The Viral Life of An Alternative Cinematic Public Sphere

Piracy, Circulation, and Cultural Control in Cyber-Age China

China has long been depicted as world's largest and most vigorous heaven for piracy and copyright offenders.[1] However, this notorious "world capital of piracy," for various reasons, seems to be facing potential decline. In December 2009, a dramatic anti-piracy campaign was collaboratively launched by both the legitimate cultural industries and the state. Unlike previous anti-piracy campaigns, however, this one was not merely a showpiece for global corporate agencies, but was rather initiated from the "inside" --- it demonstrated a surprising level of coordinative bounding between Chinese domestic cultural industry's increasing corporate powers and Chinese government's effective state control. The result was stunning. Countless BitTorrent portals and websites were closed down within days. Three major video streaming websites, Youku, TuDou, and Ku6, all began to pay license fees for film and TV contents that are supposed to be uploaded by users. Pirate DVD vendors, who have been saturating China's urban landscape for a decade, have now almost disappeared from Beijing's major streets. Majority of videostores in Beijing began to appear "piracy free" --- at least in the storefront – while pirate products are moved to the underground or backrooms behind the shelves. The Chinese word for "piracy" –"*daoban*" – became a censored term on the Internet. And many pirate consumers' clubs and forums were also closed down from various portal websites and social networks. Although it is still too early to say whether China is moving toward stronger copyright protections, the recent change does suggest China's increasing effort to suppress, regulate, or at least normalize this otherwise uncontrollable underground region that used to be operating largely outside China's heavily regulated cultural system. Such an effort to suppress piracy, not surprisingly, coincided with Chinese government's increasing attempt to tighten its control over information production and circulation, especially on digital platforms, manifested by China's recent intensification of Internet censorship.

Precisely when this piracy heaven begins to be unraveling, its cultural meanings and social functions for millions of Chinese consumers start to surface. Only in retrospect, when we are about to witness increasing waves of state and corporate control over the unruly "dark corner" of the cultural market, can we understand --- in a somewhat nostalgic way --- the tremendous pleasure and power of the institutionally uncontrollable form of cultural consumption that used to be granted by the viral operation of piracy. Thus, this essay is somewhat a retrospective tribute to Chinese piracy culture --- to trace the rise of an alternative, pirate space of cultural circulation and consumption in urban China right at the moment when such a space is about to disappear or to be integrated. While most studies on piracy are often focused on the legal or economic aspects, I would rather argue that there is a lot more to piracy than its legal challenge to IP laws or its economic disturbance to globalization. Staying away from the legal or economic debates, this essay rather emphasizes the socio-cultural functions of piracy—particularly film piracy-- in urban China, focusing on the *cultural uses* of piracy, as well

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[1] Such a notion can be found in IIPA (International Intellectual Property Alliance)'s annual "Special 301 Reports" and "Country Reports."

as the *social organizations* of its users. By conducting empirical studies on the cultural and material life of film piracy in urban China --- through infield researches and interviews with piracy producers retailers, and consumers --- I hope to examine the ways in which the viral infrastructure of pirate cinema enables an alternative space to organize the production, circulation and consumption of information and meanings outside the state's tight cultural control. Such an alternative cultural space offered by piracy, I would demonstrate, can be identified in the unique organizations of the so-called "D-Buffs" and "D-Generation" in urban China.

During the heydays of China's disc piracy, there emerged a distinctive subcultural community of pirate consumers, who self-identified as "Disc Buff" ("*Die-you*") or simply "D-Buff ("D-*you*") --- here, "D" refers to both "disc" (*die*) and "piracy" (*daoban*).[2] Defined by their collective behavior of active and passionate consumption of pirate products, D-buffs are devoted piracy consumers whose leisure lives are so much imbued with passionate collecting and consuming pirate DVDs that their collective identity is largely formed by the social and cultural life of piracy. More importantly, surrounding the collective behavior and identity of the D-buffs, there emerged a vibrant cineaste culture in urban China. This cineaste community, though emerged from piracy consumption, are nevertheless much more than passive consumers. They are rather marked by their active production of alternative cinematic forms and practices, as well as their creative challenge and subversion against the hegemony of film industry and state control. Such a piracy-nurtured, alternative space of cinematic culture in urban China was further re-enforced by the pirate system, which provides these independent or underground filmmakers a vital distribution channel to evade state censorship or industry domination. This newly emerged alternative film culture has developed far beyond the D-buff community, and has increasingly become a dynamic and far-reaching cinematic movement launched by a new generation of film consumers and filmmakers, who I would identity as the "D-Generation" --- "D" as in "digital." Marked by their collective experience of digital consumption and DV (digital video) production, this new generation's experience with digital contents is largely filtered through piracy. It is their parallel experience of both the digital and piracy that provided the building blocks for the D-generation to creatively negotiate an alternative space of cinematic production, circulation, and consumption. Therefore, by examining the rise of the "D-Buff" subculture and subsequent "D-Generation" movement, my purpose is to trace the creation of this alternative space of cinema in urban China, and examine how this alternative space --- a digital and pirate one --- may potentially disturb or subvert the dominant, celluloid space of film intuition that is controlled by both Chinese state and global industries.

