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## Chinese Entertainment Industry, the case of folk *Errenzhuan*

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

Keywords: China, performing arts, entertainment, industry, folk, carnival, media, legitimacy

### Background

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a Northeast folk performing art, *Errenzhuan*, rose to form an entertainment industry with unprecedented national and international fame. In 1990, Zhao Benshan, an *Errenzhuan* actor, was invited to perform a comedy sketch (*xiaopin*) at the CCTV (China Central Television) New Year Gala and won instant nationwide popularity. Following this, Zhao's comedy sketch became the highlight of the CCTV New Year Gala, for the next twenty-one consecutive years<sup>1</sup> (Du 1998). The very name of Zhao Benshan has since come to

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<sup>1</sup> Zhao missed the 1994 performance due to late arrival.

symbolise grassroots comedy and *Errenzhuan* laughter. In 2003, Zhao was selected as a Representative of the National People's Congress, the highest political position that may be bestowed on an ordinary citizen in China. In the same year, Zhao established the Benshan Media Studio, using only *Errenzhuan* actors, producing comic soap operas with themes around the daily lives of Northeast rural peasants. In 2004, in collaboration with Liaoning University, Zhao set up a series of *Errenzhuan* BA programmes and in 2007, Zhao purchased a theatre in the city centre of Shenyang, naming it the Old Liu Root Theatre (*Liu Laogen Dawutai*)<sup>2</sup>; by 2014 there were eight franchised Old Liu Root Theatres across China, each staging *Errenzhuan* performances, with an annual turnover of around 148 million yuan (Cao and Hu 2011: 55, Kong, Zheng, Yu and Zhu 2011: 227, Hou 2008: 77).

Despite this political and economic success, *Errenzhuan* as an art form has always been highly controversial. In 2010 Zhao Benshan led an *Errenzhuan* troupe that toured in the United States of America. Local news depicted its popularity as: 'with a 600 million-strong audience, prompting so many Netizens to Google *Errenzhuan* and his name (Zhao Benshan) that the hits temporarily exceeded those for Mao Zedong and Jesus Christ combined'. In the same article, however, *Errenzhuan* was described as 'vulgar', and Zhao's favourite apprentice actor Xiao Shenyang or Little Shenyang was referred to as 'the dirtiest man in China' (Liu 2010). Han Zaifen, vice chair of the Chinese Theatre Association, condemned *Errenzhuan* as 'grotesque, with not a trace of cultural value and depth' (Xing 2011: 200). Criticism was targeted mainly at *Errenzhuan*'s coarse and sexually connoted speech, to which Zhao responded that 'Errenzhuan is like pig's tripe, which will never be clean. Once it is thoroughly cleansed, it is no longer *Errenzhuan*' (Xinhua Net 2014).

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

The controversy continued and peaked on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014, after Xi Jinping delivered his *Beijing Speech on Literature and Art* following his succession to the Presidency. In his *Beijing Speech*, Xi stated that 'Some art works ridicule the sublime, warp the classics, subvert history, or defile the masses and heroic characters. In others good and evil cannot be distinguished, ugliness replaces beauty, and the dark side of society is over-emphasised. Still others blindly chase and cater to public tastes, vulgar interests, chase financial gain, and provoke the ecstasy of the senses'. Xi emphasised the role of artists was 'to serve the mass and the Party' and arts 'must not lose direction in the wave of market economy and be the slave of capital' (China News 2015, Xi 2014). In 2014, Zhao Benshan, who had been a member of the National People's Congress for a decade, was not re-elected, nor did he appear in the subsequent CCTV New Year Gala. There has since been very little media exposure of *Errenzhuang*, as if the entire art form disappeared overnight.

