International Journal of Communication 13(2019), 4722–4737 1932–8036/20190005

"I'd Rather Be the Ferryman in the Gold Rush": The Television Drama Production Industry in Post-2008 China

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This article examines the post-financial-crisis development of Chinese television (especially the television drama production sector) by focusing on the changing industrial structure and how industry professionals have negotiated careers and exploited opportunities within this changing sector. It begins with a brief history of Chinese television, focusing on its development within the context of "cultural system reform" in the 2000s. It then discusses the massive capitalization of television drama production around 2010 as domestic private equity funds flooded into the field. The article concludes with a description of how two different generations of television industry professionals with unique histories made their careers in an ever-changing industrial terrain.

Keywords: television drama, decentralization, financialization, market subjectivity, China

Popular culture is the culminating institution through which the Chinese party-state maintains its hegemony in Chinese society, and television is one of the most important forms of this culture. The immediate and defining feature of Chinese television is certainly its peculiar political economy and representations that effectively reflect that power structure. To be specific, like many other media sectors, in the context of marketization, the once state-subsidized television sector has been increasingly commercialized, liberalized, and even privatized to some extent to both increase its capacity and audience appeal. The production of less ideologically oriented programs such as entertainment shows and television dramas, for example, has nowadays mostly been managed by domestic private production companies. However, unlike many postsocialist countries where market logic quickly eroded the power of the state and turned mass media such as television into a new engine of economic growth, the party-state in China continued to maintain its ideological grip over media and culture (Pang, 2012). Even in the case of television dramas and entertainment programs, the state managed to effectively police private productions through various mechanisms such as postproduction and predistribution censorship. The state monopolization of

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Date submitted: 2018–11–24

[1] Several industry practitioners I spoke with mentioned a story about the gold rush that was widely circulated in China, especially in best-selling books teaching people how to become successful. The ferryman in the story, instead of profiting from mining gold directly, makes money by sending miners across the river for a fee. My informants regarded the ferryman's wisdom as a desirable entrepreneurial trait in finding niche markets.

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distribution outlets (i.e., state television stations) constituted another major mechanism through which production of soft entertainments, although pushed to the market, was still effectively politicized. A lot of scholarship has addressed this peculiar political economy in Chinese television—marketization on the one hand and ideological indoctrination on the other—and its outcomes (Bai, 2014; Fung, 2009; Fung & Zhang, 2011; Li, 2013; Sun, 2009; Zhang & Fung, 2014; Zhu, 2008). Ruoyun Bai (2014) effectively calls this condition a disjunctive media order in postsocialist China.

Important as this research is, however, relatively few studies to date have examined Chinese television as an industry, especially its industrial development after 2008. Building on his research examining formats and creative industries, Michael Keane (2015) argues that there has to be a different way of understanding Chinese television, a way that moves beyond its political role and looks at its internal workings, changes, and workforce in the context of markets. This article answers this call by focusing on the post-financial-crisis development of Chinese television, especially the television drama production sector, which is the frontier of marketization in television. It begins with a brief history of Chinese television, focusing on its development since the 2000s, and moves to discuss the rapid expansion of the television drama production sector around 2008, especially its financialization. The article concludes with a description of how two different generations of television industry professionals with unique histories made their careers in an ever-changing industrial terrain.

This article combines various methods, including participant observation of trade festivals (the 13th Beijing Television Program Market and Exhibition in March 2014 and the 20th Shanghai Television Festival in June 2014), interviews with industry professionals, and documentary research. It takes a cultural approach that considers the lived experiences of people involved in media production as the subject for theorizing contemporary media industries (Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009). While I talked with a diverse group of people from the television industry for this research, the article particularly focuses on two industry practitioners, Han and Wei, who are from different generations and positions in the industry and are negotiating their survival in a rapidly changing cultural market in their own ways. They live with the promises and opportunities that cultural system reform has brought about and also the disillusionment and frustration that ensues. Their rich experience in the industry adds to our understanding of the changing industrial structure, work patterns, and entrepreneurship of China’s television sector. As a way of triangulation, the interview materials were validated by looking at data obtained in other ways, such as documentary research and critical studies of trade festivals. I assessed these materials critically, moving back and forth between and among different sources to keep them “in critical tension or dialogue with the others” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 4). The fieldwork for this article was undertaken up to 2014, which potentially presents one limitation of the overall findings that I will discuss in the conclusion.

