

# Staging Corruption

## Chinese Television and Politics

Ruoyun Bai



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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Bai, Ruoyun, author

Staging corruption : Chinese television and politics / Ruoyun Bai.

(Contemporary Chinese studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic format.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2631-0 (bound). – ISBN 978-0-7748-2633-4 (pdf). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-2634-1 (epub)

1. Television programs – China. 2. Television and politics – China. 3. Television broadcasting policy – China. 4. Political corruption – China. I. Title. II. Series: Contemporary Chinese studies

PN1992.3.C6B342014

384.55'320951

C2014-902645-5

C2014-902646-3

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**Canada**

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)

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# Introduction

A police chief in a modern Chinese metropolis sought refuge in an American consulate. He used to be the right-hand man of the city's Party Secretary, but the relationship between the two had deteriorated to a point where the police chief found it necessary to make this desperate move. The next day, the police chief stepped out of the consulate and was taken away by state security agents who had been dispatched from Beijing to prevent him from falling into the hands of the local police. The incriminating materials that the police chief had brought with him to the consulate revealed, among other things, that his boss' wife was a leading suspect in the murder of a British businessman close to this elite family. A month later, the Party Secretary, who had been a serious contender for a seat in the seven-person Politburo Standing Committee, the innermost core of power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was stripped of all his posts and placed under investigation by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the Party's primary anti-corruption body. His wife was charged with murder and sentenced to life in prison. Their son, a Harrow graduate currently residing in the United States, was thrust into the global limelight for his costly education, flamboyant behaviour, and lush lifestyle. In the meantime, rumour mills went into overdrive. Why was the politician betrayed by his police chief? Did he wiretap President Hu Jintao and other top Chinese leaders? How many mistresses did he keep? Is it true that his wife had a love affair with the British businessman? Did he hoard \$6 billion in overseas bank accounts while presenting himself as a guardian of socialist, egalitarian values? Did the businessman help the family funnel money out of China and then threaten to reveal the scheme to get a better commission? Had the populist Party Secretary been set up by his political enemies in Beijing? How would the storm end? To be continued ...

This is not a soap opera. The Bo Xilai scandal, which has been under the scrutiny of the global media since February 2012, poses perhaps one of the biggest political challenges and embarrassments to the CCP since the

1989 Democracy Movement.<sup>1</sup> It casts into the limelight the power and wealth of the children of the CCP's elders,<sup>2</sup> and threatens to shed light on secretive power struggles and webs of corruption at the highest echelons of the Party leadership. Yet it feels like a soap opera. Like many media scandals, it has all the ingredients of a drama – treason, murder, corruption, power, money, lust, and betrayal.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, there has been in the past decade no shortage of real television dramas about crime, corruption, and power struggles among high-ranking bureaucrats set in contemporary or ancient China. Many salacious details of the Bo Xilai scandal, alleged or confirmed, were already found in those drama serials – illicit accumulation of wealth by Party-state officials, money laundering via overseas operations, murders committed to cover up previous crimes, conspiracies and betrayals, intricate webs of shifting alliances and connections among political and economic elites, decadent private lives of the powerful, and so on. In other words, the scandal, with some alteration, could have been taken from a Chinese prime-time television drama. If historical dramas are considered, with their staged political machinations among emperors, princes, and top-level bureaucrats, the parallel between entertainment and contemporary Chinese politics is all the more striking.

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

Since the mid-1990s, corruption dramas have proliferated and shaped prime-time viewing to such an extent that it is simply not possible to

dissociate public discourses of corruption from television drama representations of the issue. In late 1995 and early 1996, *Heaven Above* (*Cangtian zaishang*),<sup>4</sup> generally referred to as the first “anti-corruption drama,” riveted the nation’s attention with a truly novel television character – a villainous high-ranking government official and Party cadre (vice provincial governor) whose web of corruption wreaks havoc on a city within his jurisdiction. This seventeen-episode China Central Television (CCTV) drama was said to have garnered an audience rating of nearly 40 percent at its peak – roughly 400 million viewers.<sup>5</sup> From then on, high-level official corruption became a legitimate topic for dramatization. Corruption dramas proliferated. Although accurate data on total output are hard to come by, the salience, at least in quantitative terms, of the theme of corruption can be inferred. By 2003, crime drama had become the most prominent drama genre in China,<sup>6</sup> and roughly 30 percent of such dramas had plots featuring official corruption.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime, as writers, producers, and publishers rushed to exploit synergistic possibilities, so-called anti-corruption novels flooded the book market,<sup>8</sup> reaching both fans of corruption dramas and new audiences. In 2004, for reasons that will be explored in this book, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) meted out harsh discipline to the television industry by banning the topic of corruption from prime-time television.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of SARFT’s clampdown, dramas that explicitly dealt with corruption among CCP officials dwindled. Around the same time, however, the theme of corruption was reincarnated in a diversity of drama genres that provided a different spin on official corruption. With a radically cynical rendering of the issue, these genres have gained a lot of attention, especially from young urban viewers.