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

This paper focuses on the evolution of *Errenzhuang*, through which it examines the development of the Chinese art market under the dual pressures of economic and ideological censorship. Zhao Benshan is mentioned in the Background to highlight the scale of *Errenzhuang* as an entertainment industry and stress the power of the party-state in regulating the market. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this paper draws theories from folk comedy, cultural industries and CCP legitimacy to provide an analytical structure. This paper suggests that the

trajectory path of *Errenzhuang* reveals the distinction of the Chinese cultural industry, as developed under CCP ideologically directed market monopoly for the continued articulation and legitimacy of the CCP. Such conditions are referred to in this paper as ‘cultural industries with Chinese characteristics’.

For the completion of this paper, two-months of field research took place between January and February 2015 at Shenyang Arts Research Institute. Shenyang is the capital of the Northeast province. Literature and documents about *Errenzhuang* were accessed from local libraries and the Institute itself. *Errenzhuang* performances were attended at the Old Liu Root Theatre in Shenyang city and nearby regions. With the assistance of Shenyang Arts Research Institute, interviews with around twenty *Errenzhuang* artists, script writers and directors, as well as audience focus groups, were conducted. They form the empirical data base for this paper.

## Section One: Theoretical Structure

### Bakhtin's Carnival, 'a pint of tripe'

A large amount of material on comedy has been published, with some focus on China (Davis and Chey 2013, Clasquin 2001). However, none is more appropriate than that of Bakhtin to analyze the phenomena of *Errenzhuang*. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin developed Aristotle's theory of laughter, as a unique characteristic of the human species, which acts as the ultimate wisdom and power of the human being, to apply it in folk carnival. To Bakhtin, laughter is not an abstract form but a highly interactive process between actor and audience. It is a gay transformation, a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, through which the folk population defeat the authoritarian commandments and prohibition of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the power exists on earth (Bakhtin 1984: 69-122).

In Bakhtin's analysis of the power of laughter, he did not idealize the folk art form. In fact, he refers to the peasantry grotesque realism as 'a pint of tripes', which is 'blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty and rampantly physical, revelling in oceans of strong drink ... and endless coupling of bodies'. However, Bakhtin highlights the essence of 'a pint of tripes': the stomach, intestines, belly, and the sex organs are all the very essence of life and revival. Through the grotesque realism, the folk manages to 'build its own world in opposition to the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state' (Bakhtin 1984: 90-141). This folk grotesque laughter gives man a new outlook on life, which defines the path of truth, symbolizing the ultimate victory of human kind.

'A pint of tripes' has been the main reference of *Errenzhuan* and the focal point of debate. This paper argues that *Errenzhuan*'s grotesque images and sexual reference represent the vitality of folk life. Dirty jokes and coarse language are essential to *Errenzhuan* to provoke laughter from the listeners, through which the official world is mocked, power is reversed, and the folk obtain victory. Once the grotesque realism and coarse language are eliminated under the dual pressures of economic and ideological censorship, *Errenzhuan* loses its essential folk power of defiance and renewal. The ability of the Chinese party-state to maintain ideological focus and market monopoly lies at its role as the 'central bank'.

### CCP 'Central Bank' and Legitimacy

The phrase 'central bank' was coined by the famous French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who devised the concept of capital to measure social hierarchical power. Bourdieu's capital is not limited in the monetary sense, but expands to a wide range of exchange forms. Whilst in Western countries the most valuable capital forms are economic and cultural, in socialist regimes such as East Germany and the Soviet Union, Bourdieu argued the most powerful capital forms are political and symbolic capital, as the government hold all forms of capitals,

monopolize market and act as a 'central bank'. In these countries, the unequal distribution of capitals is the source of the observable differentness in patterns of consumption and lifestyles (1998).

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

The initial rise of *Errenzhuan* in the new millennium was the result of direct CCP support through the re-allocation of resources, such as access to CCTV - which is under the tight management of the CCP (Zhu and Berry 2009) - and the selection of Zhao Benshan as a representative of the National People's Congress, the highest political status a Chinese citizen

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<sup>3</sup> Three Reforms took place in 1951 and is a process of establishing state folk opera houses (*gaizhi*), elevating folk actor's historical underclass status to that of professional artists (*gairen*), and traditional folk improvisation style of productions changed to compulsory written scripts (*gaixi*), with superstitious and sexual connotation eliminated. China folk opera companies in the new millennium continue to exist under the structure of Three Reforms.

can be granted. It was through such redistribution of political and symbolic capitals that enabled *Errenzhuan* to rise to become a nationwide entertainment industry.