Chinese Television in the 2000s

The development of Chinese television since the late 1970s could be considered as going through a process of decentralization, recentralization, and re-decentralization. Before the reform, the television broadcasting service in China was centralized at the national and provincial levels, with Chinese Central Television (CCTV) being the only national broadcaster and each province having one television station of its own (Zhao, 2008). As the reform took off and unfolded in the cultural realm, by the early to mid-1980s, many state media and cultural units, which had been completely subsidized by the state, gradually ceased to enjoy government subsidies and were forced to rely on themselves for profits (Baranovitch, 2003). Advertising, sponsorship, and other forms of business operations became an important source of income (Zhao, 1998).

The expansion of market relations in television brought about a proliferation of television stations and channels, and this commercially driven process of decentralization was further enabled by the development of new television technologies, notably the rapid growth of cable and satellite television (Bai, 2014). The multiplication of stations and channels throughout the 1990s brought about an immediate, surging demand for content, especially entertainment-oriented programs that would appeal to large audiences. By the late 1990s, many television dramas and other entertainment programs had been outsourced to and produced by private production companies, which at the time were not officially acknowledged because Chinese media was not as liberalized as it became a decade later (Bai, 2014; Shao, personal communication, April 21, 2014).

Market-oriented restructuring in those years led to significant decentralization and fragmentation in the state media sector. As a response, beginning in the mid-1990s, the government began to launch a campaign advocating media conglomeration to recentralize and manage the unintended consequences of media marketization and to prepare for Western competition after China joined the World Trade Organization, or WTO (Chan, 2004; Lee, 2003; Zhao, 2008). Hunan province, for example, created the Hunan Broadcasting, Film and TV Group, the first provincial-level broadcasting conglomerate in the country in 2000, which subsumed under its single control channels previously operated by different television stations (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television [SARFT], 2002). However, as Chin-Chuan Lee (2003) notes, the media conglomeration was organized by "administrative fiat," resulting in bureaucratic competition, inefficiency, duplication, and waste (p. 10). A more sweeping, systematic program of "cultural system reform" intervened to provide a new policy framework for accelerating the restructuring of the media and culture sector in the early 2000s and also for building a stronger national media and culture to combat foreign media upon China's entry into the WTO (Keane, 2013; Zhao, 2008).

A central theme of cultural reform this time around has been a more radical separation of media functions that serve public/political interests and entail state subsidies from those that are less pertinent to political/public interests and could be more readily exploited as commodities. The former led to a category that may be awkwardly translated as "public-interest-oriented cultural undertakings" (*wenhua shiye*), which were protected from market relations,[2] and the latter became "cultural industries" (*wenhua chanye*), which were circumspectly opened to varying degrees of marketization (Zhao, 2008). This distinction allows the state to pursue its core interests in the cultural realm while at the same time serving as a powerful discursive basis for inviting market forces to reengineer state media.

With this dual operation in broadcasting, while those newly created conglomerates remained public-interest-oriented entities, business operations such as advertising and the production of less ideologically oriented programs such as television dramas were identified as cultural industries, spun off the group, and

[2]. There are many translations of *wenhua shiye* in existing scholarship. For example, Michael Keane (2013) translates it to "publicly funded cultural institutions." Elizabeth Perry (2013) translates it to "cultural undertakings." The version used here is borrowed from Yuezhi Zhao (2008).

turned into shareholding companies, absorbing state capital from nonmedia sectors, domestic private capital, and in some cases even foreign capital, provided that the state owned a controlling interest (State Council, 2005; Zhao, 2008).

Private capital was not only encouraged in the restructuring of state broadcasting groups but also allowed to establish purely private production companies. Unlike in the previous decades when private capital, while existing in the cultural realm, generally did not enjoy official status, these investments were permitted to a larger extent and conferred many advantages, the most important of which was legitimacy. In August 2003 and June 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), the regulator of television in China, twice issued a long-term television drama production permit to twenty-four private companies, sending a strong political message to formalize the position of private capital. By 2005, there were more than 2,000 private companies of various sizes across the country, and they accounted for about 80% of the total investment in television drama production (SARFT Development and Research Center, 2006).

