

Rethinking the Chinese Internet: Social History, Cultural Forms, and Industrial Formation

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn**Luzhou Nina Li¹****Abstract**

Current accounts of the development of the Chinese Internet have provided important analyses of the political economy of telecommunications and the Internet. This study builds on these research to examine how vernacular online practices played a role in enabling political economic dimensions of the Chinese Internet to act as significant shaping forces. With this objective in mind, this article considers vernacular online practices that preceded the rise of commercial online video portals. My specific examples are ‘video spoofing’ and ‘fansubbing’, practices popular in the early to mid-2000s. Led by amateur enthusiasts, these practices were intimately associated with the legacy of cultural piracy in China in the pre-Internet era. My primary concern here is with identifying and explicating the social energies that encouraged the formation of these online practices, their development trajectory, and finally, how these practices eventually became assimilated within a nascent video industry. In that respect, my argument is that the vernacular cultural forms and practices associated with these phenomena were central, and indeed essential, to the formation of an online video industry in China.

Keywords

Chinese Internet, fansubbing, history, online video, piracy, spoofing

After nearly two decades of development, the Internet in China, as Guobin Yang (2012) suggests, has become localized to the extent that it is now possible to talk about the “Chinese Internet” as opposed to the Internet in China. Talking about the Chinese

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Internet is not so much about minimizing its global features as emphasizing its Chinese characteristics. If we are to establish a subfield of “Chinese Internet Studies” within the loosely defined field of “Internet Studies,” a more detailed history of the Chinese Internet needs to be told. Scholarship on global Internet developments has examined the political economic forces that shaped technological and infrastructural developments (e.g., DeNardis 2014; Mueller 2002, 2010; Schiller 1999, 2007), as well as the sociocultural factors that affected the Internet design and use (e.g., Abbate 1999; Flichy 2007; Schulte 2013; van Dijck 2013). In the Chinese context, scholars such as Cullen and Choy (1999), Harwit (2008), and Mueller (1997) have provided important analyses of the political economy of telecommunications and the Internet. My study builds on their research to examine how vernacular online practices played a role in enabling political economic dimensions of the Chinese Internet to act as significant shaping forces. The use of “vernacular” in this article is drawn from Henry Jenkins (2006a), who defines vernacular culture as culture generated by amateurs. This research agrees with Guobin Yang’s (2012) argument that apart from the impact of political economic forces, the formation of the Chinese Internet was also shaped by sociocultural practices found in the various forms of vernacular production, distribution, and consumption of online content.

In particular, this study examines the vernacular online practices that preceded the rise of commercial online video portals in the early to mid-2000s. Among the many practices, the study focuses on “video spoofing” and “fansubbing” and the outcomes of these practices, that is, user-generated content (UGC). Both video spoofing and fansubbing were intimately associated with pre-Internet cultural piracy in China. This association forces us to reconstruct a relationship between pre-Internet/video social energies and the formation of a particular sector of the Chinese Internet industry that has not been studied. In a broad sense, this study corresponds with scholarly discussions of the vernacular creativity and alternative politics embedded in tactical media, social production, participatory/fan culture, and so on (e.g., Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Lovink 2002, 2008). Certainly, in the Chinese context, scholars have emphasized the cultural politics of vernacular practices such as video spoofing (Gong and Yang 2010; Li 2011; Meng 2011) and amateur photography and online writing practiced by rural migrant workers (Sun 2010, 2012, 2014). My main interest in this article, however, lies in establishing the location/significance of vernacular online practices within the broader political economy of the Chinese online video industry.

By this approach, I intend to situate the sociocultural condition of early vernacular online practices and their constitutive relationship with the online video industry, as well as the larger communicative ecology of the day. This article describes the social energies driving the formation of those practices, their development, and finally, the process by which those practices eventually became part of the nascent video industry. Decades of developments in the Internet in China have shaped a distinct online culture that is significantly different from the more heavily politicized traditional media (e.g., television) yet meanwhile demonstrating liberating traits that cannot simply be grasped with the frame of commercialization. It is therefore necessary to rethink the Chinese Internet by exploring its social history. My approach could best be categorized as

“culturalist” and is informed by the early writings of Raymond Williams, which emphasize sensuous human energies as social practices as well as their interactions with various elements such as social structures and material practices (e.g., Williams [1958] 2002, 1961).