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

### *Cultural Industries with Chinese Characteristics*

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

Adorno has often been criticised as an elitist however, his theory is still useful to decipher the market situation in China, as *Errenzhuan* evolved from a distinct folk art form to a standardized entertainment, precisely because of the market requirement for making profit.



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

When *Errenzhuan* was perceived as being controversial, to the representation of China's global cultural image, the CCP was able to regulate the entire *Errenzhuan* industry by withdrawing the two most important capital forms – political and symbolic. This was exemplified by Zhao Benshan not being invited to attend Xi Jinping's 2014 *Beijing Speech* and not being re-elected as a member of the National People's Congress. Consequently, *Errenzhuan* lost the capitals which had previously been converted into economic capitals for development within the cultural market. The fate of *Errenzhuan* therefore highlights the distinction of Chinese cultural markets, which develop under the dual pressures of economic requirement and ideological censorship. This phenomenon may be best interpreted as 'cultural industries with Chinese characteristics'.

## Section Two: Origin of *Errenzhuan*

Scholars trace the origin of *Errenzhuan* from two sources: A Northeast ancient fertility-praying dance and a beggars' story-telling performance which entered the Northeast from central China. Another name for the Northeast is *Guanwai*, which means Beyond the (Eastern) Gate (of the Great Wall). It has historically been regarded as the place outside of civilization and law, where the convicts and refugees migrated to in times of war and famine. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century a popular sing song story-telling art form developed amongst Northeast labourers. The name

*Errenzhuan* first appeared in the Tai Dong Daily newspaper in 1934 and was officially recorded in 1953 (Wang 2009, Tian 2008: 4, Li 2007).

*Errenzhuan* literally means two people, usually a male and a female, singing improvised literary stories in turns. Traditionally, after a day's toil, especially in the long harsh winter, labourers would gather together on top of the Northeast heated brick bed to chat and to sing *Errenzhuan*, with a fan or a handkerchief as props. When the singing becomes lively, movements would be added, amongst which *yangge*<sup>4</sup> is the most popular form. The important role is that of the clown, which is called *xiazhuang* or the lower dress. The role focuses on *shuokou* (speaking), as opposed to singing, dancing or acting and usually is taken by the male actor (Liu 2013: 132). He leads the narration, sexually teasing his partner, interacts with and amuses the audience (Yang 2007). Grotesque realism, dirty jokes and coarse language are essential to *Errenzhuan*. However, it was after mid-night, when children have been put to bed, that *Errenzhuan* became most animated.

Sexual connotation with symbolic sexual acting through physical touching are performed in 'adult only surroundings', either late at night at home or traditionally in the 'red light' districts. This is the reason why *Errenzhuan* stage partners are mostly couples (Hu 2013, Hou 2008,). Yang Pu, Professor of *Errenzhuan* and director of the Northeast Arts Research Centre at China Jilin University explains the reasons for the highly charged sexual connotation and its related popularity:

'*Guanwai* men have historically lived in an environment with little sex and love, simply because they don't have the financial means to pursue it. Many labourers came to the Northeast to work in mines and forests. These groups of labourers had very little opportunity to meet females. Under harsh economic and social conditions, many could not afford to get married. Even amongst married

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

people, most of them had arranged marriages, with little love. Lack of sexual opportunity and satisfied sexual activities lead to strong desires for sex and love. Explicit sexual dirty story telling provides satisfaction for the illusion of fulfilled sexual desire' (Yang 2010: 49, 89).