In 2009, the State Council, the highest organ of state administration in China to which ministries like SARFT report, announced the *Plan to Revitalize Cultural Industries* (*Wenhua chanye zhenxing guihua*), which brought cultural reform to new heights. The plan proposed two substantial moves. First, it rearticulated the need to set up bailout funds (such as discount loans, project subsidies, and capital injection) to develop cultural industries at the levels of both central and local governments. In this context, the government announced the establishment of the China Cultural Industry Investment Fund jointly led by the Ministry of Finance, major state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and key state-owned cultural units. Second, the plan encouraged banks and financial institutions to lend active support to the cultural industry and called on guarantee and re-guarantee agencies to come up with new instruments and services oriented to the industry. With these moves, cultural enterprises, both state controlled and privately owned, were encouraged to launch domestic IPOs.

It is in this climate that local governments accelerated the development of cultural industries, nurturing promising local enterprises and consciously pushing them into the stock market. The Zhejiang Huace Film and Television Company (henceforth Huace), a major private studio from Zhejiang province and also the first listed stock in television drama production, for instance, was precisely a key object of local government support since the Zhejiang bureau of SARFT was determined to intensify cultural reform within its jurisdiction. Wei, a former project manager at Huace, recalled a lunch he had with a retired deputy director of the Zhejiang bureau of SARFT:

> In that lunch, he [the official] told us that they at the time wanted to take three cultural enterprises to the stock market, Huace, Huayi Brothers [film], and Zhongnan Cartoon. . . . So the government was quite consciously pushing it [the IPO launch]. Of course, personal [corporate] willingness was also a factor. But in China, like many things, while it appears to be a personal [corporate] matter, it turns out to have deep connections with the government. (Wei, personal communication, April 20, 2014)[3]

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[3]. In this article, I use aliases instead of the real names of my informants to provide anonymity.

Wei's recollection was reconfirmed by an official source. In the press conference held by the Zhejiang bureau of SARFT in 2010, its spokesman reviewed the broadcasting reform in Zhejiang and said:

> In recent years, the Zhejiang provincial SARFT nurtured a group of influential private film/television production companies including Great Wall, Huace, Zhongnan Cartoon. . . . It supported and facilitated Huayi Brothers' stock market launch. . . . Now it is supporting Huace, Great Wall, and Zhejiang Time Cinema to launch IPOs. (SARFT, 2010)

Unlike the trend of decentralization in the previous two decades, which was mainly pushed forwarded by advertisers, the process of re-decentralization in the 2000s was facilitated by the expansion of domestic private capital, and local administration further accelerated that process. Both processes were certainly first and foremost constituted by the state. Accompanying an increasingly decentralized and flexible industrial structure were slippery labor practices—in other words, the rise of freelance, casual labor. For example, after working for a few employers, including Changcheng and Huace, Wei embarked on his own career as an independent screenwriter and has contracted projects from production companies. Experienced producers also began to establish their own studios, and production companies now hire them on a project-by-project basis. A network of subcontracted studios and individuals arose as a result, which makes the industry appear further decentralized, open, and dispersed.

It should be noted here that alongside the increasingly decentralized industry was the delegation of central power to local authorities; in the case of television, it was to the local SARFT bureaus. This delegation of authority was part of the national administrative and legal reform between 1998 and 2003, which aimed to rationalize governance through a withdrawal of direct intervention while simultaneously retaining political authority (Chin, 2011). This was necessary because decades of media reform had given rise to self-interested provincial media and other corporate entities outside the state sector (but still intricately related to it), which made it imperative for ministries like SARFT to decentralize power and invite local bureaus to participate in cultural governance. Moreover, the explosion of private television drama production companies and the consequent considerable growth of drama outputs made it practically difficult, if not impossible, for SARFT to handle censorship centrally, making the decentralization of power essential. The delegation of administrative powers did not necessarily create more space for provincial governments to participate in national policy making, but it did allow them to practice greater discretion in policy implementation (Chin, 2011).

Financialization of Chinese Television Drama Production

Huace's public listing, supported by the government, seemed to mark a newer stage of cultural reform in television. It showed investors the lucrative prospect of television drama production and inspired many to join, leading to the large-scale expansion of the sector, or "the savage growth," as Wei called it. Cultural production was indeed a high-risk but high-reward proposition. As Wei summarized it:

> The rate of profit is astonishing. For those well-performing companies, they can make profits in one cycle of production within one year, and the profit rate is more than 100%, which is unimaginable elsewhere. . . . For businessmen, the interest rate of money stashed

> in banks is low. Even the interest rate of usury is only about 20%. (Wei, personal communication, April 20, 2014)

Hot money began to pour into the field in the late 2000s. Meanwhile, as the impact of the global financial crisis was felt across many sectors of the economy, companies and individuals began to withhold or withdraw other investments and turn to the cultural market. By late 2010, the field of television drama production had already amassed large investments from industries such as real estate, energy, and manufacturing. These companies and individuals invested in single projects, and profits were distributed to them as dividends. Wei entered the industry right at the moment of this ferocious growth spurt. His first job was in the Great Wall Film and Television Company (Changcheng), another long-established company in Zhejiang province. As he recalled, "Immediately after I entered the company in 2009, I felt its expansion. One could feel that it was swelling every day."