This book examines corruption dramas as a product of the concrete historical conditions of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. How can one historicize the rise and fall of television dramas about corruption? How are these dramas shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces that are in constant, complex interplay with one another? What do the production and regulation of these corruption narratives reveal about the media order in the context of market society and political authoritarianism? Answering these questions facilitates an exploration of the politics of corruption dramas in two crucial contexts: the “commercial revolution”<sup>10</sup> of the Chinese media overseen by the Party-state, and an increasingly polarized Chinese society brought about by market reform. On the one hand, corruption dramas epitomize a distinctly Chinese commercial media culture. On the other hand, providing a space in which social and political issues are

raised, they draw on social sentiments prevalent since the early 1990s: anxiety about mushrooming social problems and the integrity of the moral and social fabrics, feelings of precariousness about one's well-being in an increasingly marketized society, indignation or unease about the radically unjust distribution of wealth and power, a newly heightened sense of citizens' rights and a desire for change, and so on. In a sense, these popular dramas are collective dreams (or nightmares) that bring to the fore fears and desires deeply harboured in the post-socialist Chinese society.<sup>11</sup> In a nutshell, this book is an inquiry into corruption dramas – how they developed, were suppressed, and became reincarnated as a result of complex interplays between the CCP, SARFT, television stations, and production companies, and how they can be studied as a crucial site where different narratives and discourses about China's corrupt elite contradicted, supplemented, and transformed one another to shape a new ideological terrain.

The book makes the following sets of claims:

- 1 Chinese media may be conceptualized as a contact zone in which dominant political, economic, and social interests meet, clash, and engage with each other to create a disjunctive media order in post-socialist China. The notion of disjunctive order allows us to account for both changes and continuities in Chinese media. Different from disorder, it is a kind of order that is predicated on shifting articulations of interests. The Party's propaganda departments, SARFT, national and provincial media conglomerates, production firms, advertising companies, and key journalistic and creative personnel engage in constant realignment and compromises to maintain the balance and stability of the media order.
- 2 Corruption dramas constitute a significant cultural power that reconfigures and redefines state power. State power does not exist independently of the cultural realm that shapes public perceptions of the legitimacy of the Party and the state. Featuring a panoply of Party cadres, governors, mayors, chiefs of various state agencies, bank officials, state-owned enterprise managers, customs officials, judges, prosecutors, and police officers, corruption dramas are to a large extent tales about the state, teaching moral lessons about what constitutes the legitimate exercise of state power, the proper role of the state in the market economy, and the desirable courses of action for the Party in the face of corruption.
- 3 Corruption dramas started off as a key component of the Party-initiated anti-corruption campaign and moral crusade, and ended up becoming part of the moral and political crisis that the Party sought to manage. The

political acceptability of corruption dramas has been predicated on their embrace of an officially ordained melodramatic imagination that frames its anti-corruption drive as a victorious battle of the righteous Party against a minority of moral delinquents. However, the melodramatic imagination turns out to be hardly sustainable by commercial media, as it competes with alternative imaginations of officialdom. Significantly, corruption dramas become entangled with the depoliticizing agenda of neoliberalism, which idolizes the private self.<sup>12</sup> The end – that is, the self’s need for betterment – justifies the means, even if the means amount to corruption. It is not without irony that since SARFT’s 2004 clampdown, corruption dramas have gone a long way towards normalizing corruption.

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

### Corruption Matters

In this book, corruption is treated as both an empirical phenomenon and a discursive category. A standard definition of corruption in political science refers to it as “behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains: or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence.”<sup>13</sup> This definition is largely accepted by China’s disciplinary and legal professionals, who define corruption as “abuse of public power (*gonggong quanli*) by occupants of public office (*gongzhi renyuan*) in the state and party apparatus for private interests.”<sup>14</sup> It describes most of the officially identified forms of corruption, the three most prominent of which are bribery, embezzlement, and misappropriation of public funds. Corruption in China has intensified and grown rampant since the onset of market reform.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing corruption as a problem generated by the deep interpenetration of the state and the market, Wang Hui points out that a critique of corruption must be “a critique of much deeper levels of inequality and injustice involved in the asset-transfer process,”<sup>16</sup> and “critiques of the state cannot be separated from critiques of the movement toward market society.”<sup>17</sup> Since 1978, the post-Mao Party leaders have initiated and implemented reform measures designed to revitalize the economy via marketization. Most likely unforeseen by Deng Xiaoping but nevertheless facilitated by the prevailing pro-market ethos, plundering of public assets ensued and has unstopably escalated as the market reform

proceeded, benefiting the very guardians of public funds and resources, i.e., bureaucrats presiding over resources allocation and managers of state-owned enterprises, as well as well-connected entrepreneurs. The organic connection between corruption and market reform policies and practices has been painstakingly documented.<sup>18</sup> Put plainly, corruption in contemporary China is an effect of marketization and privatization policies implemented without any democratic participation or supervision. Furthermore, it fuels and sustains the neoliberalization of the economy by serving as a key mechanism for distributing massive wealth, assets, and resources under public ownership to private individuals. In other words, corruption is both symptomatic and constitutive of a flawed economic reform process that systematically favours political and economic elites. It has played a prominent role in the primitive accumulation of capital, the emergence of bureaucratic-capitalist classes, and the proletarianization of the working class in post-Mao years. In this sense, corruption is bound up with China's embrace of capitalism and class reconstitution.

