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Piracy Cultures

From D-Buffs to the D-Generation: Piracy, Cinema, and an Alternative Public Sphere in Urban China[1]

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China's rampant movie piracy has given rise to an alternative film culture. Through the viral infrastructure of pirate circulation and consumption, an active cineaste culture of "D-buffs" and an independent film practice, the "D-generation," have rapidly emerged and expanded in urban China. This essay's examination of the D-buff subculture and the D-generation movement shows that this alternative, pirate film culture has opened up precious space for an alternative public sphere to develop counter to the hegemonic pseudo-public controlled by state censorship and commercial industries. By organizing spectatorship and filmmaking through the shadow system of piracy, this alternative public sphere provides an inclusive, heterogeneous, and non-controllable social horizon for organizing collective experience and identities.

In December 2009, China launched a dramatic antipiracy campaign, shutting down countless file-sharing portals and websites, raiding video stores, and removing piracy-related online communities from the Internet. These recent changes are part of China's growing effort to suppress, regulate, or at least normalize this otherwise uncontrollable underground domain, which had previously operated largely outside China's heavily regulated cultural system. More importantly, this push to suppress piracy coincided with an uptick in the Chinese government's efforts to tighten its control over information circulation—especially on digital platforms—most notably manifest in its recent intensification of Internet censorship. The coincidence between piracy regulation and information censorship highlights a "hidden" but significant

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function of media piracy in China: its role as an alternative, underground channel for cultural circulation and consumption that can evade state control and censorship. In a country infamous for information suppression, such an alternative cultural space is particularly important and even subversive.

This essay focuses on the particular function of piracy as an alternative space of cultural circulation and consumption in urban China. Owing to the dominant public discourse that criminalizes piracy as theft, piracy's significant potential as an alternative information-distribution channel has largely been ignored. But now, as various levels of state censorship and corporate control loom over the freedom of cultural access on a global scale, it is time to reexamine the thin line between what is legally unacceptable and what is politically viable. As an unruly shadow system outside the state-controlled cultural institutions, Chinese piracy provides an ideal case through which to examine the potential of piracy as an underground channel distributing information and meanings that would otherwise be censored or suppressed. Recent studies on piracy have tended to focus on its defiance of the uneven distribution of global-media capital (Larkin, 2004; Pang, 2006; Sundaram, 2010; S. Wang, 2003), leaving its struggle against state media control relatively untouched. Therefore, in this essay I will examine the particular sociocultural function of piracy in contemporary China in order to shed new light on the cultural and political viability of piracy despite its controversial legal and economic status. By conducting empirical studies on the *cultural uses* of film piracy, as well as on the social *organization of its users* in urban China, I hope to identify the ways in which the viral infrastructure of pirate cinema enables an alternative space for organizing the production, circulation, and consumption of information and meanings outside the state's tight cultural control. Such an alternative cultural space established through piracy, I demonstrate, is identifiable in the unique cultural phenomena of the "*D-buffs*" and the "*D-generation*."

During the heyday of China's disc piracy, there emerged a distinctive subculture of pirate consumers who self-identified as "disc buffs" (*Die-you*) or simply "D-buffs" (D-*you*)—"D" refers to both "disc" (*die*) and "piracy" (*daoban*).[2] Defined by their collective behavior of passionately consuming pirated movie discs, D-buffs are devoted pirate collectors whose leisure lives are largely shaped by the social and cultural organization of piracy. More importantly, the collective experience of D-buffs in urban China has given rise to a vibrant cineaste culture creating cinematic forms and practices that present an alternative to the hegemony of commercial film industries and state censorship. This alternative film culture, launched by a new generation of filmmakers that I identify as the "D-generation" ("D" for "digital"), is increasingly dynamic and far-reaching. Marked by their collective experience of digital consumption and digital video (DV) production, this new generation's experience with digital content is largely filtered through piracy. It is these parallel digital and pirated experiences that have provided the D-generation with the building blocks to creatively negotiate an alternative space of cinematic production, circulation, and consumption. Therefore, my investigation of the rise of the D-buff subculture and the D-generation movement aims to trace the creation of this alternative space of cinema in urban China and explore how this alternative, digital, pirate space may potentially challenge the dominant, celluloid, censorious space of Chinese film institutions.

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[2] The letter "D" refers to multiple meanings in the Chinese context—disc, DVD, digital, 3D, download—but most commonly it means *daoban* (piracy). Because China's Internet censorship often makes *daoban* a sensitive word, D-buffs refer to piracy as "*D-ban*" (D-version) to avoid censorship.

This pirate cinema space, I further argue, may testify to the possibility of an *alternative public sphere* under a political regime that appears to be fundamentally against the notion of an autonomous "public." In post-Socialist China, which remains an authoritarian state despite its capitalism-oriented economic reform, any effort seeking to locate an "authentic" public sphere of bourgeois civil society seems to be problematic. The dramatic crackdown on the Tiananmen democratic movement in 1989 led many to doubt even the possibility of Chinese society developing a genuine public sphere (Chamberlain, 1993; Huang, 1993; Wakeman, 1993). However, as Deborah Davis has suggested, looking beyond the restriction of politically institutionalized public activities can reveal many "alternative locations of and pathways to structural change" made possible by the increasing sociality of Chinese people mobilized by the flourishing mass consumption in urban China (2000, p. 21). Cinema may well be one of these "alternative locations." This brings to mind Miriam Hansen's broader conceptualization of the public sphere (Hansen, 1983, 1994). Hansen's notion of the public aspect of cinema points to the sociocultural organization of pirate circulation and consumption, and to the possibilities of an alternative public sphere that may arise from the distinct relations between cinematic representation and reception. If, as Hansen suggests (1994), a shift in cinematic spectatorship is often intertwined with the transformation of a public sphere, then is it possible to imagine an alternative public sphere made up of the shadow spectator community organized by the viral infrastructure of piracy? And in China's case particularly, would such an alternative public sphere be able to disturb the existing power structure and status quo in the tightly controlled sociocultural landscape?

To tackle these questions, I conducted extensive field research on the cultural and material life of film piracy in Beijing, China. In addition to collecting primary materials from archives, governmental agencies, and the Internet, I conducted in-depth interviews with 25 subjects in Beijing, including filmmakers, producers, and distributors; video-store owners and pirate DVD vendors; film scholars and journalists; film school students and professors; and self-proclaimed D-buffs. These interviews provide detailed accounts of how piracy culture is practiced and organized in urban China. I also made friends with many D-buffs and went with them to visit video stores and secret vendors in Beijing, gaining firsthand experience of life as a D-buff. To gather quantitative data, I conducted an online survey among average piracy users regarding their usage of, and attitudes toward, pirated products, which yielded 316 effective responses. These empirical data yield a vivid picture of how piracy constitutes the very material fabric of these Chinese consumers' cultural life, which gives them an alternative space to negotiate with various levels of national and global cultural hegemony.