This alternative, pirate space of cinema, I would further argue, may testify the possibility of *an alternative public sphere* in a political regime that appears to be fundamentally against the notion of an autonomous "public." Indeed, in post-Socialist China, which still remains an authoritarian state despite the capitalism-oriented economic reform, any effort seeking to locate a traditional sense of public sphere of a bourgeois civil society would seem to be a "mission

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[2] There has been increasing tendency among D-buffs to use letter "D" to refer to multiple meanings – disc, DVD, *daobao* (piracy), digital, 3D, download, and etc. But the most common trend is to use "D" to refers to *daoban* (piacy), because China's intensified Internet censorship has made "daoban" (piracy) into a sensitive word, thus to avoid censorship, D-buffs often use the term "*D ban*" (D- version) to refer to piracy.

impossible." The dramatic crackdown of the Tiananmen democratic movement in 1989 made many to further believe that it is almost impossible for Chinese society to developed a genuine public sphere (Chamberlain, 1993; Huang, 1993; Wakeman, 1993). However, as suggested by Deborah Davis, if we look beyond the restriction of politically institutionalized public activities, we may find many "alternative locations of and pathways to structural change," which was made possible by the increasing sociality of Chinese people who are mobilized by the flourishing mass consumption in urban China (2000, p. 21). And cinema may well be one of these "alternative locations," which brings me to another notion of "public sphere" that was put forward by Miriam Hansen, whose conceptualization of the public is much broader and more complex than Habermas' bourgeois-liberal model that assumes an autonomous domain above the marketplace and thus distrusts commercial mass media (Habermas, 1991; Hansen, 1983, 1994). Grounded on Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993)'s notion of "social horizon of experience," Hansen (1994) describes the spectatorship of early cinema as the manifestation of an "alternative public sphere," which offers spectators a social and cultural horizon to organize their collective experience of modernity and urban life. Hansen's notion on the public aspect of cinema inspired me to look at the socio-cultural organization of pirate circulation and consumption, and try to locate the possibility of an alternative public sphere that may arise from such distinctive relations between cinematic representation and reception. If the shift of cinematic spectatorship, as suggested by Hansen (1994), is often intertwined with the transformation of a public sphere, then is it possible to imagine an alternative public sphere constituted by the shadow spectator community organized by the viral infrastructure of piracy? And in China's case, particularly, would such an alternative public sphere be able to disturb, or even subvert, the exiting power structure and status quos in a tightly controlled socio-cultural landscape? These are the questions I want to tackle in this essay.

To study piracy as the possible location for an alternative public sphere in Chinese society also means to divert the current debates on piracy from the focus of globalization. Piracy has often been discussed and examined as a particular symptom of globalization ---- either a manifestation of the unsolvable tension between the national and the global, or a bottom-up tactic against the un-even global distribution (Larkin, 2004; Pang, 2006; Sundaram, 2010; S. Wang, 2003). Such globalization-centered studies of piracy, though valid and important in many ways, not only serve to continue the dominant discourse on piracy that is particularly favored by global corporate agencies such as IIPA and MPA, but also tend to mask the internal contradictions and conflicts within the national itself. In China's case, I would argue, what contextualizes the development of piracy is less global unevenness than the internal conflicts and contradictions within China's own cultural institutions, resulted from the nation's dramatic economic and cultural transformations. Emphasizing these domestic factors would highlight the significance of Chinese piracy as an alternative social and cultural space that is opened up by such international fissures and disjunctions during China's transformation period. For Chinese consumers, the meanings of piracy are much more than mere tactics against globalization, but instead, piracy constitutes the very material fabric of their daily cultural life, to negotiate and undermine the suppressive control by the authoritarian state and the global/domestic industries. Therefore, in this essay, my study on piracy would stay away from the debates on globalization, but rather focuses on the social and cultural life of pirate consumers within the national context of China.

## Emerged from Seams and Fissures --- A Brief History of Chinese Piracy

Before examining the socio-cultural functions of piracy, I want to first briefly overview the general background of film piracy in China, especially the historical development of piracy within the context of China's wide-ranged economic reform during the past three decades. Piracy in the so-called "post-Mao" or "Post-socialist" China actually can be dated back to the early 1980s, when China just began its wholesale economic reform. The first major wave of piracy emerged in the market of books and periodicals, which directed resulted from the structural reform of the publishing industry in the early 1980s (Zhiqiang Zhang, 2005). Because of the economic reform, the book industry, which used to be completely state-owned and state-operated like many other cultural industries in China, now started to allow private entrepreneurs to enter, but limited only to the printing, distribution, and retailing businesses, while leaving the publishing sector, consisted of hundreds of publishing houses in the country, still largely inside the tight control of state ownership. In order to publish a book or magazine, a private business has to collaborate with a state-run publisher to obtain a publishing permit from the government. And this rule is also applied to audio/video recordings ---- on the packaging cover of every legitimately released DVD or CD, there labels a state-owned publisher, as well as a barcode of license ID approving that this product has passed the censorship and legally obtained a publishing permit.[3] Such a partial, but not complete, privatization of the publishing industry resulted in a deep unevenness between a commercial cultural market versus state's tight control over cultural contents. This unbalance marks the particular symptom and contradiction inherited in China's economic reform, which captivates on a free-market economy while still maintaining a strong authoritarian political control. And this contradiction is particularly sharp in the cultural industries due to their apparent central significance to the state's political and ideological power. The unevenness and conflict between a dramatically stimulated and rapidly expanding commercial cultural market versus the tight grip of content control in the state's hand inevitably created an enlarging gap between the growing consumer demand and the limited content supply. And the gap was further intensified by the nation's skyrocket economic boom that resulted in a dramatic increase in people's income and their consumer appetite, which left a huge cultural void and market space for piracy to fill in ---- first in books and periodicals, and then in optical recordings of music and films.