In terms of methodology, this study relies on documentary research (e.g., cultural policies, official statistics, trade press, mass-circulation newspapers, personal reminiscences/commentaries circulating online, and related studies) and in-depth interviews with early fansubbers and parodistic video makers. Using these methods, it reconstructs the sociocultural conditions that enabled vernacular online practices, early Internet culture, and the industrial context. Informants quoted in this article include Hu Ge (henceforth Hu), one of the early video spoofsters; Bai Cong (henceforth Bai), an early UGC player who, with the commercialization of the Chinese Internet, became a professional video maker; and G.B., an early Japanese anime fansubber.¹ As an ordinary user who has lived through the early period of the Chinese Internet, my early Internet use and pre-Internet cultural consumption also inform this study in a self-conscious way.

A Brief History of the Early Online Video Industry

The online video industry in China took off in the early 2000s when the Chinese state, telecommunications infrastructures, and transnational and local capital, in conjunction with popular need, went through profound, interrelated changes. The Chinese state’s ambition to develop an Internet economy was the main political framework that determined the infrastructure and market developments of the Chinese Internet (X. Wang 2009). Because online video straddles both technology and culture, the post-2000 “cultural system reform” campaign and the subsequent official rhetoric espousing an integration of culture and technology also constituted a friendly political environment for the growth of the industry.² The industry began to take shape in the early 2000s with the emergence of video-on-demand (VOD) service providers (SPs). At the time, rapidly commercializing telecom operators began to get involved in the business of value-added service (VAS) following the settlement of the “last mile” residential broadband access. With this development, early VOD services providers were quickly transformed into SPs/content providers (CPs) of VAS portals developed by major telecom corporations (*ChinaByte* 2008). The portal VNET, launched by China Telecom in 2002, for example, fostered hundreds of SP/CPs offering a wide array of services including information and entertainment during the first half of the decade (Feng 2003). By the end of 2005, the number of SP/CPs cooperating with VNET had grown to more than 500 (Liu 2005). The SP/CPs specializing in video entertainment basically contracted the construction and maintenance of the VOD system from telecom operators and divided revenues from user subscriptions with telecom companies (*ChinaByte* 2008).

In the early days, a considerable amount of content provided via telecom VAS portals in fact infringed copyright, which pointed to the close relationship between piracy and the formation of the early Chinese video industry (L. N. Li 2015). As will be shown below, the early Chinese video industry, which did not yet identify with a

professional mode of cultural production (and lacked the resources to do so), was mainly sustained by piracy and a piracy-informed vernacular culture.

Although portals like VNET gained momentum between 2003 and 2005, they failed to develop users. Growing up with mostly free content, Chinese Internet users were generally unwilling to pay for content. Meanwhile, the consumption of pirate content through peer-to-peer (p2p) file-sharing networks developing around the same time reduced the attractiveness of VNET to users. Moreover, VNET also displeased users because of the difficulty using the portal. According to a member of the China Telecom Sichuan Branch staff, quoted in *Telecommunications Weekly*, even by 2005, most broadband subscribers were unfamiliar with VNET and unsure how to navigate it (C. Li 2007).

The lukewarm response to online video services only began to change with the rise of video-sharing websites in the mid-2000s. Venture capitalists after the dotcom bubble renewed their interest in investing in a new wave of web startups—known as Web 2.0—that focused on participation and sharing. In this context, newer online video SPs emerging after the VOD model came into public view as YouTube-style video-sharing platforms. The first video-sharing website, Tudou.com, was founded when startup entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and researchers crowded into forums and conferences to discuss the prospect of Web 2.0. Tudou's cofounder, van der Chijs (2014), a Dutch consultant in Shanghai, was attracted to the idea of self-produced on-demand radio, which had been presented in Adam Curry's blog (Curry was an early podcaster and podcasting entrepreneur in the United States). Capitalizing on the idea of podcasting, Gary Wang and his Dutch partner launched the website as a podcast-hosting site in April 2005. They quickly realized that a pure audio podcasting site did not scale and was hard to monetize, so they added a video component (van der Chijs 2014). Tudou was quickly discovered by Internet users and experienced rapid growth in 2006 and 2007. By August 2006, daily audiovisual clips received by the website had increased to more than 3,000, and the number of registered users had surpassed 500,000 (F. Wu 2006).