However, I would like to push this analysis further by arguing that the grotesque sexual connotation not only comforts the folk but allows them to challenge the official world. For example, the poem *Homesick in the Moonlit Night (Jingyuesi)*, which was composed by Chinese scholar Li Bai during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and has long been regarded as the exemplary literature of the learned class, is also popular in *Errenzhuan*. Instead of the official lines of 'raising my head to look at the bright moon, lowering my head and miss my hometown'; in *Errenzhuan*, the actor sings the couplet as 'raise my head to look at the bright moon, lower my head to pull down my trousers (to masturbate)' (Wang 2009: 45). The humour arises from rhymed metaphors lining erotic sexuality with emphasis placed on lower body sexual organs, which is the very essence of folk life, as Bakhtin highlights, and through which the official world is mocked and power reversed.

Such explicit sexual connotation and folk laughter not only creates an alternative world for the lower-class male, but also females who suffer the dual repressions of class and gender. In the Chinese classical literature, *The Western Chamber (Xixiangji)*, one episode involves the young maid, named Red Lady, facilitating her Mistress to secretly meet with her beloved young scholar, against the will of the family. In all other Chinese theatre versions, the story focuses on the Red Lady's linguistic wit. However, the *Errenzhuan* adaptation of the Western Chamber meeting has specific emphasis placed on the actual sexual intercourse: after Zhang Jun met Cui Yingying in the chamber, due to excitement and anxiety Zhang could not obtain an erection. In order to 'save the rarely obtained occasion', the Red Lady decided to 'sacrifice' herself by giving Zhang Jun oral sex to arouse both him and Cui. Afterwards, Zhang queried with the Red Lady how she could be so 'knowledgeable' at such a young age and the reply was: 'if the old

master did not die, I could easily be your number two mother-in-law' (Wang 2009: 77). Such an angle of storytelling offers an explicit challenge to the Confucian patriarchal system, where females, especially young female servants, form the bottom of the hierarchical structure of gender, class and age (Yi 2011, Yang 2010). In this alternative world, a servant girl obtained superiority through sex and publicly announced her victory based on her sexual performativity.

Through the carnival aspects of linguistic 'grotesque realism' and degradation, *Errenzhuan* builds 'its own world in opposition to the official world, its own state versus the official state' (Bakhtin 1984: 21), and those involved obtain renewal and revival. In Northeast China, locals describe their devotion to *Errenzhuan* by saying that they 'would rather spare a meal than *Errenzhuan*'. Food, to the lower social class is the most precious of goods. To place the consumption of *Errenzhuan* before food demonstrates the extreme popularity of this art form amongst the locals (Yang and Sun 2013, Yang 2007). Under the aforementioned Three Reforms implemented during Mao Zedong's leadership, whilst *Errenzhuan* as a folk form achieved unprecedented artistic standards and peasant singers gained elite status, the once intimate actor-audience relationship was broken and folk power to mock the official world diminished, which led to the decline of *Errenzhuan* popularity. Since the post-Mao market reform of the 1980s, in particular from marketization of post-1992, we saw the rapid emergence of a body of independent *Errenzhuan* performers, actively evolving *Errenzhuan* to a popular regional art form, leading to the state sponsored *Errenzhuan* entertainment industry in the new millennium.

### Section Three: Cultural Industries with Chinese Characteristics

#### Dual Censorship: Economic and Ideological

Whilst the world has witnessed the unprecedented speed and scale of China's marketization and globalization over the past thirty years, China also experienced large scale human

migration, especially rural peasants moving to urban cities. Lacking modern education and skills, they mostly take on low skilled labour work at construction sites or in factories (Sargeson 2016, Wang 2006). In the Northeast region, however, there is another job opportunity that is open to the peasant: to sing *Errenzhuan*.

In the mid-1990s, in a medium sized city such as Changchun alone, there were half a dozen small to medium sized theatres that specialized in *Errenzhuan*, with over 10,000 independent *Errenzhuan* actors actively searching for work. Nearly all were rural peasants (Tian 1996: 160). Each night, theatre managers would invite around five pairs of *Errenzhuan* actors, each given a performing slot of between 20-30 minutes. Zhao Benshan, when looking back at his early career, describes the time as ‘tough’: ‘if you could not make the audience laugh, you would be kicked out of the theatre by the manager and there is no coming back’ (Zhao 2006).