Since the late1990s, optical recordings of audio/video materials have become the fastest growing sector in China's entire pirate market. According to China's officially published data on the government's confiscated pirate materials (from which we can roughly estimate the piracy industry, whose actual size, however, is difficult to measure due to its underground nature), the number of confiscated pirate A/V discs grew over 80 times for the past decade (Figure 1). Since 2001, A/V recording has become the largest part of the whole pirate industry in China. In 2002, about 40% of the total pirate products seized by the government in that year were A/V discs, and in 2008, the number rose to 75%. The fastest growing period for pirate audio/video recordings was from 1998 to 2005, when the number of confiscated pirate discs jumped almost 100 times from 689 thousands to 66 million.

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[3] But these codes are not seen on pirate video/audio discs, which further indicates that piracy is operating as a shadow system outside China's state censorship and cultural control.

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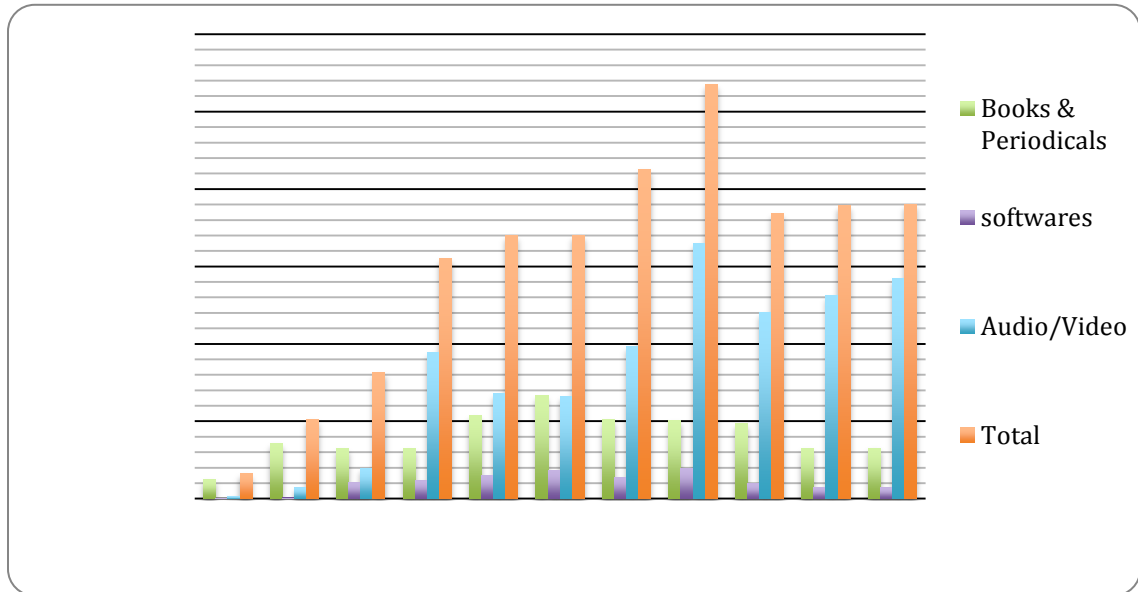
Data Source: National Copyright Administration of PRC, 2008; State Intellectual Property Office of PRC, *Chongguo Zhishi Chanquan Nianjian* (*China Intellectual Property Yearbook)*, 2000-2008. Beijing: Intellectual Property Press.