Inspired by Huace's listing, interest in investing in stocks instead of in single projects also began to grow. Wei experienced that kind of fever in Changcheng as well: "People from commercial banks and various financial institutions visited the company every day. They were less interested in investing in single projects than in buying shares. They wanted to make another listed company." Of particular interest were the private equity funds (PE funds), mainly RMB funds (Renminbi private equity and venture capital funds registered in China), which invested in and incubated film, television, and cultural production companies and culminated in IPOs, mergers, and other outlets. For example, the Zheshang Venture Capital, which invested in Huace, received its payout when Huace successfully entered the stock market. This kind of operation differed from investing in single projects and was the major path for most PE funds to get into the field (Hu, 2010). In 2012, there were 22 instances of PE investment with a total amount of $212 million. Among them, iFirst Capital (*yingfeng chuangtou*), DT Capital (*detong ziben*), Ray Stone Capital (*leishi touzi*), and Seven String Investment jointly invested more than $30 million into Hairun Film and Television, one of the largest television production companies in China and a hot IPO hopeful. These investors waited to receive their payouts when Hairun successfully entered the stock market. The China Cultural Industry Investment Fund, the first Chinese government-backed PE fund, invested nearly $30 million into Huan Rui Century Media, another strong market player (Chen, 2013).

This surge of investment came to a halt in October 2012 when the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC) imposed the eighth moratorium on IPOs since 1994. As there were hundreds of companies lining up for listing, and the schedule for reopening the IPO market was unclear, PE-backed IPO hopefuls turned to second choices for exit strategies, which triggered a wave of mergers and acquisitions (Su, 2013). For example, in 2013, the Huayi Brothers spent ¥252 million in acquiring a 70% stake in the Zhejiang Changsheng Film and Television Production Company controlled by Zhang Guoli, a renowned actor and director in China. Flower Film and Television (*hua'er yingshi*), an award-winning production studio, was sold to LeTV for ¥1.6 billion. Huace fully acquired Croton Media (*kedun chuanmei*), a Shanghai-based television production company, for ¥1.65 billion (Chi, 2013). Some companies also turned to backdoor listing. For example, Changcheng merged with Jiangsu Hongbao, a listed hardware manufacturing company, in a backdoor listing in 2013. Those companies under pressure from possible PE fund withdrawals experienced a circumscribed capital flow and were more likely to choose a quick and effective backdoor listing instead of waiting for the IPO market to reopen (Su, 2013). As Changcheng went through the process of backdoor listing, the eight PE funds hidden behind it, all aggressive investment funds, came into public view. With the success of the listing, their initial investment of ¥77 million ballooned to ¥842 million (Yao, 2013).

Hot money flocking into the field drove up the production cost of television dramas and their selling price (to state television stations) considerably. In the early 2000s, it took an average of ¥3 million (about $400,000) to make a serial, depending on the genre (Han, personal communication, June 10 and 11, 2014). That number would increase 10 times over the next decade. In 2008, the budget for the 43-episode *My Chief and My Regiment* (*wo de tuanzhang wo de tuan*), one of the most popular dramas produced at the time, reached nearly ¥40 million. Its first-run rights were sold for a record of ¥1 million per episode, making it the most expensive serial to date. Because of the exorbitant price, four satellite television channels had to collectively buy the rights and reach an agreement on the schedule to air (Pan, 2008). Performers' salaries were the biggest single element in production costs. Money spent on performers' salaries commonly accounted for at least half and in some rare cases two-thirds of the total production costs (Wei, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Nevertheless, state television stations/channels, especially provincial satellite television, which was increasingly enriched by advertising revenue in the 2000s, were still able to buy into those expensive productions. In fact, to some extent, it was the ongoing commercialization of state television stations/channels and their growing buying power that both assured the unprecedented amount of interest in television drama production and contributed to a steady—and in recent years sharp—increase in the production budgets of television serials. Buying programs per se, a common institutional practice for state television nowadays, was a product of commercialization. Commercial slots were not as expensive in the 1980s and early 1990s as they are today. It was then common practice for television stations to trade commercial breaks within the show schedule (*suipian guanggao*) in exchange for the productions of domestic private content providers, who then solicited advertisers (usually through advertising firms) for themselves (Keane, 2013; Shao, personal communication, April 21, 2014). This was one of the reasons that in the early days, advertising firms were a major force in producing television dramas because they were the ones who sold ad space. Eventually, the bartering model in program purchase was replaced by a monetary exchange as commercial slots became more valuable with the accelerated process of commercialization.