However, it was increasingly difficult to make audiences laugh through traditional *Errenzhuan* story telling. The main audience who had the economic capital to attend theatres in the 1990s were the youth that grew up in the 1960s and 70s. They had little exposure to traditional literature and the *Errenzhuan* art form. Meanwhile, overwhelming numbers of national and international entertainments poured onto the Chinese market competing for consumers. Zhang Bangsong, a journalist from *New Millennium Weekly* describes the situation in the 1990s as: ‘no audience liked to hear traditional *Errenzhuan* singing. Most of the time, performers were shooed off the stage halfway through their performance’ (Quoted in Wang and Cheng 2011: 179). Faced with new market demand, the independent *Errenzhuan* artists had little hesitation in evolving the art form to please the consumers.

Actors keenly adopted diverse high art and popular art forms, ranging from humour clips, pop songs and Western dance, to strengthen their own performing styles. For the *Errenzhuan* actors, there was only one purpose: to make the audience laugh. Only it was no longer for simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, but for economic gain (Wang and Cheng

2011, Zhao 2006, Tian 1996). By the late 1990s, *Errenzhuan* had grown to become a popular regional entertainment form, mainly amongst the Northeast working class and peasant audience. Locals describe the scene of *Errenzhuan* troupes performing in the rural countryside as ‘millions of people watching *Errenzhuan*’ (*wanren weiguan errenzhuan*) (Zhang 2014: 12). *Errenzhuan* could have remained a regional popular culture, however, a new CCP ideological direction of promoting indigenous folk culture propelled *Errenzhuan* to develop an entertainment industry at a national level.

In the 1990s, China experienced a TV boom. By 2000, 1.19 billion had access to television, representing 92 percent of the population (Li 2010, Hazelbarth 1997: 1). Alongside the rising number of television consumers was an increasing flow of television stations, both nationally and internationally, targeting the Chinese-speaking consumers (Zhu and Berry 2009: 12). There was a growing awareness of using native culture to build a national identity, and *Errenzhuan*, by then a traditional folk form turned regional popular culture for the working class and peasants, was recognized as being an ideal subject to reinforce the CCP founding ideology and legitimacy (Su 2011, Xie 2007, Hu 2006, Jiang 2003, Dai 2001). Various regional TV stations began to invite *Errenzhuan* actors onto their programmes, with the most prominent invitee being the CCTV (Zhang 2013: 9-34). Yu Xiaofei, an *Errenzhuan* star performer, describes the sudden access to media and the rise of *Errenzhuan* national popularity:

‘It all started in the early 2000s, Zhao Benshan was already famous then. But suddenly many (*Errenzhuan* actors) were invited onto the CCTV. The first programme I recorded was named *The Donkey Boy* (*fangniuwa*), it was a comedy sketch about my vocal skills in imitating the sound of rural life. Well, the moment it was broadcasted on CCTV, I became famous. Countless people wrote to the CCTV wanting to see more of my shows. I was invited back three times by CCTV to record further programmes. Once I was famous on CCTV, I was invited to record programmes in many regional television channels. I toured more than a hundred cities in China and dozens abroad. There

is very little or no fee for recording a television programme, but once you are famous on TV, all theatres want you and they do pay very handsomely' (Private communication, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2015).

There are several key issues revealed by Yu: Firstly, the link between media promotion and *Errenzhuan*'s national rise in popularity. The extensive broadcasting by central and then regional TV stations redistributed 'central bank' capital, that facilitated *Errenzhuan*'s quick rise to national fame. Secondly, instead of inviting *Errenzhuan* couples to perform traditional *Errenzhuan*, it mainly targeted the clown role, often with excellent acting skills, to perform script-based comical sketches. Thirdly, and most importantly, is the increasingly fierce competition within the *Errenzhuan* entertainment market. These three facts resulted in *Errenzhuan* artistic evolution.