The impressive performance of the website quickly brought it a second round of venture capital investment of \$8.5 million, jointly made by Granite Global Ventures, JAFSCO, and its initial investor IDG Ventures China in mid-2006 (Yang 2007). At the same time, the rapid growth of YouTube made it possible to envision the extraordinary commercial potential of a global video UGC network. A number of local "wannabe" sites emerged after Tudou's debut in 2006, including Youku.com, 6.cn, Ku6.com, pomoho.com, TVix.cn, and 56.com. Most of them have disappeared due to market consolidation. However, at the time, hundreds of those companies absorbed \$100 million in venture capital investment (X. Li 2007).

Along with the hype about sharing sites, p2p live-streaming services were becoming increasingly popular. In this model, users download a small application program to local computers and use it to watch movies, sporting events, live streaming television programs from domestic channels, and overseas subscription channels such as HBO picked up by live-streaming SPs both legally and illegally. In terms of technology, these providers basically appropriated the p2p network architecture commonly used by Internet users to share files to provide proprietary live-streaming services. This

model emerged earlier than sharing sites and enjoyed a certain degree of popularity among venture capitalists due to its extraordinary ability to amass users. Although VOD, video sharing, and p2p live streaming all made up the early history of the Chinese video industry, this article focuses on the sharing model because it involved the widest range of vernacular practices.

The popularity of online video, especially video-sharing sites, suggested the existence of sociocultural demands of both the production and consumption of UGC on which commercial companies could capitalize. Video UGC mainly consisted of user-uploaded clips documenting everyday life activities, video spoofs, and a vast number of pirated videos migrated by users from both physical and digital environments. Before video portals moved into the regime of cultural production through a process of vertical integration, content generated by users constituted their main provision. In the following section, I will elaborate on this part of the online video's industrial formation by focusing on two practices: video spoofing and fansubbing.

Video Spoofing, Pirate Culture, and the Video Industry

Video spoofing (or parody) is popularly known in China as *egao* (evil work). The culture of parody is not a product of the Internet. As the Chinese art critic Su Xianting suggests, the political pop and “red rock” emerging in the early 1990s were forms of *egao* responding to the prevailing disillusionment following the failure of idealism in the 1980s (Huang 2014). Likewise, Dai Jinhua and Zhang Jingyuan (1999) also captured elements of political parody in literary practices and films during the same period. Those satires, however, were largely elitist practices.

The Internet opened up a modest space for ordinary people to express ridicule and satires. The spoof “A Murder Caused by a Steamed Bun” (*yige mantou yinfa de xue'an*) produced by Hu in 2005 was one of the earliest and most memorable vernacular productions of the time. It satirized the 2005 martial arts epic *The Promise* (*wuji*) by adopting the format of China Central Television's (CCTV) program “China Legal Report” (*fazhi baodao*). The spoof deconstructed the elitist myth constructed by the director through the film's grand narratives, epic style, and allegorical design, thereby subverting cultural authority (Gong and Yang 2010). It also satirized CCTV and the official media culture it represents by mimicking its standardized tones and ideologically laden language (with which Chinese audiences could easily identify), and lampooned the ongoing process of commercialization by constantly disrupting the spoof with commercial breaks (Meng 2011). Moreover, the production mediated larger social issues such as domestic migration, underground sex industries, and urban police brutality (Meng 2011).

Although statistics on the quantity of parodistic productions immediately following the “Steamed Bun” spectacle were absent, a search of news articles on *egao* in the *China Important Newspapers Full-Text Database* shows that the number of such articles increased from one in 2005 to sixty-five in 2006, with many mainstream presses denouncing the destructive potential of *egao*. This change confirms that *egao* was a popular phenomenon at the time.

Internet users' enthusiasm for digitally enhanced video spoofing raises a question about the historical root of these social energies. A discussion of this may well implicate the history of amateur productions in China. We lack a comprehensive, documented history of vernacular cultural expression in the postreform era. The scattered studies of amateur media making in the pre-Internet age in China are the closest counterpart to UGC practices in the digital context. For example, early local rock bands, emerging as a ramification of the social and cultural diversity in the 1980s (Baranovitch 2003), were marked by a sense of amateurism. A brief discussion of the formative history of local rock bands might shed some light on what counts as creative engines in recent amateur cultural activities such as video spoofing.