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

Chinese society has taken. Whether as a site for contested meanings or as a dominant framing device, corruption is of fundamental importance in helping us understand the ideological conditions for escalation, dissipation, or reconfiguration of social tensions in post-socialist China.

### Corruption Dramas

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

Drama serials may be produced by independent production companies, but more frequently, they are co-productions among television stations, production companies, and sometimes other institutions involved in drama production for publicity and/or mercenary purposes, such as the army, the police, schools, hospitals, or, in the case of corruption dramas, the Party’s anti-corruption bodies (central or local disciplinary commissions). Those that are nationally distributed and therefore considered successes in commercial terms reach a nationwide audience either via CCTV or provincial television stations.<sup>19</sup> Due to ferocious market competition, drama serials target general audiences to maximize their ratings. Nevertheless, there have been two countervailing tendencies: an urban bias that accounts for the dominance of urban settings and concerns of urban Chinese, and demographic segmentation in the 2000s as television stations compete to differentiate their drama fare through channel branding and niche marketing.<sup>20</sup> Corruption dramas were developed in the mid-1990s to speak to a national

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

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

Corruption dramas vary widely in terms of setting, narrative, and style. Most are set in a fictional Chinese metropolis of the market reform era. Among these, some revolve around a corruption case, whereas others bring in plots of official corruption to support main narratives of mafia-related crimes such as drug trafficking, smuggling, gangster fights, kidnappings, and murders. Some are strictly about standard forms of corruption such as bribery and embezzlement, whereas others place corruption in the context of broader issues and questions concerning China's political economy. In government documents, trade journals, or the popular press, these dramas are sometimes referred to as "anti-corruption drama," hewing closely to the Party's anti-corruption agenda. The term is too restrictive, however, and fails to capture the great variety of ways in which the issue has been approached. "Crime drama," another officially recognized category, is both too narrow in its exclusive focus on crime vis-à-vis larger political and social issues, and too broad because a large number of conventional cop dramas have nothing to do with corruption. Thus, instead of using an existing generic category, I have coined the term "corruption drama," which can best account for both the heterogeneity and commonality among different types of drama serials about corruption. In this study, corruption dramas also

include a number of historical dramas, including the so-called serious dramas (*zhengju*),<sup>21</sup> which transport modern anti-corruption battles to the imperial era; historical comedies (*xishuo ju*), filled with lighthearted satires about corrupt officials; or court dramas (*gongting ju* or *gongdou ju*), which dramatize corruption as an inherent component of intricate interpersonal relations and complicated political struggles in an imperial court. These historical dramas are of crucial relevance as they may be readily interpreted as allegories of contemporary Chinese society.

Corruption dramas provide a privileged site for scholarly inquiry in several ways. First, they have shaped and enriched public discourses of corruption in a uniquely powerful way. Compared with investigative news programs, which became institutionalized around the same time that corruption was legitimized as a topic for television drama in the mid-1990s, corruption dramas have accommodated a wider range of discourses of corruption. Not only do they provide more freedom for their creators to narrate and imagine corruption but the serial form also allows greater space for sustained engagement with the issue. To be sure, news that exposes bureaucratic malfeasance and social ills enjoys a higher cultural status than television drama. Yet investigative journalism has always been tarnished by the mouthpiece nature of Chinese news media and has over time lost the original lustre and appeal of the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, although corruption dramas are entertainment, they frequently adopt a realist mode of representation that leads many viewers to accept dramatized corruption as approximating real-life corruption cases. As most of these dramas deal with corruption in city and provincial governments, on which independent reporting is impossible, they provide plenty of fodder for popular imagination of corruption among high-ranking officials.

Furthermore, television drama fuels public discourses of corruption by drawing a number of intellectuals into the “domain of the popular.”<sup>23</sup> A key feature of the commercialization of literary production in China is the growing synergy between book publishing and drama production, with many literary talents crossing over to the much more profitable screenwriting for television.<sup>24</sup> The most influential of them, such as Lu Tianming, Zhang Ping, and Zhou Meisen, have not only played a key role in pushing political boundaries and legitimizing corruption-themed bestsellers and television dramas but have also brought some intellectual debates on corruption into commercial productions. By co-opting intellectuals, the television drama industry has been instrumental in moving the issue of corruption from

marginal spaces occupied by tabloid magazines and satirical doggerels to central domains of popular culture.