Following the rise in CCTV exposure, more peasants saw learning *Errenzhuan* as the way to gain fame and capital. Growing numbers of peasant children enrolled in *Errenzhuan* schools, which led to an expansion of the *Errenzhuan* education market. By 2005, nearly every city in the Northeast had at least one *Errenzhuan* school; in Jiling city, the hometown of Zhao Benshan, there were over 30 *Errenzhuan* schools, many recruiting between 300 to 500 students annually, the majority of the students were from the rural countryside (Zhang 2014: 128). Despite the rising supply of trained *Errenzhuan* actors, market demand for *Errenzhuan* remained limited. Yu Xiaofei stated that there was no financial gain for appearing on TV and that the theatre was the only means of making a living. This is to say, that increasing numbers of actors competed for limited performing opportunities, which led to a standardized art form where actors are only differentiated by the increasing amounts of sexual connotation they were prepared to insert into their performance. Yan Guoqing, manager of Harerbin Longjiang Theatre describes the *Errenzhuan* market in the late 2000s as follows:

'*Errenzhuan* allows peasants to earn tens of thousands a year. It is unthinkable for peasants in any other trade. However, 99% of *Errenzhuan* performers are from the rural countryside. Like myself. I have only primary graduation. Most *Errenzhuan* performers are illiterate. In order to earn money, to make the audience laugh, they would do anything. But most *Errenzhuan* performers are mediocre. Facing the increasing market competition, the easiest and the quickest way to make money is to imitate others and to increased sexual reference to attract audience. The result? We have the 'bottle neck' effect – whichever the theatre you attend, you see the same *Errenzhuan* content with increased coarse language and rude jokes (*huangduanzi*) (Private communication, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2015).

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

Xiu is a phonetic translation of 'show'. *Errenxiu* refers to two actors performing brief clips of traditional singing, modern dance, instrument playing, acrobatics and the insertion of coarse jokes. A typical *Errenxiu* in the new millennium has the following format:

Male (M): let me introduce you my sexy partner XXX: (female partner walks onto stage wearing glittering bikini dress), oh my mother (*aiya wodemaya*), you wear too much.

Female (F): how could I have worn too much?

M: next time when you walk on stage you only need to wear two pieces.

F: which two pieces?



M: a hat and a pair of shoes (audience laugh). Well, audience are happy today, let's sing a short traditional *Errenzhuan* for them, shall we?

F: ok. Let's have music.

(M and F singing *Errenzhuan* whilst making *yangge* dance movements for about two minutes).

M: (to audience) was it good? ... I can't hear much applause. Whoever applauded, you will pick up a gold bar when you step out of this theatre; whoever did not applaud, you will fall onto dog shit when you step out of this theatre (audience eagerly applaud). Well, thank you, *Errenzhuan* just want to make you happy, make you laugh. Since everyone is so happy, I will now play an erhu instrument for everyone, and invite my partner to sing! Let's have music (show continues)

(*Tengxun TV Channel*)

Increasingly, the army of peasant performers are trained in *Errenxiu* to enter the wider entertainment industry, such as tourist theme parks, extras in large scaled performances and other minor acting roles. The evolution of *Errenzhuan*, from a once powerful folk grotesque realism for renewal and revival, to 21<sup>st</sup> century *Errenxiu* as a standardized entertainment for service-based mass consumption, illustrates vividly what Adorno warned us of back in the 1940s, the corruption of economic censorship, the loss of authenticity and creativity of art form, be it either high or popular (Adorno 1991:10-13). The distinction of Chinese cultural industries is highlighted through the corruption of *Errenzhuan* under the dual pressures of economic success and ideological censorship.