This "golden era" of Chinese disc piracy --- from 1998 to 2005 --- is the period that not only gave rise to a flourishing pirate film culture (which I will examine later), but also coincided with the dramatic transformation of Chinese film institution that has long been tightly held at the center of state control. While the shadow system of pirate cinema was enjoying its rapid maturation and skyrocket boom in the late '90s, the legitimate film industry in China was undergoing a turmoil restructuralization and deep economic reform. During the 1990s, while the whole national economy was souring, the film industry was rather suffering a rapid decay. In 1991, the annual movie admissions declined half from the previous decade, and in 1993, box office revenues further dropped another 40% (Tang, 2006). Facing the difficulties, a series of deep industrial reforms have been launched since 1993. Echoing the theme of "a socialist market economy" in the national reform, Chinese film industry also started a structural overhaul toward marketization and commercialization, though in a much more cautious and slower manner due to the government's continuing concern of cinema as a propaganda machine. The state-owned monopoly was partially broken down, private and foreign enterprises were allowed into the industry, and ten revenue-sharing foreign "*da apian*" (big pictures), which were mainly Hollywood blockbusters, were imported annually (Tang, 2006; Zhu, 2003). Despite all these efforts, however, the market refused to revive, and it became increasingly dependent on the imported blockbusters, which often accounted for 70-80% of the total box office revenue. In 1999, when the film market hit its historical bottom, only 10% of domestic features films didn't

lose money (Tang, 2006). From 1998 to 2002, Chinese film industry remained at the bottom, and domestic film productions shrank half from 170 feature films in 1992 to only 82 in 1998.[4] One unmistakable fact is that cinema --- at least in its theatrical form --- which used to be the most popular medium in China for several decades, had by then lost its attraction and function as mass entertainment. Over two decades, annual film admissions in China declined dramatically from 29.3 billion in 1979 to 220 million in 1999 --- less than 1% of what it used to be two decades ago, indicating that majority of the population who used to go to cinemas had stopped doing that (Tang, 2006). By the turn of the new millennium, Chinese audience had collectively turned away from cinemas. In a survey conducted in 1996, 79% of city residents preferred television as their favorites entertainment form, while cinema didn't even make into the top 10 list, and less than one third of people are willing to pay for watching films in theaters (Zhu, 2003).

It is certainly not accidental that the weakening of Chinese film institution during the 1990s coincided with the rise of piracy. In fact, the decline of box office implied a transforming viewership of Chinese audience. In a survey conducted in 2002, 38.65% of college students preferred using video discs to watch movies, while only 6.75% chose theaters (Jiangyi Zhang, 2002). However, the question at stake here is not only the transformation of spectatorship from celluloid to digital, from theatrical to home videos, from a classical, illusionist form of viewer absorption to a more dispersed and less regulated form of film consumption; but the change from movie theaters to pirate videos also highlights the possibility of an alternative space for cinema that was opened up by the disjunctions and unevenness of the hegemonic film institution in transformation. Like American early cinema in the nickelodeon era, whose completing modes of representation and reception during unstable transition eventually gave rise to an alternative public sphere (Hansen 1994), the increasing unevenness of Chinese cultural intuitions, resulted from the internal contradictions of China's economic reform, also led to the possibility for an alternative film culture to have a momentum of its own. It is in the seams and fissures of the uneven cultural institutions where piracy gained its vibrant social and cultural life. Therefore, it is not accidental that when Chinese film industry began to successfully revive since 2003, largely by integrating and normalizing those previously marginal or underground agencies and practices (e.g. independent filmmakers and pirate industry), the alternative space of pirate film culture also began to face regulation, suppression, and even potential disappearance. But before its closing down, this precious space still managed to be located and explored by a new generation of consumers and filmmakers to create an alternative film culture in urban China.

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

Ever since pirate videos first appeared in China in the late 1990s, a cineaste culture has begun to emerge, and its development and maturation went hand in hand with the fast boom of pirate industry during its golden years from 1998 to 2005. The first wave was the development of a series of small cineaste clubs in urban China, as the result of the sudden spread of digital and pirate technologies that greatly broadened opportunities for film consumption and production. Before the existence of piracy, film availability in theaters, libraries and schools was extremely limited, due to China's strong censorship and tight quota system. Only elite institutes such as

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[4] Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.

Beijing Film Academy and China Film Archive offered limited access to certain foreign film collections. But piracy changed everything. When films such as Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959) and Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983) were "introduced" to Chinese audience through piracy, a cinephile community soon emerged and quickly expanded.[5] People began to organize small-scale screenings in bars, cafes, and bookstores, where some hard-to-find arthouse classics were publicly screened to like-minded audiences. From these screenings, various cineaste clubs were soon developed in major cities. In Beijing, "Practice Society" (Shi Jian She) was one of the earliest and most influential cineaste clubs at that time. Founded in April 2000, it quickly attracted hundreds of members. They gathered weekly in a small bar close to Beijing Film Academy, and their screening material was often a bootleg VCD cheaply made by fans themselves on their home computers. Besides foreign cinemas, the club also screened underground films, experiment videos, and documentaries made by emerging Chinese independent filmmakers, many of whom were club members themselves. As indicated by the club's name, Practice Society emphasized as much on the aesthetics of film arts as on the practices of filmmaking. The club organized workshops, panels, and published their own journal (figure 2) to initiate active discussions and debates on how to explore alternative forms of independent filmmaking. Similar cineaste clubs, "101 Workshop" and "U-theque," were also founded in Shanghai and Guangzhou, organizing film screening and filmmaking in a similar fashion. An active film circle was quickly developed from these cineaste clubs, and it attracted and nurtured a new generation of directors, screenwriters and critics, including Du Haibin, Zhu Chuanming, Wang Fen, Wang Liren, Cheng Yusu, Ou Ning, Cao Fei, and Zhang Xianmin, many of whom later became renowned independent filmmakers. This cinephile/filmmaker circle also formed a crucial component of the so-called "Urban Generation," who were celebrated by Zhang Zhen as the foundation of "a 'minor' and 'nomadic' film culture that engage both the margins and the center" in urban China (2007, p. 31). And the possibility of this "minor" and "nomadic" film culture largely relied on the technological availability of digital piracy, which was then still in the early format of VCD. A famous film critic and blogger, who was also a central figure in the early cineaste culture, specifically pronounced such piracy-cinephile connection by naming himself "wei-xi-di," a homophone for VCD in Chinese. As Zhang comments: "It is significant that the revival of a cinephile culture in China is in large part made possible by the 'primitive' or 'pirated' form of postmodern technology of the VCD." (2007, p. 27). Indeed, trespassing from piracy to public, from consumption to production, these early cineaste clubs witnessed the birth of an alternative film culture centered around digital piracy, and this is what I would later describable as the "D-Generation" cinema.