The (reportedly) first rock group in China, "Wanlimawang," was set up by four students at the Second Foreign Language Institute in Beijing, and was named after the members' surnames (Clark 2012). According to the limited and fragmented documents available, its core member, Wang Xinbo (henceforth Wang), accidentally encountered the music of The Beatles in the early 1970s when the cultural environment was still dominated by revolutionary model plays. Obsessed with a rock genre (which he did not understand at the time), the young man indulged himself by searching for related musical knowledge in all possible ways and designing musical instruments and electronic devices (Zhong 2008). Wang also shared his musical skills with his friend Ma Xiaoyi (henceforth Ma), a teenager living in the work-unit compounds (*dayuan*) of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, and came to know the other two band members through Ma.³ Wang, Ma, and the other members shared a passion for music and musical instruments, and frequently gathered to exchange ideas and perfect their self-taught process. Ma later entered the Second Foreign Language Institute and persuaded the secretary of the Institute's Youth League Committee to finance the establishment of the band in the winter of 1979 (Zhong 2008). Thus, the first local rock band in China was largely driven by amateurs enthusiastic for foreign music, despite its elitist origins.

This story shows that one of the most immediate factors that pushed amateurs' vernacular production forward was the consumption of cultural products enabled by unofficial channels. No further sources are available to confirm how Wang encountered The Beatles during the Cultural Revolution. However, there are reasons to believe that it was not through the official network of audiovisual publishers. The dissemination of foreign rock music through unofficial channels had a huge impact on the development of early rock in China. As Nimrod Baranovitch (2003) documents, there was an increasing presence of foreigners, especially foreign students at Chinese universities especially in Beijing in the 1980s. Foreigners, mainly Westerners, not only introduced foreign rock cassettes into China but also participated in local performances and the production of the genre. Indigenous rock bands developed through these interactions with foreign rock music. It is likely that professional musicians participated in the early rock music scene in China. Yet, we cannot ignore the role of amateur music making sustained by the enthusiasm of the youth culture of the day. It is especially true considering that rock and roll appears to some to be a non-artistic form that anyone could make if they set their minds to learning the mere rudiments of

musicianship (Simonelli 2013, 78). What inspired that amateur creativity, I argue, were alternative practices of cultural consumption.

Therefore, when we speculate about the historical root of social energies embedded in amateur video making, we should think about the role of alternative cultural consumption. My informants' life experiences exactly lend support to this argument. Most early UGC participants were born between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, and their production activities should be understood in relation to their exposure to pre-Internet popular culture enabled by piracy. Piracy culture blossomed throughout the 1980s and 1990s in China, and patterns of pirate cultural consumption were evolving simultaneously with economic development and technological change. In the case of pirated films, for example, video halls were the dominant mode of unofficial film provision between the mid-1980s and the first half of the 1990s. These halls mainly showed the latest Hollywood flicks, Hong Kong gangster movies, martial art movies, and comedies (X. Wu 2012).

Starting in the mid-1990s, the video compact disc (VCD) format became a major method in the distribution of pirated films (X. Wu 2012). Although an obsolete technology in the West, VCD experienced an unexpected rebirth in Asia in the informal cultural economy due to its cheap price and acceptable digital quality. Thus, Shujen Wang (2003) considers VCD development in Asia one of the most fascinating examples of a reterritorialized technological and cultural space mobilized by nation-states, local manufacturers, and consumers in countering the global audiovisual entertainment market order defined by transnational electronics corporations. VCD was later supplanted by the digital versatile disc (DVD) format in mid-1997 due to the latter's high storage capability. The price of pirate DVDs decreased drastically from the initial ¥30 to ¥40 apiece to less than ¥10 (about \$1.2 at the time) after 2000 (X. Wu 2012), which made the consumption of pirated films affordable. Before the rise of personal computers, affordable broadband services, and p2p networks in the early to mid-2000s, DVDs dominated the pirated film market for a long time.