### Possible Clean Tripe?

In 2009, *Errenzhuan* star Little Shenyang was invited to Jiangsu provincial TV studio for a live interview. It was chaired by nationally renowned female presenter Zhao Danjun. During the recording, Xiao Shenyang addressed Zhao as 'stinky shameless one' (*chou buyaoliande*), which amidst *Errenzhuan* coarse language is only a mild tease, similar to the English expression of 'piss off'. However, to utter such a phrase to a female TV presenter, in a public

sphere with millions viewing, was perceived by Zhao as a serious insult. Zhao demanded an apology and when it was not delivered, she walked out of the recording studio and the show was cancelled. The story did not finish there. Through social media, the story was twittered across the nation and interestingly, most netizens showed support to Little Shenyang. The phrase ‘stinky shameless one’ became an instant popular youth expression nationwide (Chongqing News 2009).

The CCP may have favoured *Errenzhuan* in early 2000s as positive folk culture for soft power insertion, but from the mid-2010s the attitude began to change. By 2012 China’s Internet users soared to the top in the world followed by the United States (Global Internet Report 2016). 45.8% of the total population of Internet users in China are youth (CNNIC 2016, Lei 2011, DeBell and Chapman 2006). There is increasing concern over regulating public media use and much talk of internet security (Jing 2014, Cheung 2009). Whilst traditional *Errenzhuan* used to have a mid-night or ‘red light’ time and location restriction and the new millennium television and theatre *Errenzhuan* or *Errenxiu* performances could be regulated, internet surfers had more freedom in selecting their preferred clips for viewing. It was the sketches with the most explicit sexual dialogue that became the most widely downloaded and viewed, often by audiences who are curious about what *Errenzhuan* was and its associated reputation of ‘a pint of tripe’. Although humour’s subversive quality may not be able to overturn a social system (Westwood 2004: 11), *Errenzhuan*’s nationwide popularity, associated with grotesque image and sexual language, and wide internet accessibility, caused increasing uneasiness amongst CCP promoters of ideological direction and national identity building (Li 2010). Mounting scrutiny was placed on *Errenzhuan*, focusing on training schools and theatres (Zheng 2014, Zhang 2013). We hear the following from the Director of a Shenyang *Errenzhuan* School:

‘*Errenzhuan* schools nowadays forbid students to learn any sexual related jokes – no matter how mild they may be. There is a female *Errenzhuan* performer, famous for saying rude jokes. Yes, she

was extremely popular in theatre circles, but she did not last long. Why? Once she was invited to Jilin TV studio to record a performance and it was never shown. There were far too many dirty jokes. Following on from that, she hardly had any invitations for stage performance. No theatre wants any trouble from the government' (Private communication, anonymous 20<sup>th</sup> January 2015).

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

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

Despite this submission, the turning point had finally arrived. In late 2014, Zhao Benshan, the representative figure of *Errenzhuan*, having served for a decade as a member of the National People's Congress was not invited to attend Xi Jinping's *Speech on Literature and*

*Arts* at Beijing. In February 2015, after twenty-one years of consecutive performance, Zhao Benshan did not appear in the CCTV New Year Gala. There has since been very little media exposure of *Errenzhuan* and related entertainment forms, as if the entire entertainment industry disappeared overnight (South China Morning Post 2015). Westwood vividly described how the power of folk humour and its subversive qualities cannot always be managed (2004: 775). However, with the Chinese party-state's role as the 'central bank', any form of cultural industry can fall as fast as it was allowed to rise. The evolution of *Errenzhuan* highlights the distinction of the Chinese art market, which is developed under the dual pressures of economic success as well as ideological censorship, for the continued articulation of CCP legitimacy.

### Conclusion

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

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

Laughter is indispensable in balancing the totalitarian rule, to act as the safety valve for the very existence of the official institution.

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

The new millennium's media and cultural industries have brought *Errenzhuan*, this folk art form, new opportunities as well as new challenges. With Xi Jinping's emphasis of the artists role 'to serve the mass and the Party', artists and art forms will continue to negotiate their space for survival between the gaps of economic and ideological censorship. This paper provides a glimpse of the conditions of the Chinese cultural market, which is developed under economic pressure as well as CCP ideologically directed monopolization. The party-state's ability to regulate the market, despite the industry's extreme market success, exemplifies the power of the Chinese party state 'central bank', which monopolizes the art market for the continued articulation and legitimacy of the CCP.

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