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

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

of the political economy of Chinese media, which I will describe below as “a disjunctive media order.”

### A Disjunctive Media Order

Based on the significant body of research on Chinese media industries and policies, I choose to describe the media landscape in post-socialist China as “disjunctive.” Originally developed as a concept to encapsulate the cultural effects of global flows and ever-shifting “scapes” of capital, people, technology, ideologies, images, and narratives,<sup>25</sup> “disjuncture” is used here to characterize a media culture emerging from the radical transformation of a propaganda-oriented media system by forces of commercialization, globalization, and technological development. Disjuncture describes an order of things that are simultaneously disconnected and interrelated, and a disjunctive media order is one in which the development of media is driven by more than one logic. To be sure, most media systems in the world are shaped by a variety of political, economic, social, and professional forces. But what makes disjuncture a dominant feature of the Chinese media is the coexistence and interpenetration of two equally powerful forces, neither of which dominates or collapses into the other: the political and the economic. State ownership and profit orientation underscore a peculiar political economy of Chinese media. On the one hand, there is the political will to exercise ideological and informational control through state ownership of media outlets so as to maintain a stable symbolic environment for the Party’s rule and the market reform. On the other hand, there are media and cultural industries born out of commercialization, supported by various kinds of capital, and strategically valued for their contribution to the market economy and the national GDP.

This disjunctive media order began taking shape in the years after 1978, when the central government decided to (1) legitimate advertising and let it become the primary source of funding for the state-owned media system, and (2) decentralize the media system by delegating to local governments powers and responsibilities for developing a self-sufficient local media infrastructure. These decisions were intended to address a pragmatic concern of how to modernize and expand the media system without further straining the already impoverished coffers of the central government, but their transformative impact was to be realized and further amplified in the establishment of a commercial media system “with Chinese characteristics.” The system in its current shape is characterized by the entrenchment of the

capital logic in both centrally and locally administered media outlets, ferocious competition among media groups, active participation of private capital, and, above all, the presence of the state, which facilitates, shapes, and oversees the formation of the increasingly capitalistic media order.

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

### **State Policy and Regulation**

Throughout the market reform era, the Party's media policy making has been guided by a "disjunctive" approach that emphasizes marketization on the one hand and ideological control on the other,<sup>26</sup> as expressed in the official language of "material civilization and spiritual civilization." In the 1990s, a recurring theme in official documents and speeches was how to balance the media's "economic effects" and "social effects," often with the implication that media in the marketized environment did not always provide healthy, uplifting, socially responsible, and politically appropriate messages. Part of the problem lay with the sheer number of media outlets, which made it hard for the state to exercise effective control, and this problem was exacerbated by the mercenary ties of local state regulators to the media outlets within their jurisdictions. By the late 1990s, recognizing the difficulties engendered by commercialization of the state media, the CCP resorted to the strategy of recentralization and conglomeration, hoping for more effective political control and faster industrial growth. The turn of the century witnessed a wave of media conglomeration, as a result of which a number of press, film, and broadcast groups emerged. The dual policy orientation was given a new twist in the cultural system reform launched in 2002 that separated non-profit cultural enterprises from the cultural industry at the conceptual level.

The cultural system reform boils down to "divestment, that is, by spinning off market-oriented operations from existing party-state media conglomerates and turning these operations into relatively autonomous market entities that are free to absorb outside capital and pursue market-oriented expansion,"<sup>27</sup> so that the state can concentrate its control on the core part of media, namely, political communication – that is, news and propaganda.<sup>28</sup> However, while the design intended to resolve the conflict between marketization and political control is rather neat, actual practices are much messier, and state control remains firmly in place with regard to entertainment media, which

are officially declared to be governed by the “law of the market.” Media regulation continues to reflect the double objective. From 2002 to 2014, for example, during exactly the same period in which the government was pushing for further marketization and privatization of China’s media industries, SARFT waged a “Clean Up the Screen” campaign, targeting the “excessive entertainment” and hypercommercialism on provincial television (Chapter 3). Clearly Chinese media regulators have perceived the disjuncture or disconnection between the dual objectives, and they do not see a better way of suturing the disjuncture than resorting to coercive measures.