From Seams and Fissures: A Brief History of Chinese Piracy

Piracy in the so-called post-Socialist China dates back to the early 1980s, when China was just beginning its wholesale economic reforms. Owing to uneven reform of the publishing industry, it was the books and periodicals market that sustained the first major wave of piracy (Zhiqiang Zhang, 2005). Although private businesses were now allowed, they had to collaborate with state-run publishers to obtain government permits for any publications. This partial privatization led to profound disparities between the commercialized cultural market and the state's tight control over content. The imbalance marked a particular contradiction in China's economic reform, which capitalizes on a free-market economy while maintaining strong authoritarian political control. Such a contradiction inevitably created a widening gap between growing consumer demand and a limited content supply, leaving a cultural void and market

space for piracy to fill—first with books and periodicals and then with optical recordings of music and films. Since the late 1990s, optical recordings of audio/video (A/V) materials have been the fastest-growing sector of China's pirate market. According to official data on the government's confiscated pirated materials (from which I estimate the size of the piracy industry), the number of pirated A/V discs grew by a factor of almost 100 from 1998 to 2005, with film and music piracy making up the largest share of the pirate market in China (Figure 1).

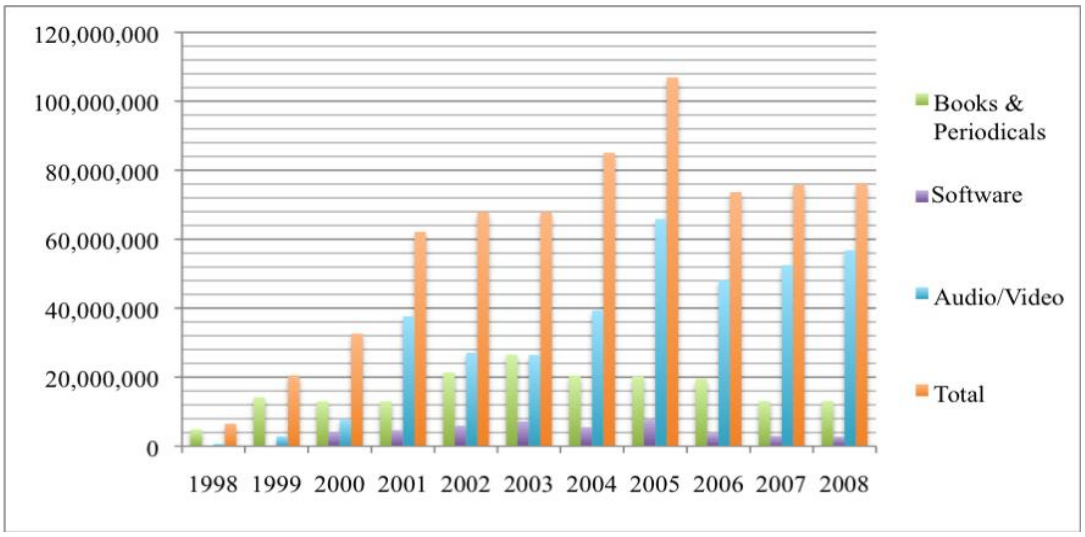

Figure 1. Pirate Products Confiscated by the Chinese Government, 1998–2008 *(in pieces).*
Data Source: State Intellectual Property Office of PRC, *Chongguo Zhishi Chanquan Nianjian* (*China Intellectual Property Yearbook*), 2000–2008. Beijing: Intellectual Property Press.

This golden age of Chinese disc piracy—from 1998 to 2005—coincided with the dramatic transformation of Chinese film institutions. While the national economy was souring in the 1990s, the film industry suffered rapid decay, and annual movie admissions fell to half the level of the previous decade (Tang, 2006). A series of industrial reforms were launched in 1993 to combat these difficulties, and the Chinese film industry started a structural overhaul toward marketization and commercialization (Tang, 2006; Zhu, 2003). Despite these efforts, the market failed to revive and became increasingly dependent on imported blockbusters (Tang, 2006). By the end of the 1990s, Chinese cinema—at least in its theatrical form—had lost its attraction as mass entertainment. Although the film market made gains after 2002, this "lost decade" of mainstream Chinese cinema left an important space in which alternative film cultures, including piracy and independent films, could develop. This trajectory finds a parallel in the early American cinema of the nickelodeon era, when competing modes of representation and reception during an unstable transition eventually gave rise to an alternative public sphere (Hansen 1994). The internal contradictions of China's economic reform caused such disjunction and unevenness in the transitioning hegemonic Chinese film institutions that alternative cinema was able to gain momentum. In the seams and fissures of the transforming Chinese film institutions, piracy developed its vibrant social and cultural life.

The "D-Buff" Community: A Cineaste Culture Built on Pirate Consumption

A cineaste culture emerged when pirated videos first appeared in China in the late 1990s, and its development and maturation have gone hand in hand with the boom in Chinese piracy. In the first wave, a series of small cinephile clubs were founded in response to the sudden availability of a broad range of films acquired through digital piracy. Before the existence of piracy, film access was extremely limited in China due to strong censorship and the tight quota system. Elite institutes such as the Beijing Film Academy and the China Film Archive offered only limited access to certain art-film collections. But piracy changed everything. When films such as Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959) and Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983) were "introduced" to Chinese audiences through piracy, a cinephile community sprang forth and quickly expanded. Small-scale screenings organized in bars, cafes, and bookstores developed into various cineaste clubs in major cities. The Beijing-based Practice Society (Shi Jian She) was one of the earliest and most influential clubs. Founded in April 2000, it quickly attracted hundreds of members who gathered for weekly screenings and distributed bootleg VCDs made cheaply on home computers (Figure 2). Besides foreign classics, the club also screened the works of emerging independent Chinese filmmakers, many of whom were club members themselves. As indicated by the club's name, Practice Society emphasized film aesthetics as much as it did filmmaking practices. The club organized workshops and panels and published its own journal (Figure 2) to initiate discussion on how to explore alternative forms of independent filmmaking. Other cineaste clubs, such as 101 Workshop and U-theque, founded in Shanghai and Guangzhou, organized film screenings and filmmaking in much the same way.