With the rapid market boom of pirate VCDs and DVDs, as well as the widespread of the cyber technologies, early cineaste clubs quickly transformed into a different kind of organizations. No longer need to gather for semi-public screenings, however, pirate consumers didn't really follow the predictable trap of public-to-private transition as many have imagined; but instead, another type of social-cultural organization was formed around piracy consumption, moving from the physical space of bars and cafes to the virtual space of the Internet. It was in the Internet stage that the term "D-buff" (*D-you*) was first coined among pirate consumers themselves. Unlike movie-buffs, D-buffs are not only passionate about watching films, but are

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[5] At that time, even the nation's most elite institute Beijing University would use pirate VCDs and DVDs for public screenings in library and classrooms, because pirate market was then the only possible channel where many foreign or independent films could be accessed.

also fervently devoted to collecting a huge library of quality DVDs, most of which are pirated. In many cases, D-buffs' knowledge and passion for cinema are largely developed from their enthusiastic collections of pirate discs. Also identified as "fever hobbyists" (*fa shao you*), D-buffs take their cues from old-day hi-fi enthusiasts (who are also called "*fa shao you*" in China), and are often extremely picky about the qualities, prints, formats, and bonus features in their DVD collections. They will never collect those DVDs made from camcorder-recorded videos taken in movies theaters (called "qiangban") because the image qualities of those discs are often very bad. They will wait for a couple of months until the legitimate DVDs of a certain film are released so that their high-quality copies would soon be available in the pirate market. Neither would they tolerate D-5s (single-layered DVDs)--- only D-9s (double layered DVDs) are collectable. They are not only knowledgeable about film history, genres, auteurs, and detailed film information (distributor, cast, year, language, director's cut or theatrical version, and etc), but they are also very sensitive to technical facts such as different regional releases as well as different prints or bonus features. For example, a young D-buff told me that he had bought many different DVDs of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* and they are pirate copies of different regional releases of the same film —the US released version, the Japanese release, and the French version. But the one he finally kept in his personal library is the pirate copy of the double-disc "classic collection" of *Seven Samurai* released by The Criterion Collection in North America (often labeled as "CC standard" on the cover of pirate DVDs). This process in which D-buffs search for the best collectable DVDs of a certain film and get rid of the bad ones is called "disc laundering" (*xi die*). And the practice of disc laundering, in which you search for the most collectables, is arguably the most addictive part of being a D-buff. Even with the recent rise of Internet piracy, hardcore D-buffs still refuse to give up their old hobby. Not only because the image qualities of those downloadable or online streaming videos are often not as good as DVDs, but also because the practice of just downloading or watching a film online, as it turns out, is simply too effortless to enjoy.

The challenging, time-consuming, but enjoyable and additive experience of pirate collecting and DVD "laundering" quickly became a popular subculture among urban consumers. A famous online article posted by an experienced D-buff probably best characterizes the collective identity and experience of this D-buff subculture. The article vividly details the different stages --- or "levels" in a video-game term ---which a D-buff would need go through to become a true hardcore: Level 1: "silly kid," when you would buy whatever you can find on the pirate market; Level 2: "fever enthusiasts," when you are addicted to it and would go out buying DVDs almost everyday, and start to learn some knowledge to differentiate the good and bad; Level 3: "matured," when you've had quite a huge collection --- most of which have been laundered for better--- and a great amount of knowledge to guarantee a good buy in most cases, won't be fooled by DVD retailers anymore and know what to listen and what to reject; Level 4: "the black hand in the market," when you've had over thousands of pirate collections, and now you stop going to DVD stores, but the retailers would call you to deliver the most recent releases, and you had enough experience and information to give recommendations and suggestions to others; Level 5: "deity," when most of your collections have been laundered for over three times, and your knowledge has been so extensive that you'd gain a stardom in the community and beginners would be thrilled to hear your insightful opinions ("DVD Fashao Dieyou," 2002).