In 2004, the tremendous commercial success of the talent show *Super Girl* (similar to *American Idol*), produced by Hunan Satellite Television, ushered in a decade's worth of cutthroat competition for audiences and advertising revenues among television channels with national reach, including CCTV and provincial satellite television, especially those in the first tier. Since then, the commercialization of state television stations/channels has accelerated at an unprecedented rate. The trend was directly reflected in their soaring advertising revenues. The years 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006, and 2007 are usually considered benchmark years in the growth of television advertising revenue in China, during which television stations/channels' advertising performance increased exponentially. In those years, advertising expenditures on television programming respectively reached ¥11.4 billion, ¥23.1 billion, ¥35.5 billion, ¥40.4 billion, and ¥60 billion. The growth rate peaked at about 49% in 2007, then slowed down in 2008 and 2009 due to factors such as the global financial crisis, but quickly recovered following the revival of the global economy (Cui, 2011). In the first half of 2011, television advertising revenue reached ¥46 billion with a growth rate of about 22% compared with the corresponding period of the previous year (Cui, 2012). In

2012, this number climbed to ¥130 billion, growing at an annual rate of about 16% (Cui, 2013). The increasingly rich television stations/channels, which now had more buying power, inevitably focused on acquiring quality dramas. Indeed, as Bai (2014) notes, television drama has become the dominant and most important television genre in generating advertising income for most channels.

It was this exploding environment—the television stations/channels on the one hand and the aggressive private investment on the other hand—that pushed up the production cost of Chinese television dramas. In this context, Wei believed that cultural production had been reduced to a game of capital. He sighed: "It is such an age, an age of crazy capital market. If the changes I felt in those years at Changcheng were just early signs of this trend, now it is just crazy. It shows no signs of retreat" (Wei, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

"I'd Rather Be the Ferryman in the Gold Rush."

—Wei, television drama producer and screenwriter

The television industry in China, characterized by an overinvestment in production, is difficult terrain in which to maneuver. Market subjectivity is fostered among industry professionals as they strive to become active, successful, and entrepreneurial subjects. Han is one of the people who is adaptable enough to survive in this environment. We first met in March 2014 at the trade fair in Beijing and again in June of that year at the television festival in Shanghai. Han was in his 50s and appeared slightly out of place at trade fairs populated by young people in their 20s and 30s. However, his ruddy complexion, loud voice, energetic manner, and great willingness to talk to people all belied his age. Han came into television drama production in the late 1990s from the periphery of the cultural industries. He was working in the advertising and marketing department of one of the largest state-owned pharmaceutical companies in China. After years of effort, the pharmaceutical industry had finally been successful in lobbying the government for over-the-counter (OTC) drug advertising. Han's job was mostly to plan and place OTC drug advertisements on television, mainly CCTV. At the time, the advertising budget for the Cydiodine Buccal tablet (*huasu pian*) was about ¥100 million (about $12 million). As an all-in package, the drug company paid CCTV both to produce the commercial for them and to arrange the ad placement. In practice, however, CCTV appropriated some of that money to produce television dramas. As Han commented:

> Television drama was not expensive to make at that time. One drama cost only about two to three million. . . . It was really easy to get two to three million out of it [the budget]. . . . The production of the commercial only took a little time, probably just overnight. But they [CCTV] said it took two months to produce and another two months to air. In these four months, they used the money to produce a television drama. (Han, personal communication, June 10 and 11, 2014)

In return, the drug company received the pre-roll ad slot when the drama aired. What was created by CCTV here was a mixed operation of sponsorship and advertisement, and the benefit to Han from this arrangement included free trips to filming locations, an introduction to the field of television drama production, and possibly even kickbacks.