These cineaste communities soon spawned an active film circle that nurtured a new generation of directors, screenwriters, and film critics, including Du Haibin, Zhu Chuanming, Wang Fen, Wang Liren, Ou Ning, Cao Fei, and Zhang Xianmin. This cinephile/filmmaker circle formed the backbone of the so-called "urban generation," celebrated by Zhang Zhen as the foundation of "a 'minor' and 'nomadic' film culture that engages both the margins and the center" in urban China (2007, p. 31). The creation of this "minor" and "nomadic" cinema relied largely on the technological availability of digital piracy, which was then still in the early VCD format. This piracy-cinephile connection was explicitly pronounced by a famous film critic and blogger who called himself "wei-xi-di," a homophone for "VCD" in Chinese. As Zhang Zhen comments, "It is significant that the revival of a cinephile culture in China is in large part made possible by the 'primitive' or 'pirated' form of postmodern technology of the VCD" (2007, p. 27). Indeed, in traversing from piracy consumption to film production these early cineaste clubs witnessed the birth of an alternative film culture in China.

Figure 2. **A Publication (*Touchfilm: Practice Handbook*) and a Bootleg VCD** (*Old Man*, dir. Yang Tianyi, 2001). Circulated in Practice Society (Beijing).

With the rapid boom in the pirate market and the spread of cyber technologies, the early cineaste clubs quickly transformed into a different organizational form, moving from the physical space of bars and cafes to the virtual space of the Internet. It was during this Internet stage that the term "D-buff" was first coined among pirate consumers. Unlike movie buffs, D-buffs are not only passionate about films but also fervently devoted to collecting huge libraries of high-quality DVDs, most of which are pirated. In many cases, D-buffs' knowledge of and passion for cinema have developed largely from their enthusiastic consumption of pirated discs. Also identified as "fever hobbyists" (*fa shao you*), D-buffs take their cue from hi-fi enthusiasts of the past and are often extremely selective regarding the technical specs in their DVD collections. They never collect *qiangban* (DVDs made from camcorder-recorded videos in theaters); nor do they tolerate D-5s (single-layered DVDs). Only D-9s (double-layered DVDs) that are printed from high-quality originals (e.g., legitimate DVDs released overseas) are collectible. Not only are D-buffs knowledgeable about film history, genres, and auteurs; they are also very sensitive to technical distinctions such as different regional releases, different prints, and bonus features. For example, a young D-buff named Ma Wei told me that he had bought many pirated versions of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, but the one he ultimately kept in his library was a pirated copy of the "classic collection" of *Seven Samurai* released by the Criterion Collection (interview with Ma Wei).[3] The process whereby D-buffs search for the most collectible DVDs of a certain film and discard the less satisfying ones is called "disc laundering" (*xi die*). This practice of continuously searching for the "best" is arguably the most addictive part of being a D-buff. Even with the recent rise of Internet piracy, hardcore D-buffs still refuse to give up their old hobby. In Ma's own words, downloading or watching a film online "is simply too effortless to enjoy" (interview).

The challenging, time-consuming, yet enjoyable and additive experience of collecting and "laundering" pirated products quickly became a popular subculture among urban consumers, whose

[3] A Beijing-based journalist, Ma is currently a senior writer for *Zongyi Weekly*.

increasing income and leisure time enabled them to afford extensive piracy consumption as a hobby. As a distinctive urban group, D-buffs established a unique subculture identity and community through their active consumption of piracy. The collective identity and experience of this D-buff subculture is probably best characterized in a famous online article posted by a veteran D-buff. It details the different "levels" a D-buff must pass through to become truly hardcore, from Level 1, the "silly kid" who blindly purchases whatever is available on the pirate market, all the way up to Level 5, hailed as a "deity" who, through disc laundering, has gained sufficiently tremendous knowledge about pirated movies to earn stardom in the community and thrill beginners with insightful advice.[4] These levels probably best describe the game-like mentality, as well as the community function, of the D-buff subculture. In fact, the collective practices of exchanging knowledge and experience, as well as of learning and competing throughout these different levels, organize D-buffs into a strong subcultural community, initially via online platforms such as forums and blogs, which then evolve into real-life organizations called "*die you hui*" (D-buff clubs). Almost every major Chinese city has substantial D-buff clubs with thousands of local members who meet regularly to discuss films, the latest releases, and the technical specs of DVD collections. D-buffs have taken advantage of newly flourishing social media in China to further expand their organizations and communities. For instance, at douban.com, a Chinese social network where users are self-organized into interest groups, there are 410 groups of various D-buff clubs, mostly organized by their urban locations: "Beijing D-buff club," "Shanghai D-buff club," "Chengdu D-buff club."[5] The group page for the Shanghai D-buff club at douban.com features threads calling for meetings, gatherings, and disc trading on a weekly basis, and many of these gatherings are organized in Shanghai neighborhoods such as Xujiahui, Pudong, and Jing'an.[6] This indicates that D-buff communities are not just organized in cyberspace but also socialized in the physical spaces of urban neighborhoods.

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[4] "DVD Fashao Dieyou de Wuge Jibie" (Five Levels of Enthusiastic DVD Buffs) (2002). Retrieved from http://ent.163.com/edit/020730/020730_128220.html

[5] Se "die you hui" at douban.com
http://www.douban.com/search?q=%E7%A2%9F%E5%8F%8B%E4%BC%9A&sortby=relevance&start=0

[6] See "Shanghai D-buff Club" at http://www.douban.com/group/dvd

Figure 3. A D-Buff/Filmmaker's Personal Collection of Over 2,000 Pirated DVDs
(not including those thrown away during "disc laundering").

The predominance of piracy has made it affordable to collect and "launder" a huge number of DVDs, but affordability of discs is not the only reason for the extensive, rapid growth of the D-buff subculture in urban China. Significantly, the fact that pirated discs can be consumed as "collectibles" challenges the dominant discourse that often portrays pirated products as cheap, trashy counterfeits. In China, pirated discs may be cheap, but they are certainly not trashy. On the contrary, the Chinese pirate market often offers higher-quality products in a wider variety than its legitimate counterpart. In fact, the surveys I collected suggest that for most D-buffs, the major attraction of pirated DVDs is probably not the price tag but the broader selection of movies and superior audio/visual quality. For instance, among pirate consumers who identified themselves as cineastes, only 22% claimed that price was the main reason for purchasing pirated products, while the majority (74%) listed variety and quality as the determining factors (Table 1).