These levels probably best described the game-like mentality, as well as the community function of the D-buff culture. In fact, the collective practices of exchanging knowledge and

experience on the Internet, as well as leaning and competing your way through these deference levels, have organized D-buffs together into a strong subcultural community ---- first through online platforms such as forums, blogs, and social networks, then emerged into a real-life organization where D-buffs began to meet with each other in semi-public gatherings. There are countless websites and online forums that were developed by D-buffs, and almost every major city, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, has its substantial D-buff clubs (*die you hui*) that have thousands of local members who would meet regularly to discuss about films, latest releases, and technical details on DVD collections. D-buffs have also taken advantage of the newly flourished online social networks in China, such as douban, tianya, and kaixin, to further expand their organizations and communities. Through these virtual or physical social networks, D-buffs seek constant communication with each other and initiate discussions and debates about various technical, material, and tactical issues related with DVD collections. And there are also internal "rules" within the community. For instance, you can't post spoilers in your discussions about certain movies; you can't publish the real name of a piracy store even if you want to recommend it (to prevent government officials from using the information to raid pirate circuits). There is even a widely circulated "D-buff exam" on the Internet, titled "The National DVD Exam Complete Version (for Graduate Students)" (Tuyouqibiao, 2006). Such a pseudo-official tone humorously challenges the real official discourses and highlights the oppositional tendency of this alterative film culture. Popular media were also eager to engaged with the consumer power of the "D-wave." Magazines such as *DVD Guide* (*DVD zhinan*) and *Look: Movies* (*Kan Dianying*) are among the most popular ones that are specialized in timely information about newly released DVDs (in pirate but not legitimate market, for most of the films listed in these magazines were never officially imported), including extensive technical details for collectors. They also feature D-buffs' own columns and forums to discuss "how-tos" for beginners. Countless movie guidebooks were published, and these books often make explicit reference to the D-buff culture. A movie guidebook, written by famous critic Zhou Liming, is titled *Discs Among Discs* (*Die Zhong Die*), and no wonder that the book was used as a "bible" by both D-buffs and the pirate industry. The culture and community of D-buffs was growing into such a degree that it is almost impossible to find a cineaste in China who doesn't own over thousands of pirate DVDs.

The D-buff culture and community grew widely and rapidly in urban China, not just because of the raving predominance of piracy that made DVDs so cheap and affordable (~5-8RMB a movie, less than 1 USD) that almost any urban consumers can afford a huge DVD collection or a "costly" process of disc laundering. But more importantly, the fact that pirate discs can be consumed as collectables challenges the dominant discourse that portrays pirate products as trashy counterfeits. In China, pirate discs may be cheap, but they are certainly not in poor quality. On the quite contrary, Chinese pirate market often offers much higher-quality and wider-variety of products than their legitimate counterpart. In fact, most D-buffs I interviewed insisted that the reason they prefer pirate DVDs is not because of their lower price tags, but rather because of their more premium visual/audio qualities, as well as their wider selections of art-house or independent movies. This indication is also suggested by the survey I conducted in China in 2009. Among pirate consumers who identified themselves as cineastes, only 22% claimed price as the attraction, the majority (74%) list variety and quality as the determinant factors that make pirate DVDs more desirable and collectable. Indeed, among the D-buff circle, it is the legitimate DVDs that often bare the label of being cheaply made and in poor quality (bad packing, non-digital preprints, and few bonus features), because the very thin profit margin in

China's legitimate market tends to force DVD releasers to cut down cost at the sacrifice of quality.

The reason that pirate products can offer better quality and wider variety largely relies on their lack of copyright licensing cost or region code limitation. The lower cost and higher profit margin makes piracy industry so competitive that some pirate makers are willing to spend more money and energy to perfect their products to win the market. Thus, strangely enough, even in this underground market, some pirate makers established their own "brandnames" for their superb product qualities, such as better images, more bonus features, better subtitle translations, or more beautiful packaging. Experienced D-buff would recognize these "brandnames," which are often marked by a small logo or packaging details, and use them as reference points for disc collections (Huang Chao Ning Tian, 2006). The lack of copyright licensing nor region codes also blessed the pirate industry with access to variety of different foreign regional releases -– the American release, the Japanese or European ones -- from which they can choose any one or more versions to use as their master discs for piracy, thus providing a wide variety of pirate products of a single film title. For the pirate makers, the difference is just a matter of choice for their master discs without any legal or economic obligations. But for piracy consumers, especially the D-buffs, the difference can be quite remarkable: different prints, lengths, subtitles, or bonus features. Thus, the lack of copyright or region-code limitations in piracy provides a huge variety of possibilities to consumers, thus giving rise to the addictive experience to keep searching for the "best" --- the enchanting process of "disc laundering." Pirate makers are also more than willing to satisfy D-buffs' picky tastes by providing the best possible quality. They will research among different regional releases by various homevideo distributors, and try to find the DVD release with the best image quality and most bonus features as their master disc.[6] To better serve D-buffs, pirate DVD makers even came up with their own unique "release" of the most collectables. They would select best features from each different regional released DVD and put them together into an unbeatable combination --- the image track from the US release, the subtitle taken from a Hong Kong version, and the bonus features from a Japanese DVD. Such an ultimate combination, which can even beat the premium products from The Criterion Collection, can only be produced in the pirate system, for the lack of copyright restriction and region-code limitation provides endless possibilities for both piracy producers and D-buff consumers. Furthermore, piracy nurtured the D-buff culture also because it provides a huge selection of film titles, most of which were never legitimately released in China due to tight quota, censorship, or market reasons. The pirate industry, on the other hand, can so easily evade state quota and censorship, and its profit margin is so high that it can afford to release many less known and peculiar arthouse titles to a niche audience, and thus offers consumers with much wider choices than the legitimate market. If D-buffs' passionate practice of disc searching is like treasure hunting, then it is the vast selection of films in the pirate market that provides them such attractive treasurers.