Han witnessed the spinning off and corporatization of production units that had been affiliated to state television stations. By the mid-2000s, it was obvious that the state was promoting the development of cultural industries. Meanwhile, the "golden age" of the pharmaceutical industry was coming to an end. In this context, Han turned to the more promising creative and cultural industries, and he leveraged his experience in marketing, advertising, and media planning to gain a foothold in this field. At the same time, he did not resign from the pharmaceutical company. Apparently, he wanted both the security of the state system and the benefits of the market economy without entirely exposing himself to the precarity the latter might entail. As an incumbent SOE employee, Han was not allowed to register private production companies. To work around this problem, he used an alias. Han is a calculating, creative, and resourceful agent, able to identify opportunities and challenges, which allows him to survive and succeed in both the state and market systems.

Han first began to operate a production company with his business partners in Beijing. That company, however, was later abandoned because of its unclear invoices, a chaotic tax situation, and various lax practices that prevented it from growing into a larger business. After that, Han and his business partners registered production companies in a few places, including Shanghai, Xi'an (the capital of Shaanxi province), and Haining (a county-level city in Zhejiang province), all of which were project based. Those places were selected because of advantageous circumstances such as policy favors, tax breaks, or previously established relationships with local SARFT bureaus and television stations. Han's most recently managed and invested project was based in Xi'an through a locally registered production company. For this project, the Shaanxi Culture Industry Investment Group (SCG), a state-owned investment fund established by the Shaanxi provincial government in 2009, was willing to offer a ¥10 million (about $1,250,000) loan to the project provided it was run by a local company. Han's team thus registered the production company in the SCG-invested special cultural zone in the province's capital city, Xi'an, in 2011. The company, alongside two of its joint producers, eventually raised ¥40 million (about $5 million) from various sources, including bank loans. Part of the money was said to have come from one of the officials from the local television station/channel that eventually broadcast the show.

Han's companies probably represent the development trajectory of a majority of players in the industry. Bai (2014) describes them as mostly very small, producing no more than one drama serial in one or two years. This was how Han operated at the beginning. He and his business partners started with personal funds, so it took a few years before they saved enough money to produce a drama serial. At that time, given the low production costs, Han was still able to manage his projects using his own money. Since then, the expansion of the industry has made this earlier model unsustainable. The Xi'an model, as he termed it, was a specific response to skyrocketing production costs, which, compared with earlier small-scale, workshop-style operations, required a greater ability to organize resources and operate projects. The new model was a success. However, in an industry increasingly favoring big companies, even this new model had increasing challenges. Han reflected on his decade in the industry in this way:

> It comes to a point where we cannot afford the investment again. When the production cost rose from 2 to 3 million to 40 million, I partnered with others. Now we cannot afford the investment even through partnerships. . . . Times have changed. (Han, personal communication, June 10 and 11, 2014)

If Han had not been able to push his company onto the stock market, he might have had to forever repeat the process of making a project every one or two years and using the money earned to make the next project. But even this process had become difficult.

Having identified limits and opportunities brought about by shifts in the market, Han turned to another business. His new business aimed to provide complete services from company registration to financial assistance to newcomers in the industry. Han aptly referred to his new business as “the whole value chain service,” where he made profits through charging service fees and annual membership fees. Han’s main product was his knowledge of an industry with many opaque rules not immediately known to outsiders. As he had done for himself, in his new business Han compared regional policies to find his clients the most favorable terms, registered companies for them, and provided subsequent financial support (e.g., taxes, invoicing) and other consultation services. Upgrading urban China’s entrepreneurial features was an integral part of the cultural system reform, with cultural and creative industry clusters carved out by local governments to attract capital and professionals (Keane, 2013; Zheng, 2011). In this context, the nature of Han’s new business venture could be understood as a broker between willing cultural entrepreneurs and local governments in which he encouraged his clients to register businesses with cultural and creative industry clusters. These locally incubated cultural enterprises could then be counted as local governments’ political achievements.

Han was cynical about the corrupt system, but that did not seem to dampen his enthusiasm in profiting from it. He was a businessman, and what he cared about most was locating the potential market. Despite the setbacks in television drama production, Han firmly believed the creative and cultural industry would remain the new engine of China’s economy for the next decade. At the Shanghai television festival, while he was promoting his new business, he was also, as he put it, “feeling the market”—that is, identifying new developments to adjust his services accordingly. As we walked out of the exhibition hall on the last day of the trade fair in Shanghai, Han said that he would remain in the industry. But, as soon his new business became stabilized, He would withdraw from investing in television drama production. In his anticipation of the future, I saw an unusual combination of optimism and pragmatism.