Table 1. Survey Results: Consumers' Reasons for Purchasing Pirated Discs[7]

Reasons to Purchase Pirated Discs	General Consumers	Cineastes
Cheapness	65%	22%
Variety of Selections	25%	65%
Quality	6%	9%
Other	4%	4%

The biggest advantage of the pirate market is its vast selection of movie titles, most of which are never officially released in China. If D-buffs' passionate practice of disc searching is like treasure hunting, then they have little choice but to resort to the pirate market with its wider variety of cinematic treasure, as the tight state quota and heavy censorship severely limit the legitimate film market by comparison. As one D-buff told me, "What can I buy on the legitimate market? Propagandas and blockbusters? The films I like are only available through piracy" (interview with Zhang Yue).[8] For D-buffs, piracy therefore is not a cheaper alternative to legitimate film consumption but rather the sole source of a large number of films that simply cannot be shown in Chinese movie theaters.[9] For niche products such as documentaries, pirate circulation is even more crucial. According to film scholar Zhang Tongdao, documentary films are virtually absent from the legitimate film market, and their distribution relies on piracy (personal interview with Zhang).[10]

The reasons why piracy can offer a wider selection of movies are mainly political. China's suppressive cultural control is the key to piracy's popularity among urban cineastes. Zhang Ming,[11] a famous independent filmmaker, comments: "The (political) system is the determinant factor. . . . So many films are banned or cannot be imported, and piracy is the only distribution channel for them" (interview). Indeed, as an underground operation, piracy has proven an effective vehicle for evading the state quota and censorship, thus offering a precious "free zone" outside China's tight cultural control.

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[7] The survey, conducted in China via the Internet from October 5 to November 30, 2009, generated 316 effective responses. Of all respondents, 70% are aged 20–29, 94% have college education and 18% have postgraduate degrees, 40% have annual income higher than RMB 50,000 (~USD 7,000), 34% are students, and 17% are self-identified as cineastes.

[8] An emerging independent filmmaker and self-styled D-buff.

[9] This also explains why the D-buff culture has not become a box-office killer in China. Since piracy provides consumers with films other than the ones shown in theaters, it does not directly compete with the box office economically. However, by distributing films that are not legitimately released, piracy poses a cultural and political challenge to the hegemonic Chinese film institutions.

[10] A professor at Beijing Normal University, School of Arts and Communications, Zhang is also a renowned documentary filmmaker.

[11] A sixth-generation independent filmmaker and director of the award-winning films *Rain and Cloud over Wushan* (*Wushan Yun Yu*, 1997) and *Weekend Plot* (*Mi Yu Shiqi Xiaoshi*, 2002), Zhang currently teaches at Beijing Film Academy.

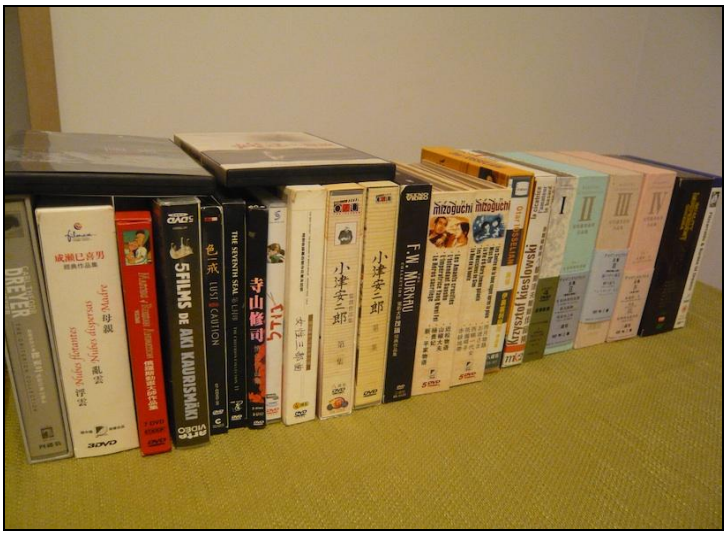

Figure 4. D-Buffs' favorites: Box sets of "masters' collections" released on the Chinese pirate market. These box sets often have beautiful packaging and extensive bonus material. Famous "masters" in this pirate collection include Dreyer, Ozu, Mizoguchi, Mikio Naruse, Murnau, Angelòpoulos, Agnès Varda, and Kieślowski. Most of these art house classics have never been legitimately released in China.

Another significant factor nurturing the D-buff subculture is the viral infrastructure of China's pirate circulation system, which has three major retail platforms: mobile street vendors, corner video stores, and on-call services. The street vendors, though the least stable, are nevertheless the most mobile, ubiquitous, and viral pirate presence and thus the most accessible channel for casual consumers. D-buffs, however, prefer local video stores. They tend to favor particular stores and often are well acquainted with the stores' owners, who frequently inform them about the latest releases or sometimes take them to a warehouse. The third channel—unique to D-buffs who are more "advanced"—is personalized on-call service, which offers home delivery and places clients' custom orders with dealers. These three levels constitute a powerful pirate distribution system that penetrates the consumer base with such dynamism, flexibility, and interactivity that it can be said to exhibit some degree of the "long-tail" characteristics seen in Internet retailing.[12] The viral structure of piracy, indeed, resembles the hypertextuality of the Internet—both are operated as dense networks and are fairly distributed systems. According to Chris Anderson's (2008) long-tail model, the Internet can offer more diverse and niche products that may sell very well in the long run. This is also the case with piracy, where a viral structure allows consumer penetration to such an extent that the industry can venture into small, niche markets (e.g., documentaries or underground cinemas) and still make money. In fact, as Zhang Tongdao asserted, thanks to their density and flexibility, piracy networks "have proved to be most suitable to distribute niche films such as documentaries in China" (interview).

[12] I would like to thank film critic Zhou Liming for inspiring the connection between the "long-tail" theory and piracy.

The energy of Chinese piracy culture relies heavily on dynamic and close interactions between the "long tails" of pirate networks and D-buffs' active searching. The pirate industry often reaches out to D-buff communities to gather information on their needs. Film critic Zhou Liming, for instance, discovered a book he authored was used in pirate circuits as an important reference for communicating with customers (interview with Zhou).[13] D-buffs frequently give feedback to the piracy industry as well. Chen Tao, a former D-buff and recent film school graduate, described his relationship with the pirate circle as "intimate and interactive": he and his classmates often presented pirate dealers with feedback and demands, and his professors would send course syllabi to pirate retailers for the students' convenience (interview with Chen).[14] This dynamic and interactive system structures a vibrant space of film culture in urban China—a multidirectional and hyper-flexible cultural network formed by the viral structure of piracy.