The viral infrastructure of China's pirate circulation system is also a significant factor that enriched the pirate market to a large degree and nurtured the D-buff culture to blossom. This viral infrastructure has three major retail platforms --- mobile street vendors, corner video stores,

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[6] For instance, DVDs released by The Criterion Collections --- labeled as "CC Standard" (*CC biaozhunban*) in Chinese piracy circle --- are often the favorite choices for both the pirate industry and D-buffs.

and on-call services. The street vendors, though the least stable due to constant raids, are nevertheless the most mobile, ubiquitous, and viral presence of piracy, and offer the most accessible channel for casual consumers. D-buffs, however, rather refer to frequent local video stores that are saturating almost every corner in cities. Most D-buff have their own favorite video stores where they frequent almost every week, and they often know the storeowner very well, who will inform them about the latest releases and new titles in the pirate market, or sometimes even take them to the warehouse. More "advanced" D-buffs also have another unique channel --- personalized on-call service that will deliver DVDs to your homes, offices, or dorms on a regular basis. Through this personalized service, one can even put costume orders with a list of most-wanted films or filmmakers, and the vendor will always make sure to satisfy your request and deliver the right stuffs on your list. These three levels constitute a powerful pirate distribution system that can reach deeply into consumers with such dynamics, flexibility and interactivity, that it exhibits a large degree of "long-tail" characteristics resembling the Internet retailing (the viral structure of piracy indeed resembles the hypertextuality of the Internet). Therefore, according to Chris Anderson (2008)'s long-tail model, pirate market can afford to offer more diverse and niche products that may eventually sell very well in the long run.

To a large degree, the energy and liveliness of China's piracy culture heavily relies on such dynamic and close interactions between the "long tails" of piracy's viral retailing and the active searching-outs of D-buff consumers. For instance, the pirate industry often reaches deeply into the D-buff communities to gather information about their needs and demands. Retailers and distributors would constantly research through cinephile clubs, film schools, movie magazines, and even course syllabi to learn about the latest trends and popular names in cineaste culture. Such information will then be delivered back to pirate producers who would in turn provide the most desirable products to fit the needs of D-buffs. Not only are pirate dealers actively reaching out to the D-buff communities, D-buffs would give their feedbacks to pirate industry as well. A film school student told me that his professors often gave their course syllabi or screening lists to pirate retailers, in order to make sure that these film titles would soon be available in the pirate market for students to purchase. A famous film critic once saw his own book on the counter of a video store. And it turned out that the book was recommended by a D-buff to the storeowner, who then used this book as a reference to give recommendations to both pirate producers and his customers. This highly dynamic and interactive system formed a most vibrant space of film culture in urban China --- a multi-directional and hyper-flexible cultural network that was made possible only through the viral structure of piracy.

The "D-Generation" --- An Alternative Cinema From A "Pirate Film School"

Like early cineaste clubs, the D-buff communities are also focused on both film consumption and filmmaking. Because of their enthusiasm in consuming and collecting pirate DVDs, many D-buffs became extremely passionate and knowledgeable about cinema, and some went on to become filmmakers. But the difference between D-buffs and their precursors is rather the sheer *quantity* of films that were made available to them by the rampant development of Chinese pirate market at the turn of the new millennium. Piracy provides such an extensive collection of domestic and world cinemas, as well as such an interactive cultural network, many jokingly call it a "pirate film school." From this "pirate film school," there soon "graduated" a

new generation of filmmakers, who largely learned their own ways of filmmaking from China's booming pirate market and thriving D-buff culture. And we may call them the "D-generation" --- "D" here does not simply mean *die* (disc) or *daoban* (piracy), but has more to do with "digital," a notion that highlights the technological materiality of this new generation's unique practices of both film consumption (digital piracy) and film production (digital filmmaking).