Pirate cultural consumption, including the consumption of pirate films, had a huge impact on expanding the cultural repertoire of the young generation, cultivating particular kinds of aesthetics, and nurturing the desire for creative expression. These factors eventually led some members of this generation to get involved in the production of amateur videos when digital technology provided the affordance in the early 2000s. Early amateur video makers I spoke with unanimously talked about the influence of piracy on their cultural choices and online habits. For example, Hu admitted in our conversation on July 25, 2014, that the development of his interests in cultural expression and online creativity were intertwined with his history of media consumption. From the days in the 1980s when he copied the songs of Michael Jackson, Madonna, and ABBA using a tape recorder and a blank cassette, to the late 1990s/early 2000s when he purchased pirated DVDs; and from the days when he wore flared pants⁴ and Mark glasses,⁵ to the early 1990s when he indulged himself with Western rock bands such as Pink Floyd, his reminiscences could be composed into a narrative pastiche that reflected the popular cultural landscape of the 1980s and 1990s, which was largely shaped by the culture of piracy. He particularly recognized the influence of American

and Hong Kong comedy movies such as the works of Stephen Chow. The subgenre he described could be more appropriately considered slapstick comedy: "I like those that are really funny; people in the plays are stupid."

Bai also attributed his creativity largely to his pre-Internet exposure to pirate culture. As he enthusiastically recalled in the conversation with the author on July 27, 2014, his entire high school was filled with pirated Hong Kong and Western commercial movies from VCD and DVD rental shops: "I spent a lot of time watching those movies. . . . I even watched those very old and lousy productions that you can hardly name today." He admitted that his pirate cinematic experience was the main source of creativity for him and his business partners:

We all shared the same kind of enthusiasm to movies as teenagers. They [movies] gave us so many enrichments. . . . When we chatted and talked about creativity, many of the inspirations came from what we watched. [We] would spontaneously combine [ourselves] with them, including Stephen Chow's works.

Cultural energies accumulated through consumption of commercial popular culture enabled by piracy found convenient outlets with the rise of video-sharing sites. However, sharing sites were not the first kind of digital platforms for video expression. For example, Hu already participated in amateur video making long before the appearance of Tudou. In 2000, he purchased a cheap webcam and produced a thirty-second video mocking television commercials on his personal computer (he bought the computer the year before). In 2001, he spent ¥3,000 (about \$375 at the time) on a Panasonic DV, which allowed him to more deeply engage with UGC. He began to film moments of life, pets, streets, friend meetings, and so on. Due to the limited technological conditions of the day (e.g., slow Internet speed), he could only save most of his productions on his computer. However, sometimes he edited the raw materials into media files (a skill he transferred from his amateur experience with musical production), uploaded them to the virtual space he rented for a musical forum he maintained, and posted the link to the video in the forum for his friends to download. This was the mode of vernacular video production and distribution before the rise of video-sharing sites. The "Steamed Bun" piece was made in this way. Although sharing sites were taken for granted as the primary distribution platform for the spoof, in fact, the spoof was widely distributed online as a downloadable file through forums, emails, and instant messenger (IM) programs by the end of 2005. As an ordinary Internet user, I can recall that it was the first recognizable viral video before the massive rise of video streaming. Thus, alternative online video making existed well before the emergence of sharing sites.

Amateur video practices of the day should be contextualized within a broader range of vernacular cultural expressions emerging in Chinese cyberspace in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The main part of early Chinese Internet culture was the university, followed by commercial forums (Yang 2012), which opened space for a wide range of expressions. For example, as part of the popular cinematic culture developing with film piracy in the 1990s, online forums became a continuation of traditional cine-spaces such as unofficial film societies and cineclubs in the digital context (X. Wu

2012). They also facilitated a boom in online writing/literature that continues today (Hockx 2015). As I will show below, the forums also laid a foundation for the development of p2p sharing networks and fansubbing. Following on the heels of early forum culture was diversified Internet services, which emerged around 2003. These services, such as Flickr-like photo sharing websites and blogging, I see as more idiosyncratic extensions of forum culture. These are all important if we are to understand early Chinese Internet culture, of which online video was a part. And Hu's experience with both forums and amateur videos suggests an interaction among words, visual images, and video, thereby demonstrating the intermediality and intertextuality embedded in vernacular online culture.

Although there was a palpable presence of amateur video making in the early 2000s, its development, as Tudou's founders realized, was technologically constrained simply because not everyone had the digital literacy, financial resources, and dedicated time to rent a server and maintain a personal website. Meanwhile, in the United States, the founder of the podcast "The Dawn and Drew Show" was at risk of losing his job for surreptitiously hosting audio files on his company's server and causing the server to jam (Shao 2005). The birth of sites such as Tudou made it easier for young people like Hu to express themselves through online audio and videos. Thus, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between the accumulated social demands for cultural expression and the rise of video-sharing sites like Tudou. To some extent, the flocking of venture capitalists to Web 2.0 websites was simply investors riding a trend to capitalize on the sudden awakening of popular consciousness shaped by earlier generations of distributive and productive media technologies (e.g., VCD, webcams, and DV recorders), which led to the birth of commercial platforms like Tudou.