The "D-Generation": An Alternative Cinema from a "Pirate Film School"

Like early cineaste clubs, D-buff communities focus on both film consumption and filmmaking. Their enthusiasm for consuming pirated DVDs causes many D-buffs to become extremely passionate and knowledgeable about cinema, and some have gone on to make films. Examples include Chen Tao and Zhang Yue, whom I interviewed—both started as devoted D-buffs, went to the Beijing Film Academy, and became award-winning independent filmmakers.[15] But the difference between these D-buff filmmakers and their cine-club precursors is the sheer *quantity* of films that became available to them with the rampant development of the pirate market. Zhang Yue, for instance, estimates that he has collected more than 2,000 DVDs, 99% of them pirated. Piracy consumption also accounts for over 90% of his entire film-viewing experience (interview). In fact, piracy provides such extensive opportunity for film collection and interactive cultural networking that it has helped nurture a new generation of filmmakers who learned filmmaking skills largely from China's booming pirate market and the thriving D-buff culture. Here they are called the "D-generation," with "D" not meaning simply *die* (disc) or *daoban* (piracy) but being more representative of "digital." Compared with the previous notion of the "urban generation," which emphasizes the collective experience of China's rapid urbanization (Zhen Zhang, 2007), my concept of the "D-generation" highlights the *technological materiality* of this generation's collective digital practices in both film consumption (digital piracy) and film production (DV filmmaking). Given that the spread of digital technologies is increasingly transforming Chinese urban life into a digital one, the designation "D" is probably most appropriate for describing the collective experience and sensibilities of this emerging group of young filmmakers.[16]

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[13] Zhou is a best-selling author and a journalist at *China Daily*. His film-review book *Discs Among Discs* (*Die Zhong Die*) is a popular movie-guide reference in the D-buff community and the pirate industry.

[14] An emerging independent filmmaker recently graduated from Beijing Film Academy, Chen spent two years collecting pirate DVDs as a D-buff before attending film school.

[15] My interviews with many D-buff/filmmakers elicited stories very similar to Chen's and Zhang's, though some never went to film school.

[16] Zhang Zhen's groundbreaking notion of the "urban generation" mainly pertains to the beginning wave of this alternative film culture, and the filmmakers she characterized belong to a slightly older generation for whom the digital is alluring but still new. The D-buff/filmmakers I interviewed in 2009, however, belong to a younger group that grew up under a much stronger cultural influence of digital technologies. With their

Mostly born in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, these young cinephiles-turned-filmmakers are truly a new generation. Their coming-of-age stories not only parallel China's economic reforms and dramatic transformations in the past decades but also bear witness to Chinese cinema's chaotic transitions in institutions, materiality, and spectatorship. Unlike their famous predecessors, the Chinese fifth- and sixth-generation filmmakers—mainly film school graduates who learned their craft in classrooms and film studios—the new generation has gained its extensive knowledge and versatile skills largely through the avid consumption of pirated DVDs. In fact, many young Chinese filmmakers, including those from film schools, suggested to me that their initial passion and knowledge about films and filmmaking mostly derived from their enthusiastic piracy consumption. In Chen Tao's words, "I learned more from pirate D-9s than from BFA [Beijing Film Academy] classrooms" (interview). Probably as a consequence of that, D-generation filmmakers are much less institutionalized or unified and thus appear to lack the collective voice of the fifth and sixth generations. However, unlike their festival-savvy forerunners, the D-generation is less concerned with a unified agenda than with the versatility and multitude of styles and sensibilities, which mirror the diversity and breadth of their pirated collections. Some among the D-generation are involved in commercial and genre filmmaking and are now riding the waves of the newly revived film market (such as Ning Hao, the poster child of new commercial cinema in China). Most others (e.g., Zhang Yue, Chen Tao, Huang Weikai, Ying Liang, and Weng Shouming), however, express their artistic aspirations and sensibilities variously through low-budget, independent, and even amateur modes of filmmaking. Their social backgrounds are also marked by diversity: although D-buffs and the D-generation are largely urban youngsters, there are those who are rural immigrants, and some are even from the lowest social rungs. For instance, Xiao Ou (a pseudonym), an amateur DV filmmaker I met in Beijing, is an immigrant from a small provincial village. Before picking up the camera, he was a pirate vendor, and he gained his knowledge of cinema largely from the pirated DVDs he was selling.[17] Indeed, except for their collective experience of learning the art and their skills from China's abundant pirate cinema, members of this D-generation seem to share few common traits. They are as unruly and diverse as the pirate market with which they grew up.

In spite of its wide range of different styles, sensibilities, and backgrounds, the D-generation is nevertheless united by its collective preference for digital filmmaking. The eye-catching market boom of digital piracy in the late 1990s coincided with the introduction of DV camcorders to urban China. Thanks to their affordability, portability, and user-friendly interface, DV camcorders quickly became the most popular device among amateurs and professionals alike and sparked a wave of DV filmmaking in China. These DV enthusiasts also overlap with the D-buff community, which has long been a wired and technically informed group due to its daily consumption habits involving extensive digital usage. Since the early cine-club days, pirate consumption and DV filmmaking have been organized together. Practice Society emphasizes a hands-on approach to cinema, and most of its workshops and discussions concern ways to explore newly emerging techniques of DV filmmaking to create alternative forms of cinema. It was Practice Society

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high degree of immersion in digital piracy and DV filmmaking, I believe these younger filmmakers deserve their own generational term to characterize their collective experience of the digital materiality.

[17] I was introduced to Xiao Ou through several filmmakers. He had been arrested twice for illegal pirate dealing. He is currently writing a film script with the help of a former customer who is also a D-buff/filmmaker.

devotees who organized the DV filmmakers' group DV Documentary Team, many of whose members, such as Du Haibin, Zhu Chuanming, and Wang Liren, later became influential documentary filmmakers. In the city of Guangzhou, artists Ou Ning and Cai Fei literally transformed their cineaste club, U-theque, into a DV production team and collectively made the internationally acclaimed experimental documentary *San Yuan Li* (2003). The later D-buff communities certainly followed the lead of these early cine-club pioneers. As early as 2000, when a prototype D-buff club was formed in Wuhan, its members traveled all the way to Beijing to learn from their fellow cineastes how to branch out from VCD screenings to DV filming (Zhen Zhang, 2007, p. 30). However, today's D-buff communities mostly forgo the physical gatherings of early cineaste clubs and instead organize their DV practice in cyberspace. "DV filmmaking" is a central category on many D-buff websites, blogs, and forums, where D-buffs not only discuss their own DV works and experiences but also organize DV productions. For instance, a Beijing D-buff posted on his neighborhood social network that he sought other D-buffs to make DV films with;[18] another D-buff in Hangzhou posted a message on a local D-buff forum looking for actors for his DV film. Yang Fudong, a world-famous video artist, once used a Shanghai D-buff forum to recruit crews for his video-art project.[19]