### **Media Institutions**

While television stations remain an essential component of the Party’s propaganda apparatus, their goals, interests, and functions have become fractured in the process of marketization. As state media, they have political and cultural obligations to fulfill. They must satisfy media officials and censors who favour programs that are politically pro-Party or at least innocuous, culturally conservative, and popular with the masses.<sup>29</sup> As businesses faced with a highly competitive media environment and driven by ambitions of national or even global expansion, their daily operations are shaped by market-based calculations. Such calculations often boil down to audience ratings as they cater to advertisers who look for programs that deliver large numbers of viewers and/or the most desired demographics, depending on the marketing goals of the advertising businesses. Audience ratings aside, brand or reputation cultivation is a longer-term business strategy for many television stations. Thus launching investigative news programs may be partially understood as a strategy for a television station hoping to establish an image of respectability and professionalism. Television dramas that deal with serious social issues perform a similar function for television stations. Yet building a reputation based on hard-hitting journalism or socially relevant drama programming is a risky business strategy that has been used by powerful television stations such as CCTV. For provincial and local television stations, brand cultivation is frequently associated with youth-oriented entertainment. In any case, Chinese television stations today deal with multiple interests and demands, and in terms of content production, they are eager to establish common ground between these competing interests by airing programs that ameliorate political concerns, please advertisers, resonate with popular sentiments, and promote a public self-image that dovetails with their long-term business strategies. The very imperative of balancing the party line and the bottom line bespeaks the double logic of Chinese television.

### **Structure of the Television Industry**

Disjuncture also describes a television industry that has done away with the coherence of a state broadcasting system, where CCTV and local (provincial and municipal) television stations were government bureaucracies entrenched in a hierarchical relationship. For years prior to the mid-1990s, CCTV was the only meaningful player in the national market. While local television stations operated terrestrial channels that were able to reach only viewers in their own administrative territories and one or two neighbouring provinces or cities, CCTV reached a national audience as all local stations were obliged to carry its programs. Because of the power and prestige that came with its status, it was able to attract the cream of the nation's creative talents and access the best television programs produced by local stations; directors of local television stations regarded it as an honour to have their programs aired by CCTV. This relatively stable relationship of domination and dependency came under tremendous pressure as advertising and business sponsorship replaced state subsidies to become the major source of funding for television stations. For example, local stations were more inclined to keep popular television dramas to themselves or at least negotiate with CCTV for a much better price. As a result, beginning from the early 1990s, CCTV found itself losing the most popular television programs to local stations, and viewers along with them. After the mid-1990s, CCTV's relative strength in terms of program ratings decreased even more rapidly, as provincial television stations each operated a satellite channel, put their best programs on this channel, and transmitted them to national households. In the 2000s, a number of regional media powers have emerged, each with a provincial television station at its core. The rise and national expansion of provincial broadcasters, predicated on entertainment programming – specifically popular television dramas and reality shows – is one of the most significant developments in China's television industry during this decade.<sup>30</sup> Although they have been abetted by state policies, unintended consequences such as the erosion of CCTV's audience base and the sheer amount of entertainment on provincial television channels, regarded as "excessive" by the Party leadership, have created tension and even antagonism between provincial broadcasters on the one hand and CCTV and SARFT on the other. In a sense, the double logic generating disjuncture in day-to-day media operations and practices is replicated at the industrial level. It should be noted that CCTV and provincial television stations are commercial media monopolies at each other's throats, but their relationship goes beyond business competition. To the extent that CCTV remains the Party's key propaganda

organ, its losing ground to the aggressive, more commercialized provincial television stations serves as evidence of disjuncture between the political and economic spheres.

### **Constitution of Media Capital**

A fourth way of making sense of the disjunctive media order is to look at the heterogeneous capital composition of the broadcasting industry. Currently, the industry is underwritten mainly by four types of capital: (1) bureaucratic capital of television stations, (2) transnational capital, (3) domestic private capital specializing in television program production, (4) and domestic private capital in the form of business conglomerates in non-media sectors such as real estate and international trade. Although transnational and domestic private capital had begun entering the broadcasting sector mostly surreptitiously in the last two decades of the twentieth century, it was only in the first decade of the twenty-first that their participation in content production gained legitimate status as they were “increasingly seen, and indeed called on, as a force that can be harnessed to strengthen the national economy in general and the media and cultural sector in particular.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, in accord with the general design of pro-market Chinese media policy makers, private capital has become the mainstay of television program provision (see Chapter 1). Thousands of private firms are now in operation producing, financing, and trading all kinds of television programs (except for news and current affairs programs). Furthermore, following China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), state policies that encourage media organizations to turn their non-news businesses into publicly listed companies have further integrated media production into domestic and global capital markets. Private capital functions mostly to provide content and funding for state broadcasters, is vulnerable to fickle state policies, and remains barred from television channel ownership. Nevertheless, some private firms have gained *de facto* operational rights to television channels by leasing sports, fashion, or entertainment channels as distribution outlets for their own programs. The penetration of private capital into the broadcasting sector means a new division of labour by which private capital generates programs, state capital reaps profits through ownership of television channels, and the government exercises political and ideological control. However, this design is not seamless, and a significant amount of tension can be identified between private production companies and television stations, between private production companies and policy makers, and between provincial television stations and government regulators, as I will illustrate in the following chapters.