His most recent base was in Yongkang, a county-level city in Zhejiang province. The local government hired him because of his reputable record in other cities. He partnered with the Yongkang government in early 2014, and by the time of our conversation in June of that year, he had reportedly introduced more than 50 clients to the local government. As Han saw it at the time, Yongkang probably provided the best policy environment. It did not require an operational site (i.e., office), local employees, or other concessions from newly established companies. In Han’s words, his clients only “need to carry a company registration certificate in their briefcase.” They were what Han referred to as a “briefcase company” (*pibao gongsi*), which he considered an advanced business model because of its flexibility. To justify his transition, he more than once referred to a story about the California gold rush that has been widely circulated and recycled in China, especially in self-help books teaching business success. Many of these popular books tout successful entrepreneurial and management experience from advanced capitalist countries—above all, the United States. The ferryman in the story, instead of directly profiting from mining gold, makes money by taking miners across the river for a fee. While this story is likely apocryphal and does not figure largely in popular discourse about the historical events in the West, the ferryman’s wisdom impressed Han and others who were looking to find niche markets. Han reinterpreted the story to me in this way:

> Other people rush to mine the gold, but I will just help them cross the river. Other people exploit mines, but I will just sell them shovels. If I can make money from selling shovels, why should I go for mines? This is the most primitive U.S. model, isn't it? (Han, personal communication, June 10 and 11, 2014)

Many of Han's traits—his calculation, creativity, and pragmatism—were shared by Wei. As a digital video (DV) and film lover in college, he entered the field in late 2009 after taking a circuitous career path, working in an advertising agency for a few months and as a freelance producer for over a year. Wei first worked as a producer at Changcheng and then as a project manager at Huace. Although Wei only managed to make a short, amateur digital film at school before he began his career in the industry, lacking the appropriate professional background did not seem to have been a significant disadvantage to him. Wei's example shows the low threshold of the industry, especially after its rapid expansion. As Wei recalled, when he entered Changcheng, the company only had a few dozen staff, most of whom were making documentaries. It was in desperate need of new employees. Wei's success despite his lack of media education and training also evidences his resourcefulness as a fast learner, which paved the way for his later maneuvers in the system.

At Huace, despite his lack of experience, Wei got involved in the revision of a project script and did a decent job, which indicates a certain native ability. After that, unforeseen circumstances in which the script for another project was not ready after its launch resulted in Wei's appointment as an understudy to the original screenwriter because of his previous experience in screenwriting, however brief. Wei stepped into the role and wrote the script during shooting, working effectively in spite of the immensely challenging situation. As he commented:

> That was due to my previous working experience. I worked as a producer, so I know how television crews and shooting works. I had directing experience, so I know how to manage a team. I know exactly how what I write would look like when it is put into shooting . . . so the scripts I sent out were very accurate. I sent them [scenes] out two days before the actual shooting. Everything was pushed forward smoothly. (Wei, personal communication, April 20, 2014)

The drama was aired on two terrestrial television stations, establishing Wei's credentials as a screenwriter. After this incident, Wei came to realize the scarcity of screenwriters/scripts in the industry. As he observed, "scarce resources are always worth money." Meanwhile, Huace was slowly transforming itself into a project investment and management company, acquiring projects from outside instead of taking on original script incubation. Wei was not against this model. In fact, compared with Changcheng's in-house operations, he believed Huace represented a more modern, scientific way of development because it could free its founders, allowing them to engage in high-level operations such as financing and thus to create more value. However, Wei clearly knew that investment was not a game for low-ranking professionals like himself. To survive in the industry, he needed to develop real, professional skills that could make him competitive and indispensable.

Wei also referred to the story of the California gold rush that Han invoked. As Wei elaborated:

> The situation now is very much like the gold rush moment in LA. Very few people could actually find gold, and currently I don't have the ability to mine gold. . . . But I can ferry people across the river and make money from it. Once I accumulate to a certain number of points, I can bargain with people. I can [invest] and operate [projects]. . . . [One] must find opportunities amid changes. (Wei, personal communication, April 20, 2014)

Interestingly, two different generations of industry practitioners, Wei and Han, turned to a similar strategy in navigating the increasingly capitalized production sector. Identifying both the limit of career development at Huace and opportunities emerging beyond it, Wei decided to leave Huace and embarked on his career as a freelance screenwriter in 2013. In his words, it was a "well-considered decision" made with the same alertness and calculation that had informed his previous decision to leave Changcheng. When Changcheng embarked on the production of numerous projects simultaneously to build a record for its public listing, Wei immediately sensed it was veering out of control. For better personal development, he moved to Huace.