From early cineaste clubs to later D-buff communities, the D-generation cinephile-filmmakers formed the backbone of China's flourishing DV movement, whose tangible, freestyle, grassroots approach to filmmaking has produced an alternative film culture—a "minor cinema," in Zhang Zhen's words (2007). Much has been written about this "minor cinema," especially on its independent spirit and amateur styles (Berry, Xinyu, & Rofel, 2010; Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006; Y. Wang, 2005; Y. Zhang, 2004; Zhen Zhang, 2007). However, the close connection between the development of this alternative cinema and China's rampant piracy culture is largely overlooked. In fact, piracy was a significant factor in the development of this new generation of filmmakers and the "new wave" of filmmaking. In his interview with Esther Cheung (2007), Ou Ning, a famous filmmaker, artist, and founder of an early cineaste club, explicitly points out piracy's importance in Chinese independent cinema. He claims that the piracy culture "represents a kind of democratization of film" in China and "played a significant role in establishing the independent film culture" (Cheung, 2007). Indeed, as they both emerged as grassroots cultural movements, piracy and DV cinema formed a strong symbiosis in the coming-of-age experience of the D-generation. This experience has also become the creative inspiration of D-generation filmmakers such as Huang Weikai, whose current DV film project, entitled *Documentary* (*Ji Lu Pian*), tells the story of a pirate DVD seller who spends most of his time bragging about films to cinephile customers with whom he eventually makes a DV documentary (interview with Huang).[20] Huang's fictional story, which may be inspired by his own personal experience, represents the collective identity of the D-generation, whose cinematic practices combine digital piracy and DV filmmaking. As a building block of the D-generation's alternative film culture, piracy

[18] The same D-buff also suggested opening a DVD store together in order to make enough money for filmmaking. See http://bbs.hlgnet.com/info/u4_1308674

[19] See "Yang Fudong luxiang zhuangzhi 'Jiangjun de Weixiao' zhaomu zhiyuanzhe—Shanghai" (Yang Fudong video installation "General's Smile" looking for volunteer crews—Shanghai. (April 11, 2009). Douban.com. Retrieved from http://www.douban.com/group/topic/6008677

[20] Internationally acclaimed DV filmmaker Huang's experimental documentary *Disorder* (*Xianshi Shi Guoqu de Weilai*, 2009) won numerous international awards and garnered rave reviews after screenings in New York and Chicago.

is thus an important cultural element in Chinese cinema. As Professor Zhang Tongdao comments, "The pirate market helped to develop the Chinese film culture by nurturing a new generation of filmmakers . . . who grew up watching pirate movies. They may be the future of Chinese cinema" (interview). Piracy helps nurture this new generation of filmmakers in main two ways: first, it functions as a unique "pirate film school" by offering a vast collection of films that are otherwise unavailable in China; second, it provides a crucial distribution channel for independent and alternative cinemas that are mostly banned by state censorship.

For decades, Chinese film education remained highly exclusive, and the Beijing Film Academy, an institute for elites, was the only legitimate film school in the entire country. This education system was dramatically challenged by piracy. Not only did the pirate market introduce a wide variety of films that had never been seen in China, but the accessibility, affordability, and diversity of its products also helped democratize film education to a large degree. As Ou Ning puts it:

> [Before,] only privileged people in the film archive and the Beijing Film Academy could have access to the unofficially released films. But nowadays, every household can get hold of a VCD/DVD player very easily. With the DV medium and pirated VCDs and DVDs, the cost of understanding films is lowered and we have a very energetic film culture here in the PRC. (Cheung, 2007)

Furthermore, the D-buff community has become a vibrant classroom where many D-generation filmmakers learn from their fellow D-buffs. These alternative classrooms have reshaped Chinese film education. As Professor Zhang Tongdao indicated: "All my students started from pirate movies, and some are even more knowledgeable than me because they have more time and energy for piracy consumption . . . [The hierarchy of] film education is reversed" (interview). As DV technology made filmmaking less costly, piracy made film education no longer lofty. Precisely because both DV and piracy made film study and practice into concurrent grassroots movements, a dynamic group of filmmakers with diverse social and cultural backgrounds formed the D-generation.

Besides its function as a film school, the pirate market also provides the emerging D-generation with an important platform for distributing its works, which otherwise would never be able to reach a large audience. As a shadow system evading the authority of censorship, the pirate industry has long served as a powerful circulation channel for Chinese independent films produced outside the state-controlled film institutions. The successful release of director Zhang Ming's low-budget independent film *Rain and Cloud Over Wushan* (*Wushan Yunyu*, 1997) on the pirate market set an early example. The pirate industry quickly recognized independent cinema as a valuable content source and soon released a wave of independent films. As Zhang Ming himself puts it, "Piracy at least made the industry realize that these [independent] films have an audience and a market" (interview). The popularity of *Wushan* also influenced a broad range of filmmakers and audiences, who suddenly began to see the pirate market as a viable platform for distributing and consuming alternative cinemas. Piracy's underground nature, moreover, makes it an ideal channel for distributing banned independent anticensorship films. Li Yang's internationally acclaimed film *Blind Shaft* (*Mang Jing*, 2003), which won the Silver Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival but was banned in China, was a smash hit on the pirate market and sold millions of copies

(interview with Li).[21] In fact, according to many industry insiders, the "banned film" label is often a big selling point on the pirate market because these films are rarely available elsewhere—piracy is the *only* distribution channel for censored cinemas, in most cases.

Meanwhile, the viral infrastructure of piracy, with the density, ubiquity, and flexibility of its "long tails," has proven a suitable channel for distributing alternative cinemas that target only a niche audience. As film critic Hu Yuan puts it, "The intensity of circulation through piracy is far more effective. . . . Piracy can reach every common person" (Cheung, 2007). The efficacy of this distribution circuit has helped raise the profile of numerous unknown, independent, and minor filmmakers of the D-generation, including Zhang Lv, Wong Shouming, and Ying Liang, who got their minimalist, semi-amateur DV works distributed through the pirate market. Although the unlikely alliance between piracy and independent cinema is no honeymoon (many filmmakers have complained about the exploitative nature of the pirate industry), independent filmmakers still generally appreciate that pirate circulations offer them a crucial opportunity to reach a wider audience that would otherwise never be able to enjoy their works. As director Li Yang puts it,

> As a producer and filmmaker, I lost a lot of potential profit [to piracy], but I felt that I contributed more to the society, because my film [*Blind Shaft*], after being distributed by piracy, was seen by many and provoked them to think about the social problems I depicted. (Interview)

This desire to be "seen by many" also encourages some D-generation filmmakers to actively seek pirate releases of their own films. Zhang Yue, one of the D-buff filmmakers I interviewed, expressed willingness to send his films through this alternative distribution channel: "With such exposure, I don't mind [being pirated]; I will even try to find pirate producers myself to get my films pirated" (interview). In fact, filmmakers like Zhang Yue sometimes find it exciting to see their own films on the pirate market: "We take it as a pride or accomplishment. . . . It means your films have some fame and value, otherwise they wouldn't get pirated" (interview with Zhang).