## Audience

Disjuncture in the political economy of Chinese media has powerful implications for the ways in which television viewers are addressed and defined, and for the shape of television programs. In the market reform era, “audience” became an increasingly powerful concept, exerting real influence on television drama production. In the era of state-operated broadcasting, viewers were conceptualized and approached as “masses,” implying the “domination and leadership by the Party both through and within the media.”<sup>32</sup> Along with media commercialization, the notion of “audience” came to be widely accepted. On his research trips to Chinese cities in the late 1980s, James Lull became aware of the “growing interdependence between administrative audience research and program decision-making” and noted that “decisions to add, cancel, expand, reduce, combine, reschedule, and change the content of shows have all resulted from recent audience research.”<sup>33</sup> Yong Zhang documented how in the 1990s audience research was gradually institutionalized, routinized, and normalized, and how “the basis for designing and evaluating media content ... shifted from Party policies to primarily audience needs and satisfactions.”<sup>34</sup> To say that audience research is now routinized might be a little exaggerated. Although drama broadcasts are carefully measured and ranked for ratings, systematic audience research has yet to become a routine part of drama production and programming, which are still guided more by guesses based on recent hits rather than carefully constructed techniques of measuring audience preferences. Nevertheless, the notion that television viewers are audiences to be catered to has sunk in deeply.

Yet audience as commodity does not tell the whole story. While the propaganda transmission model is clearly retreating, the media are still expected to mediate between the Party and the people and to play an educative and uplifting function in Chinese society. From the Party’s perspective, audiences should not be merely indulged but also guided politically, morally, and aesthetically. The two different conceptualizations of audience as state subjects and audience as consumers do not exclude each other. One does not need to establish a total dichotomy to acknowledge the distinction, but it is exactly this distinction that creates potential disjuncture. When disjuncture materializes in reality, it sometimes takes the state’s coercive power to re-establish order. It may be argued that SARFT’s revulsion against “vulgarization” of Chinese television and the “Clean Up the Screen” campaign partly arose from the tension between the two conflicting paradigms of television audience. Also pertinent to this discussion is the preference of advertisers and

television stations for affluent urban viewers versus the Party's desire to send its messages to the entire population, especially the not-so-well-off population, whose support for the legitimacy of the Party and market reform needs to be gained and constantly renewed through ideological work. Thus, as Chinese television on the whole demonstrates a remarkable reluctance to engage rural populations and migrant workers in cities, SARFT officials have kept complaining to television stations and producers about the scarcity of programs dealing with issues and topics relevant to country life, in contrast to the abundance of glamorous images of the super rich and the "petits bourgeois" in modern cities.

### **Content**

Disjuncture at the content level is the most manifest. A lot of studies have been carried out to examine how commercialization of media and culture has wrought major changes in the kinds of news, information, and entertainment available to the Chinese. The Chinese media can be described as multi-vocal or polysemic and under the pressure of addressing a plurality of audiences, a plurality engendered partly by advertisers and broadcasters seeking niche markets and partly by social changes that have resulted in heterogeneous interests, claims, and aspirations. The proliferation of voices and meanings may appear across different texts (for example, different news reports on the same event) or may be embodied in one text that is susceptible to different interpretations. One interesting question that inspired many of these studies concerns the fate of the official culture, and along with it, the Party's claim to political and moral leadership, in the age of commercial popular culture. Or, do state discourses suffer an irreversible decline in the cultural market? The answer provided by most accounts is a resounding "no," and hybridization is most frequently mentioned as a primary strategy of culture making in China. Examples include newspapers that carry propaganda on front pages and more diverse and entertaining content on the rest, as well as commercial films, magazines, talk shows, television dramas, and karaoke bars that package and sell politically conservative viewpoints in extremely marketable forms, all pointing to the fact that to survive in marketized authoritarianism, commercial media make propaganda on behalf of the state.<sup>35</sup> It is increasingly hard to find pure political propaganda that does not ride the horse of popularity, or entertainment that explicitly trumps the political bottom line. Indeed, one could argue that the mainstream culture in China is hybrid in nature.

The other side of the hybridity argument is that mainstream culture might suffer an internal pressure to disintegrate. Hybridization never guarantees a perfect marriage between political and commercial messages, and the dominance of state ideologies is all but assured in such a symbolic environment characterized by cacophony and polysemy. The fault line is revealed at the “Aha!” moment when viewers (or readers, listeners, and so on) realize the artificial insertion of the official discourse. Indeed, ever since the term “main melody” came into use in the late 1980s to refer to officially endorsed culture vis-à-vis the expansion of a pluralizing cultural market, Chinese media officials, scholars, and producers have busied themselves with the question of whether and/or how the “main melody” can be made with audience appeal. Each year, a number of exemplary cultural products, whether film, television drama, novel, or song, would be officially touted for achieving both “economic effects” and “social effects.” Nevertheless, they are noteworthy exactly because of their rarity. Besides, even for these popular “main melody” items, it is entirely possible that users filter out the social effects in their private enjoyment. Not only for viewers but also in the minds of producers and broadcasters, the divide between the “main melody” and the commercial is never entirely bridged. “Main melody” films still have to depend on organized viewing to avoid embarrassing disasters at the box office. “Main melody” television dramas have to depend on CCTV or special windows on provincial television stations opened up by top-down propaganda directives for special events such as major anniversaries in the history of the Party and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). When planning for a television drama, the producer first positions it as either a “main melody” for CCTV or a commercial drama for provincial television stations. For a “main melody,” the producer would not ordinarily start the project without first securing an advance purchase contract with CCTV; the purpose of making a “main melody” is not to make money, since CCTV pays not much more than a meagre sum to cover the cost, but to associate the producer or the production company with the name and status of CCTV. If it were easy to incorporate “main melody” into commercial media, the distinction would have long ago disappeared. Despite cases of relatively successful hybridization, disjuncture is simply too salient to ignore.