Wei knew himself well. He described himself this way: "I am evaluative, able to shift identities according to situations." In fact, while he had been a freelance screenwriter for only a short time when we had our conversation, he had already developed new ideas about possible future development. Most recently, he contracted projects from production companies and confirmed the plot and content of each episode with them. After that, he created scene-by-scene outlines for each episode and delegated the writing of them to his less-established freelance collaborators to fill in the content. In this way, he shortened the time for writing a script from about seven months to three or four without, he believed, compromising the quality. Wei was happy with his model and planned to expand it. Part of that plan included looking for someone who could replace his own role in the whole process. If that succeeded, Wei said: "I could further free myself." What inspired him here echoes the same logic of capital that inspired the development of Huace.

Clearly, Wei's practices were informed by a conception of culture/scripts as standard products that can be mechanically assembled like an automobile. Elsewhere in our conversation, he described the screenwriter as unfeeling—"a factory, a machine." He was fully aware of the cutthroat commercialism prevailing in the industry and was even deprecatory of the trend. He admired those old-generation screenwriters who spent years developing and revising a script. Wei used to think that his field involved, in his words, "artistic creation." However, these idealist sentiments did not hinder his market-oriented pursuits. Such is the peculiar paradox marking both Wei's and Han's lives in the industry.

Conclusion

Chinese television studies fermented as a subfield of Chinese communications and media studies from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. Given the prominent political role of television in China, research along this line understandably emphasizes its ideology and narrative forms. The amount of interest in Chinese television seems to have gradually dissipated since the mid-2000s. In my view, two factors account for this change. First, although there have been dazzling new developments in Chinese television, from its program innovations to corporate proliferation, its fundamental political economy remains unchanged, and this has been sufficiently addressed in existing scholarship. The state regulatory apparatuses still override capital in the television sector, which renders television largely a political and moral medium. Second, the digital transformation of Chinese television and, more recent and important, new developments such as online video streaming have diverted attention away from the traditional industry.

This article calls for a renewed interest in Chinese television by examining the post-financial-crisis development of Chinese television (especially the television drama production sector) and how those changes affected people working in the industry. The production industry went through a process of privatization and decentralization in the 2000s as the program of "cultural system reform" unfolded, and the industry experienced a rapid influx of capital around 2010 as domestic private equity funds flooded into the field. The massive capitalization of television drama production did not necessarily lead to monopolization, but it did result in a power structure that favored big capital and excluded small productions. Prominent production studios now appeared more and more like investment and project management companies, leaving small studios and individuals perpetually searching niche markets in the ever-shifting industry. However, as I mentioned at the beginning of the article, the research of this article was undertaken up to 2014, so the experience of industry professionals and their subjectivities described here should be understood in that particular industrial context before 2014.

The political economy of Chinese television has continued to change after 2014, and these changes may bring about new challenges as well as opportunities for people working in the industry. Here, I briefly consider two issues for future research. Overproduction was one of the most immediate consequences of the rapid influx of private capital into television drama production and its financialization. It is estimated that only about one-third of all television drama episodes had the potential to make it to state television, and only 10% to 15% of them had profit potential (Han, personal communication, March 31, 2014; Shao, personal communication, April 21, 2014). Overproduction—alongside the inflation of production cost and financialization—raised concerns among regulators about the quality of television dramas and thus ramifications for the political and ideological function of television. Meanwhile, hot money, entering the field with a view toward fast, high returns, was withdrawn after one or two failed projects or simply after investors realized the less romantic side of the industry, although a newer wave of less knowledgeable investors took their place. The process of capitalization has thus shown signs of retreat in recent years, partly also due to strengthened government interventions. On the other hand, withdrawn investors now look for a new outlet, and new media content industries are likely their new gold mine. The notable rise of online video companies such as Tencent Video, iQiyi, and Sohu Video after 2010 and their aggressive moves in content acquisition and production have diverted audiences, producers, and ultimately advertisers away from television, thus significantly transforming the industry. As all these happen, television professionals will have to adapt again to the industry's structural and technological changes. Further investigation should consider new practices and subjectivities being produced in this process and how they reconstitute the change of China's television industry.

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