[21] Li is an independent Chinese filmmaker and the director of the award-winning films *Blind Shaft* (*Mang Jing*, 2003) and *Blind Mountain* (*Mang Shan*, 2007).

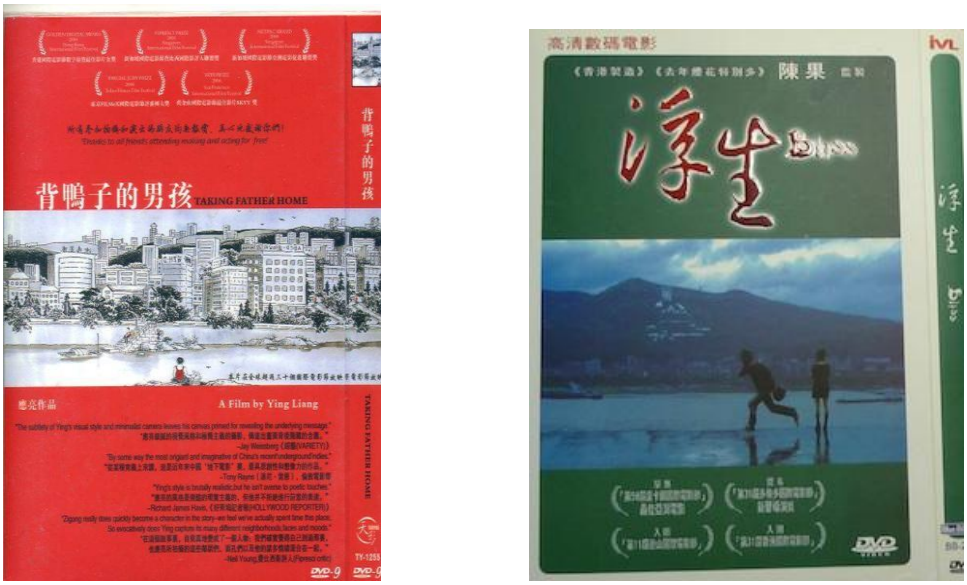

Figure 5. Pirate DVDs of the D-Generation's DV Films.
Left: *Taking Father Home* (*Bei Yazi de Nanhai*, 2006), dir. Ying Liang.
Right: *Bliss* (*Fu Sheng*, 2006), dir. Sheng Zhimin.

In sum, the D-generation filmmakers, facilitated by the wide-ranging and dynamic viral circulation system of piracy, have managed to build an alternative yet far-reaching film culture in China. Through it, audiences are exposed to a different voice outside the government's tight cultural control. In the words of director Zhang Ming:

> Piracy is a necessary stage for independent cinema, especially in a country like China. . . . Not only because it has lower cost and less risk, but also because it is outside the censorship system. Piracy provides the crucial first step to make these [independent] films available and known to the audience. (Interview)

Pirate Film Culture: An Alternative Public Sphere in Urban China

Laikwan Pang once argued that the widespread consumption of pirated films had transformed Chinese cinema from a collective public event to a private one and thus shattered cinema's political function of collective articulation (Pang, 2004). This notion, however, seems to be challenged by the collective identity and practices of the D-buffs and the D-generation, who demonstrate a substantial degree of public engagement. It thus inspires me to reexamine the public-pirate dynamics of cinema in a wider context of changing media spectatorship. Pang's observation of a public-to-private transformation of Chinese cinema assumes that it is public film screenings that fundamentally define the political position of

cinema (2004, p. 113). Pang's notion of "public screening," in fact, largely echoes the classical model of the bourgeois public sphere conceptualized by Habermas (1991), which emphasizes face-to-face communication. However, this bourgeois-liberal model's dialectic between public and private simply unravels in today's context of mass media, which has transformed communication into individualized and mediated consumption. This is especially true for cinema, whose spectatorship has increasingly been changed—by home videos, computers, and the Internet—into a technical act of private reception.

To solve this problem, Miriam Hansen seeks a more complex and inclusive definition of "public" (Hansen, 1983, 1993, 1994). Borrowing from Negt and Kluge's critique and expansion of Habermas's concept, Hansen argues that instead of a pseudo-autonomous bourgeois public sphere, the notion of "public" should be understood as a "social horizon of experience" and conceptualized as "a mixture of competing modes of organizing experience," thus becoming "a potentially volatile *process*" (Hansen, 1993, p. 205). Based on this notion, Hansen locates an alternative public sphere of early American cinema in the space of "seams and fissures" created by film institutions in transition (1994). This public sphere of cinema as a "social horizon of experience" is formed not simply by the act of public screening but rather by the relations between films and spectators. Therefore, to conceptualize an alternative public sphere of cinema means "envisioning alternative media products and an alternative organization of the relations of representation and reception" (Hansen, 1993, p. 208). Hansen's much-broadened conceptualization of the public sphere enables us to look at the public aspect of Chinese cinema beyond the notion of public screenings. Pang is certainly right that Chinese cinema's highly regulated mode of public exhibition and reception has been in decline, which has weakened cinematic institutions as the dominant public sphere.[22] However, the decline of ideologically controlled publicity does not necessarily lead to a complete privatization of Chinese cinema. On the contrary, it is precisely the temporary weakening of the hegemonic pseudo-public—which masquerades as *the* public sphere of unified "Chineseness"—that has produced an alternative organization of public life that is more inclusive, diverse, and unruly. In Hansen's words, "It is in the seams and fissures between uneven institutions of public life that alternative alignments can emerge and gain a momentum of their own" (1993, p. 205). This is exactly the case with Chinese piracy. No longer pretending to be a collective articulation of pseudo-unified "Chineseness," this largely diversified and heterogeneous "social horizon of experience," in fact, is no less "public" than the hegemonic forms of Chinese cinema.

If an alternative public sphere structured by pirate cinema is possible, then where can it be located? Since piracy largely operates in the realms of film distribution and consumption, its potential hinges on its alternative mode of organizing film spectatorship. Like pre-classical cinema in the nickelodeon era, film consumption through piracy fashions a much less regulated spectatorship. No longer governed by the schedules or locations of film theaters, spectators now have much greater freedom to

[22] Pang's notion did not take account of the recent market revival of Chinese mainstream cinema. However, her argument is still largely valid because the recent market success was less about the revival of a hegemonic public sphere of unified "Chineseness" than the transformation of Chinese cinema into commercial-industrial publicity. That being said, the recent release of several high-profile Chinese propaganda movies—together with the recent spread of neo-nationalism—does suggest that nationalist discourse has returned with the rise of Chinese economic power.

determine the time and space of their own film viewings. This nondisciplined spectatorship, however, does not dictate that film consumption be a completely private act. Instead, the piracy-mediated, uncontrollable spectatorship introduces different relations between representation and reception, functioning "as a catalyst for new forms of community and solidarity" (Hansen, 1993, p. 208). The D-buff subculture may well be one such new form of community. From early cineaste clubs to today's online forums, D-buffs have formed an intimate, dynamic, and interactive community network. This community is built upon the collective experience of piracy consumption, which involves active communication among fellow D-buffs as well as dynamic interaction with piracy circuits. The community aspect of pirate spectatorship is especially visible when an unknown independent film "goes viral" among D-buffs and mushrooms into a sudden hit on the pirate market, as in the unexpected success of *Rain and Cloud over Wushan*.