### **The Chinese State and the Disjunctive Media Order**

Whether manifested structurally or semantically, the disjunctive media order is rooted in the tension between divergent imperatives mapped onto an array of political, economic, and cultural stakeholders. The political and

economic dimensions of China's communicative processes are certainly not irreconcilable. In fact, perhaps the most important contribution of critical scholarship to our understanding of Chinese media is that commercialization has probably contributed to the entrenchment of state control as "media organizations and media managers developed a vested interest in sustaining the current political economic order by following the party line while pursuing financial gains."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, since the mid-1990s, the Party has demonstrated a remarkable ability to harness and reincorporate the energy unleashed in the marketized media sector, energy embodied in capital-hungry media organizations experimenting with innovative ways of audience building, transnational capital clamouring for market entry, and domestic private capital surreptitiously seeping into media-related businesses.<sup>37</sup> As indicated earlier, central to the Party's enhanced capacity for media governance is a resilient approach that subjects different types of media organizations, content, and capital to different control regimes based on their perceived importance to the Party's propaganda and legitimization needs.<sup>38</sup> The rationale underlying the differentiated control is the need to maximize the economic benefits of a growing media sector while keeping political challenges at bay. In doing so, the Party "retain[s] strategic control over media content and enables state media institutions and their senior management to secure income without having to be actually engaged in the mundane tasks of media production. In this way, Chinese state media operators are essentially restructuring themselves along the post-Fordist flexible accumulation strategies of capitalistic production, a development that has been characteristic of media industries all over the world."<sup>39</sup> Thus, despite and perhaps because of media commercialization, the Party reconstitutes its hegemony, and it does so exactly by adapting to the condition of disjuncture of the post-socialist media order with something similar to post-Fordism, as Zhao argues.

The Chinese state has redefined its role vis-à-vis the media sector and secured the "commanding heights" of China's communication systems. Embedded in this view is the idea that hegemony is always a process – a state of always being achieved and contested – and that it is important to recognize the fault lines over which hegemonizing forces are constantly at work. As part of her political-economic critique of China's communication systems, Zhao points to the "polysemic and hybrid nature of Chinese television discourses and their multifaceted readings, with dominant, residual, emergent, and different ideological fragments borrowing from and reinforcing each other."<sup>40</sup> This key observation is elaborated by Xueping Zhong, who

defines Chinese television dramas as constituting site of contestation and attributes their complexity and ambiguity to ideological and social tensions and contradictions in contemporary China.<sup>41</sup> From a different perspective, Xiaoling Zhang examines the dialectic between the Party's hegemony and the media's relative freedom.<sup>42</sup> She points out that Chinese media organizations are now in a better position to negotiate with the state because they are expected by the state to perform multiple functions: "To create an environment favourable for political and social stability, to construct a good image of the Party-state, to harness popular support for the government, to compete with transnational media corporations for the global flow of information, and to be commercially successful in a very crowded marketplace."<sup>43</sup> She points to areas of negotiation between the state and media organizations, where the latter are able to exercise bargaining power to serve their own best interests. Drawing on Daniel Hallin's conceptualization of the spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy and unacceptable controversy,<sup>44</sup> Zhang reminds us that Chinese media organizations and professionals, although occupying a weak position vis-à-vis the strong state, enjoy a certain autonomy in dealing with issues in the sphere of legitimate controversy and in redefining the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate controversies. In Jacques Ranciere's terms, they participate in shaping the "distribution of the sensible"<sup>45</sup> that determines what things are visible, audible, and doable and what are not in a given society. This space of negotiation, in my view, is pregnant with uncertainties: undoubtedly it is integral to the Party's hegemony, which is characterized by bargaining and reciprocity with a view to establishing common ground; at the same time, however, it may generate centrifugal forces that disrupt or even partially displace the distribution of the sensible. As far as critical social issues are concerned, contestations and challenges are likely to arise when media organizations and personnel, whether out of professional pride or profit-making motives, selectively interpret or simply ignore the Party's propaganda rules or state regulations to put forth non-official and even subversive perspectives on the issues.