The temporary alliance between capital and popular demands was largely made possible by the relatively loose regulatory regime that presided over the new media industries at the time (L. N. Li 2015). On one hand, the lag in regulation behind technological developments caused problems of overlapping, and in many cases, fragmented jurisdictions in which interinstitutional protectionism reduced the legitimacy and effectiveness of the regulatory bodies involved. Regulatory fragmentation partially enabled vernacular online practices such as parodistic video making to flourish. This is also the case of pirate practices such as fansubbing which I will discuss below. Although China's intellectual property regime has been tightened over the last two decades, problems of fragmentation, embeddedness, and dependency marking the bureaucratic structure of copyright administrative enforcement apparatuses exacerbated difficulties on the enforcement front (Mertha 2005). On the other hand, a lax regulatory regime was also due to the Chinese state's ambition to develop Internet and cultural economies.

p2p Sharing, Fansubbing, and the Video Industry

In the early days, video-sharing sites not only accommodated numerous piracy-informed parodies but also became a new outlet for digital piracy, and in particular, fansubbing. In the new century, the availability of digital channels for distribution was

transforming physical piracies in video halls, VCD, DVD, and so on. Early digital piracies mainly existed in p2p file-sharing practices. Later on, fansubbing groups that were dedicated to translating and introducing foreign films and television programs developed, relying on p2p sharing networks for distribution. Given that most of the fansubbed programs were not officially imported by the Chinese state, fansubbing constituted a specific form of digital piracy organized around p2p networks. Its relationship with p2p networks diminished as video-sharing sites became its new distribution platforms in the mid-2000s. Thus, fansubbing constitutes another case in which we should consider the role of vernacular online practices in the formation of the video industry, and again this implicates the history of piracy.

Most scholarship on piracy in both Western and Chinese contexts centers on the liberal/leftist, right/wrong, and moral/legal debates, but very few consider piracy as an industry and explore associated industrial practices and power relations (Johnson et al. 2014). Recognizing piracy in China as an example of *laissez-faire* capitalism, Shujen Wang (2003) first examines the production/manufacturing process, technology, equipment, distribution networks, and labor involved in film piracy in greater China. If we acknowledge piracy as a sector of the informal economy, we must recognize both the dominant industrialized forces and the emerging unindustrialized forces in this sector. P2p file-sharing practices emerging in Chinese cyberspace in the early 2000s were part of such forces. The emergence of p2p technology, along with improving surfing conditions, especially the introduction of “broadband unlimited monthly plans” by telecom operators, enabled the shift from disc burning to digital downloading in piracy.

According to G.B., who experienced this shift as a veteran Internet user, in the early days, consumers of pirate VCDs/DVDs compressed pirate content in physical media into RMVB (RealMedia Variable Bitrate) video files. They shared them with peers through p2p networks using the BitTorrent (BT) protocol. The consumption of pirated videos via p2p networks became a palpable trend in 2003. At the time, niche magazines like *Computer Weekly* and *China Computer Education* began to teach readers how to select free torrent clients, to optimize the downloading experience, and to protect disks/partitions. Between June 2004 and late 2005, the Motion Picture Association (MPA), which oversees antipiracy programs for the American motion picture, home video, and television industries, lodged complaints with the Chinese State Copyright Bureau against 446 unauthorized Chinese websites providing American films (Zhou 2005). In addition, aforementioned threats imposed by BT downloading on VNET provide a glimpse into the popularity of media consumption via p2p networks.

The development of p2p file-sharing practices was closely associated with forum culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s because, as G.B. told me in our conversation on July 19, 2014, video file uploaders largely relied on forums to publish their small torrent descriptor files (commonly referred to as “seeds” by Chinese Internet users), which contained metadata about the file and folder to be distributed.