Although D-buffs are mainly young, urban, middle-class consumers, the public function of this community, I argue, is not simply determined by its statistical demographic composition. As Hansen suggests, the meaning of the public horizon of film spectatorship should instead be examined "in terms of multiple and conflicting identities and constituencies" (1993, p. 208). In fact, given its affordability, accessibility, and diversity, piracy offers a much wider and inclusive cinematic spectatorship than the hegemonic form of theatrical screenings, which are not only heavily regulated but also overpriced. The urban poor and rural immigrants, who are socially and economically excluded from the newly built luxury multiplexes in urban China, now have access to a wide variety of cinemas via the pirate circuit and its communities. He Jiangjun's gloomy and sensual film *Pirated Copy* (*Man Yan*, 2004), which depicts an immigrant pirate dealer's passionate and destructive encounter with both Godard's cinema and a female film scholar, offers a symbolic yet realistic portrayal of such "conflicting identities and constituencies" in the organization of pirate spectatorship in urban China.

The accumulated diversity of identities resulting from the inclusiveness of pirate spectatorship also foregrounds some of the most marginalized groups, including the shadow communities of gays and lesbians, who have long been suppressed in mainstream Chinese media. One illuminating case is that of the surprising success of Gu Changwei's film *And the Spring Comes* (*Lichun*, 2007) on the pirate market. The film, which failed at the box office, nevertheless found an unexpected cult following—largely through pirated DVDs and P2P downloads—among gay communities, which not only constantly organized group screenings of the film but also frequently made reference to the film in their internal communications. Although the film is not explicitly about gay culture, its huge following among homosexual communities demonstrates how spectators creatively use the public/private dialectics of piracy consumption to negotiate collective marginal identities that are heavily suppressed by the hegemonic public. Such is the function of an alternative public sphere: as a "social horizon of experience" to articulate the unspeakable.

Alongside its community function of organizing spectatorship, piracy wields another viable political weapon: its effectiveness at creating cultural "leaks" to counter censorship. Pirate distribution and consumption of censored independent films, which often were banned because of their realistic social and political critiques, highlight the political function of this alternative public sphere as an underground information-circulation channel. As pointed out by director Li Yang:

> For Chinese people to learn about the social realities of China and the world, piracy has important cultural and political meanings. Because we are in a nondemocratic country where information is highly censored and tightly controlled, piracy becomes a very crucial channel for Chinese people to obtain information. (Interview)

Zhang Ming describes the pirate distribution system as a revival of the "hand-copy culture" that flourished in underground China in the 1960s and 1970s during the high political pressure of the Cultural Revolution (interview). The analogy between pirated movies in the digital age and the hand-copied books of Mao's era not only underlines the political nature of an alternative cultural system reacting against authoritarianism (or totalitarianism) but also emphasizes the peer-to-peer communication model of piracy, which is important for creating a politically viable public experience. This "hand-copy" culture, now technologically upgraded to digital reproduction, has proven to be even more vital in today's China, where mounting sociopolitical tensions have engendered a growing wave of civil activism. For instance, Ai Weiwei's politically challenging documentary *Disturbing the Peace* (*Laoma Tihua*, 2009), after being censored on the Chinese Internet, was distributed mainly through bootlegged DVDs.

The D-buff community is actively defending its "hand-copy culture" and voicing its political rights to public cultural access in the face of governmental suppression. In 2009, when the Chinese government launched an overwhelming antipiracy campaign, angry D-buffs staged a "virtual demonstration" on the Internet, mourning the loss of an important portal of cultural access. Their exercise of political rights as pirate consumers highlights the ongoing struggle between public access and corporate/state restrictions. However, the political struggle of piracy, as Lawrence Liang (2011) points out, remains silenced in Western debates about public access. This silence, according to Liang, indicates the normative bourgeois public's fundamental uneasiness about piracy and thus highlights the nature of the "pirate public" as a suppressed "other." In China, the pressures and suppression are twofold: the alternative public—piracy—is running against both authoritarian, political control of information access and corporate ownership of copyrights. Nevertheless, as Hansen suggests (1993, 1994), it is often in the negative determinations of being suppressed, isolated, or assimilated that an alternative public sphere manifests its critical potential and utopian edge. Therefore, the recently intensified antipiracy efforts in China, collaboratively launched by the Chinese government and the global media industry, may indeed be the best indication of the political potential of the alternative public sphere that has developed through piracy's unruly organization of cultural distribution and consumption.

My discussion of the possibility of an alternative public sphere in piracy culture has so far focused on questions of spectatorship. However, piracy's important role in developing an alternative cinema suggests that political potential may also be found on the production side. Discussion is growing about the public meanings of the D-generation's alternative, minor cinema—its inclusiveness of a large body of amateur filmmakers from diverse social backgrounds; its edgy, critical, and challenging subjects; and its active engagement with social and political realities (Berry et al., 2010; Y. Wang, 2005; Y. Zhang, 2004). As Zhang Zhen suggests (2007), its collective cinematic practices have indeed formed an alternative public sphere countering both the uniformity of the "official" Chinese cinema and the hegemony of global Hollywood. This public sphere, I further argue, is collectively claimed by both the D-generation filmmakers and their fellow D-buffs. Together, the D-buffs and the D-generation "are coming forward to embody a

new century of image making and social, cultural, and political imagination" (Zhen Zhang, 2007, p. 35). These new forms of image making and imagination, conditioned by the unruly structure of piracy, have fashioned an alternative mode of organizing social experience and enabled the creation of a seemingly impossible public sphere in China—one that is radically different from the official, hegemonic public. Although this pirate cultural system does not really challenge the fundamental political economy of domestic or global media capital—after all, piracy is just another side (albeit the underground side) of the same market economy—piracy's sociopolitical function as an alternative horizon of public experience may still gain its own momentum. And this alternative public sphere may not be unique to China at all. Instead, it may point to a radical new meaning of "public" born of a global cultural movement marked by a profound transformation of cultural representation and reception in the digital age, from multiplexes to BitTorrent, from global Hollywood to YouTube, from CNN to WikiLeaks . . .

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