickness and blackness, 163, 164, 169
Tong Xiangrong, 54
transgression: of boundaries, 101; discourse of corruption and, 105; of moral order, 101-2, 106, 107-8

Wang, David Der-wei, 165
Wang, Shaoguang, 54
Wang Baosen, 68
Wang Fulin, 227n9
Wang Gang, 168, 170
Wang Hui, 7
Wang Shuo, 114
Wang Xiaofang, 166
Wang Xin, 181-82
Wang Yuewen, 165, 166
Warner China Film HG Corporation, 47
Wei Jianxing, 78, 89
Wine Republic (Jiuguo), 165-66
women: in anti-corruption dramas, 95, 146; roles of, 38
World Trade Organization (WTO): and media production, 17
Wuxi Taihu Film and Television Production Base Company, 50

Xiaoshuo Jie (Fiction World), 91-92
Xinbaoyuan Film and Television Investment Company, 45-46, 47
Xu Guangchun, 58, 98, 99
Xu Yu, 31
Xunlei.com, 185, 204

Yan Zhen, 165
Yang, Mayfair, 163
Yang Weiguang, 77, 78
Yearnings (Kewang), 36-40, 60, 229n34
Ying’s Film and Television, 47
You Xiaogang, 76, 235n1
Youku.com, 185

Zhai Taifeng, 76
Zhang, Li, 225n18
Zhang, Xiaolong, 22, 62
Zhang, Yong, 18
Zhang Ping, 11, 46, 88, 89, 91-92, 134
Zhao, Yuezhi, 224n10, 225n18, 226n22, 226n30, 228n20, 241n59, 241n60, 244n34, 250n57
Zhao Baogang, 45-46
Zhejiang Hengdian Film Production Company, 47
Zhejiang Hengdian Group, 47
Zheng Dongtian, 75
zhichang narrative, 181-82, 247n57. See also guanchang narrative
Zhong, Xueping, 21-22, 135
Zhou Huan, 78, 227-28n9
Zhou Meisen, 11, 82, 91-92, 114, 134, 137, 139-42, 147
Zhu, Ying, 135
Zhu Lili, 177
Žižek, Slavoj, 25-26, 182-83, 217