The availability of p2p networks inspired those who were dissatisfied with the slow distribution rate of physical piracy. Unlike the production of Chinese dramas, where the entire series is completed before airing, many foreign dramas are produced on a live-shoot system and aired weekly. Large-scale physical piracy manufacturing is less

likely to copy each weekly episode immediately after the broadcast; instead, it goes to production when the entire series/season has been aired. A compromise among economies of scales, time, and space in physical piracy was apparently necessary. However, as G.B. recalled, “Fans like to chase the drama [*zhuiju*]. They cannot wait for new releases . . . the [physical] piracy really couldn’t catch up.” In this sense, the condition of time–space compression articulated by many scholars is actually a highly relative process. Global cultural flow is less internationalized than imagined even with technological advances. The local desire to annul time–space in global cultural flows became the major force in generating fansubbing practices, and technological developments such as p2p file-sharing networks brought this institution into existence.

Early fans began to connect through forums and IM programs to form a network of unpaid volunteers who, by division of labor, recorded foreign copyrighted materials, uploaded them to hosting servers (located either in China or overseas), translated the content and proofread the subtitles, synchronized the subtitles with the video, compressed and uploaded the video to the server of the forum owned by the fansub group, created and released the torrent descriptor file in the dedicated forum, and distributed the torrent file across the Internet. Fansub groups dedicated to different types of drama and genres (e.g., Japanese drama, Japanese anime, Korean drama, U.S. drama) proliferated. In 2004, G.B. joined the group KTXP, which specialized in subtitling Japanese anime, and to a lesser extent, Japanese television dramas. Chen Yi was another veteran fansubber who worked for YDY, one of the most influential fansub groups dedicated to American television series, movies, and reality shows. When he recalled the heyday of fansubbing, he commented: “We had many subgroups within YDY. The group I belonged to could easily recruit 70–80 fansubbers” (Jin 2014).

Early fansub groups relied on forums and the p2p network architecture for distribution. This was largely an economic choice. As G.B. put it,

Fansubbing was a purely voluntary practice. We were not willing to and didn’t have much money to maintain a [high-capacity] server. . . . Our server was unable to handle thousands of simultaneous downloads. . . . BT downloading was all about sharing, and didn’t consume many [network] resources. . . . It reduced the pressure of the server. . . . So, if there was no BT downloading, it would be very difficult for fansub groups to operate.

Video-sharing sites emerging in the mid-2000s broke, if not replaced, the dominance of p2p networks in distributing pirate content in the digital context. They soon became another digital platform for ordinary Internet users to share copyrighted materials they collected from physical piracy as well as for fansubbers publishing their reproductions of foreign content. G.B. was unable to recall exactly how this shift took place: “There might be a gap there. One day, you suddenly found that there were a lot of online streaming sites, and then you could [upload and] watch stuff online.” By October 2007, half of the content delivered via Tudou was pirated cultural products shared by users (Yang 2007). As an ordinary Internet user, I recall that my college peers frequently turned to sites like Tudou for the convenient consumption of old and new films, series, and television shows in the mid-2000s. Although p2p file sharing

still requires users to be tech-savvy, portal-like sites like Tudou free users from searching for “seeds” and configuring download managers such as eMule and Thunder, and therefore ease cultural consumption.

Video-sharing sites like Tudou were not originally intended for distributing pirated content, but their meaning in cultural life was partially redesigned by users because piracy was so common in China and, indeed, part of everyday cultural life. The Chinese case therefore constitutes a local disruption of the global UGC order collectively defined by transnational capital and users. Although an unexpected development, pirated content uploaded by users (including fansubbers) constituted an important part of video sites’ content provision in the early days. Given China’s relatively isolated and state-dominated system of cultural provision, the new media industry, including the video sector, would not have survived and thrived without piracy. In this sense, piracy served as a cultural infrastructure for the development of the online video industry.

To some extent, fansubbing could also be seen as a form of vernacular parody production, because the process of adding subtitles transforms so-called “fixed texts” into fluid and dynamic ones that are open for creativity. This process blurs the distinction between UGC and piracy in this essay. In reality, fansubbers often refused to use lexicons, styles, and tones appearing in dubbed foreign films provided by state media such as CCTV. Instead, they incorporated popular Internet slang into the translation. They also exploited the process of subtitling to comment on or satirize social phenomena (Meng 2012). While fansubbers sometimes acted as video spoofsters during the process of subtitling, video spoofsters also increasingly turned to fansub groups for cultural resources when digital networks, fansubbing, and online streaming outmaneuvered physical piracy. Thus, fansubbing and video spoofing occurred around the same time, interacting with, influencing, and reinforcing each other. Most important, the enthusiasm and energies driving fansubbing shared the same historical roots (i.e., piracy) of those generating video spoofs. Cultural processes (i.e., piracy culture) over the past two decades prepared for the emergence of a contentious culture in the forms of, but not limited to, video spoofing and fansubbing; and these constituted a sociocultural basis for the rise of the video industry and meanwhile earned their standing through video sites.