A key area that has not been adequately addressed in the existing scholarship of Chinese media studies is the representational realm in which the Party-state is narrated, imagined, and visualized. In my view, how the state is represented in public culture should be of immediate concern to anyone interested in issues concerning state power. If a regime's legitimacy depends on "subjective *perceptions* of the regime, for example, as competent, efficient, fair, committed to the realization of the common interest while avoiding publicly manifest partiality or bias"<sup>46</sup> (emphasis added), then

it follows that images, narratives, and discourses about the state that circulate in the mass media are all closely intertwined with the question of legitimacy. Because ordinary people do not usually have direct experience of, or contact with, the state – its politics, mechanisms, agents and their behaviours (perhaps with the exception of clerks in local state bureaucracies) – they depend largely on media stories, which provide them with knowledge of the state at both the national and local levels, shape their sentiments, and help them form opinions about the state. It is in media stories about the state that disjuncture of the media order is seen most forcefully and concretely.

What are the advantages provided by the conceptual framework of the “disjunctive order”? In a sense, it is closely associated with the Gramscian notion of hegemony. The two terms differ, however, in that whereas hegemony is more helpful in describing and locating effects, the former focuses one’s attention on the complexities and dynamics of the present situation. The notion of “disjuncture” is sensitive to both the structurally generated differences of interests and motives as well as agency of individuals, and the possibilities of alliance, rearticulation, and conjuncture of diverse forces. Commenting on the articulation and rearticulation of various social forces in shaping the Chinese media, Zhongdang Pan fruitfully points out that “some of these forces are contradictory ideologically and that articulation of them often produces changes that defy easy categorization with our familiar theoretical arsenal. Therefore, understanding China’s social changes requires situated and grounded examinations of how such multifaceted (re)articulation takes place and is embedded in the ways in which individuals carry out their work and conduct their life.”<sup>7</sup> This book hopes to delineate the disjunctive media order through a grounded examination of corruption dramas. Further, the “distribution of the sensible” in the disjunctive media order is by no means fixed or clearly mapped out. It is one of the book’s goals to distinguish how the boundaries of the permissible shift as a result of interplays among various institutional and individual stakeholders, what fault lines are amenable to repairs so that a hegemonic equilibrium is maintained, and what fissures would persist and exacerbate the centrifugal pressure from within the disjunctive order.

### Organization of This Book

The book has six main chapters. An overview of Chinese television drama production and regulation from a historical perspective, Chapter 1 contextualizes the book, concretizes the previous discussion of the disjunctive media order, and lays the groundwork for an analysis of the advent and evolution

of corruption dramas in the subsequent two chapters. It delineates the transformation of television drama from an art of propaganda to a commercial cultural form as Chinese television underwent expansion and commercialization from the late 1970s onward. It pays particular attention to the growing presence of commercial production firms from the mid-1990s onward, and assesses whether and how this development has affected the relative strengths of private capital, television stations, and media regulators in shaping the content of television dramas.

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

Chapter 3 focuses on the breakdown of the strenuously achieved equilibrium represented in *Heaven Above* as a result of deepening commercialization in the 2000s. Such breakdown was reflected in the intensified scrutiny and censorship of corruption dramas from 2002 onward. The intensified

commercial logic gave rise to an increasing number of salacious exposés that diverged from the triumphal narrative of the good Party defeating corrupt local officials. The tacit agreement that corruption dramas must convey crystal-clear moral messages was broken, straining the relationship between market-driven producers and broadcasters on one side and SARFT censors and propaganda officials on the other. The tension reached a breaking point and was resolved with coercion, leading to the ban on prime-time broadcast of crime and corruption dramas. In a sense, this chapter is about the disjunctive media order under pressure. It takes an in-depth look at how censorship of corruption dramas is motivated and conducted.

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

Chapter 5 continues to engage with the neoliberal revolution in the way corruption is narrated, and focuses on the logical outcome of the revolution – the cynical turn of corruption dramas. The cynic's narrative resemantizes corruption as a cultural problem, as the root of corruption is said to be closely associated with a long-standing bureaucratic tradition under Confucian influences. Deeply nihilistic, the narrative posits that all individuals, as soon as they become part of the bureaucracy, become hopelessly immoral and corrupt, and that politics is all about backbiting and bootlicking for the sake of one's personal interest in power and money. As a perfect illustration of Slavoj Žižek's take on cynicism as a dominant ideology,<sup>48</sup> the culturalist explanation for corruption turns into a fascination with corruption itself. Modelling one's actions on behaviours and rules in the alleged

bureaucratic culture is believed to help one succeed in the workplace, family matters, school, and even romance.

Chapter 6 provides a case study of how audience members take part in the making of the cynical frame. It focuses on a 2009 drama serial, *Snail House (Woju)*<sup>49</sup> and its reception to illustrate how cynicism can rework the meaning of corruption to such an extent that the new role model of the brave new age appears to be none other than a charismatic corrupt official character. In this chapter, I argue for the necessity of exploring the linkages between the cynical attitude in corruption dramas, middle-class anxieties and aspirations, and the hegemony of neoliberalism.