Conclusion

The story of vernacular online practices preceding the rise of the online video industry in China shows that vernacular cultural forms and practices were central to its industrial formation. Sociocultural practices that shaped the formation of the video industry were once again influenced by the pre-Internet history of cultural piracy in China. This move blurs the boundary of Chinese Internet studies and calls efforts of periodization into question. We could perhaps conduct a division of time if we think about the Chinese Internet as a political economic project. However, it becomes a daunting task if we take into account the sociocultural history of the Chinese Internet, which forces us to think about periodization as a more complex process of conceptualization.

Yet, acknowledging the roles of the consumer public (i.e., pirate consumption) and popular enthusiasms in the formation of the online video industry is important not only for the sake of periodization. More important, it sheds light on thinking about newer cultural forms (e.g., web series), transnational flows into China, and producers' subjectivities that the video industry engenders today. In 2008, the Chinese video industry went through a strategic transformation in which it moved away from its initial grass-roots orientation to a focus on professionally produced, copyrighted content. The core of this transformation was to move upward into a regime of content production through the process of vertical integration. As this happens, video portals have reenergized media culture in contemporary China by producing and distributing a wide array of online soaps, microfilms, and short videos that are increasingly popular among audiences. Appearing novel to most people, nevertheless the ideological features that these popular cultural texts render, the actual production practices, and the tastes of producers are still embedded in the piracy-based vernacular video culture that existed before the professionalization of the video industry. Elements of early vernacular culture were somehow retained during their industrial transformation because emerging video giants needed to capitalize on social demands and popular tastes to make a profit. Thus, there is a certain degree of continuity between the early vernacular video culture and the current commercial video culture in China. Given the profound influences of the latter in Chinese society, it is therefore worthwhile to trace its precedents, its origins, and its larger cultural formation, which helps us better understand the features of digital culture in China. There is much research that needs to be done, and this piece serves as a humble effort to encourage that research.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use aliases instead of the real names of my informants to provide anonymity. Hu Ge is an exception, however. His productions, especially the spoof "A Murder Caused by a Steamed Bun", have been widely known, which makes him easily identifiable.
2. For instance, the "Circular on Making the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economy and Social Development" (*Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu zhiding guomin jingji he shehui fazhan dishige wunian jihua de jianyi*), delivered at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2000, called for the facilitation of integration between the information industry and related cultural industries. In particular, it promoted a convergence of the telecommunications, television, and Internet sectors, which were abbreviated as "three-network convergence" (*sanwang ronghe*) in popular discourse.

3. The walled work-unit compounds were built as public-housing complexes to house state employees from a single work-unit in post-1949 socialist China. As many critical urban scholars point out, work-unit compounds create gated communities, especially in large compounds for government ministries in Beijing, where class cultural practices and place-making strategies are enacted (see, for example, Pow 2009). Living in a compound of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, Ma presumably possessed privileged cultural capital, and Wang's connection to him shows that they shared the same or adjacent social space. In fact, Wang's parents taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the most renowned art academy in China (Cui and Yuan 2010). Perhaps due to this background, he could connect himself to the outside world, even during the Cultural Revolution. Thus, unevenly distributed cultural capital across social classes and spaces structured the patterns of cultural consumption, especially in the early days of reform. In this sense, early rock music in China was a product of elite cultural practices rather than a form of subculture.
4. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Western pop stars were models for imitation in Chinese society. Flared pants were an icon of popular culture at the time. Young people copied newly introduced pop figures and wore flared trousers. Wearing these trousers quickly became contentious. Older generations were upset and offended by these pants. In the eyes of the elderly, people wearing flared pants were hooligans. Wearing flared pants escalated into a political issue. Fashionable young people were seen as seeking a "bourgeois lifestyle" from which they needed to be saved. There was a time when teachers would wait in front of the school gate and cut off those bourgeois pants legs (*EastDay* 2008).
5. The "Mark glasses" was a cultural phenomenon derived from *Man from Atlantis*, the first American television series officially imported into China in 1980. As the series became popular, people began to wear glasses modeled on the sunglasses worn by Mark Harris, and these were called "Mark glasses" (Tang 2012).

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