Mostly born in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, these young cinephile-turned-filmmakers are truly a "new generation," because their collective coming-of-age experience not only parallels with China's wholesale economic reform and dramatic transformations in the past decades, but also witnesses Chinese cinema's chaotic transition in institutions, materiality, and spectatorship --- from state-owned systems to commercial markets, from celluloid to digital, and from theatrical exhibition to pirate consumption. Unlike their famous ancestors --- the Chinese Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers--- who are mainly film-school graduates learning their arts and crafts in classrooms and film studios; the new generation, however, largely gained their extensive film knowledge and versatile skills primarily through their avid collection and consumption of pirate DVDs. Indeed, many young Chinese filmmakers, some of whom even went to proper film schools, all suggested to me that their initial interest, passion and knowledge about films and filmmaking mostly came from their enthusiastic consumption of pirate products at early age. Learning their arts and crafts more from the pirate market than from film schools, the D-generation filmmakers are hardly institutionalized or unified, and thus appear to lack the collective voice that the Fifth and the Six generations used to fashion. However, unlike their festive-savvy ancestors, the D-generation is less concerned with a unified agenda than with the very versatilities and multitudes of their styles and sensibilities, which seems to mirror the diversity and broadness of their pirate collections. Among the D-generation, there are ones who are into commercial and genre filmmaking and riding the waves of the newly revived film market in China; while most others rather express their artist aspirations and sensibilities through low-budget, independent, and even armature modes of filmmaking. Such diversity can also been found in their social backgrounds. Although both D-buffs and the D-generation are largely urban youngsters, not all of them are from urban roots, but some are rural immigrants. Neither are D-generation filmmakers all cultural elites, and there are ones from the social bottom. Xiao Ou, for instance, an amateur DV filmmaker I met in Beijing, was an immigrant from a small provincial village. Before picking up a camera, he was a pirate vendor for years, and he gained all his passion and knowledge on films and filmmaking largely from the pirate DVDs he was selling. Indeed, except for their collective experience of learning their knowledge and skills from China's abundant source of pirate cinemas, there seem to be little in common among this D-generation. They are as unruly and diverse as the pirate market they grew up with.

In spite of the wide range of diversity in their styles, sensibilities, and backgrounds, the D-generation is nevertheless organized through their collective preference toward digital technologies. The eye-catching market boom of digital piracy in the late '90s coincided with the introduction of DV (Digital Video) camcorders to urban China. Thanks to its affordability, portability, and easy user interface, DV quickly became the most popular device among amateurs and professionals alike, and sparked a wide wave of DV filmmaking in China. These DV enthusiasts also largely overlapped with the D-buff community, who have long been the most wired and technically informed group due to their daily pirate consumptions that involve

extensive digital operation and computer usage. Since the early cineclub days of Practice Society and 101 Workshop, DVD consumption and DV filmmaking have been organized together as a combined practice. Practice Society's self-published film journal, *Touch Film* (*shijie shouce*), explicitly foregrounds the group's "hands-on" approach to cinema, and most discussions in the journal are about how to explore the newly emerging techniques of DV filmmaking to create an alternative form of cinematic practice. A DV filmmakers' group, "DV Documentary Team," was soon organized among the members of Practice Society, and many of the team members, including Du Haibin, Zhu Chuanming, and Wang Liren, later became very influential documentary filmmakers. In the city of Guangzhou, artists Ou Ning and Cai Fei literally transformed their cineaste club "U-theque" into a DV production team, and they collectively made an internationally claimed experimental documentary *San Yuan Li* (2003). In fact, the later D-buff communities took their cues heavily from these early cineclub pioneers. As early as 2000, a prototype D-buff club was formed in Wuhan, and they came to Beijing to learn from their fellow cineastes on how to branching out from VCD screening to DV filming (Zhen Zhang, 2007, p. 30). However, different from the physical gatherings of these cineaste clubs, today's D-buffs communities mostly organize their DV practice on the cyberspace. "DV filmmaking" is a central category in most of D-buff websites, blogs and forums, where D-buffs not only discuss about their own DV works and experience but also use the online network to organize DV productions. For instance, a Beijing D-buff posted in his neighborhood social network seeking other D-buffs to make DV films together;[7] another D-buff in Hangzhou posted a message in a local D-buff forum searching for actors for his DV film. Even Yang Fudong, a famous video artist, once used Shanghai D-buff forum to look for volunteer crews for his video-art project ("Yang Fudong," 2009).

From early cineaste clubs to later D-buff communities, the D-generation cinephile/filmmakers formed the backbone of China's flourishing DV movement, whose tangible, free-style, and grassroots approach to filmmaking has put forward an alternative film culture --- a "minor cinema" in Zhang Zhen's words (2007). Much has been written about this "minor cinema," especially its independent spirits and amateur styles (Berry, Xinyu, & Rofel, 2010; Pickowicz & Yingjin Zhang, 2006; Y. Wang, 2005; Yingjin Zhang, 2004; Zhen Zhang, 2007). However, the close connection between the development of this alternative cinema and China's rampant piracy culture is rather largely ignored or overlooked. In fact, piracy played a crucial role in nurturing this new generation of filmmakers and the "new wave" of filmmaking. In his interview with Esther Cheung (2007), Ou Ning, a famous filmmaker, artist and founder of an early cineaste club, explicitly celebrated piracy's central significance in Chinese independent cinema. He claimed that the piracy culture "represents a kind of democratization of film" in China, and it "played a significant role in establishing the independent film culture in the mid-1990s" (Cheung, 2007). Indeed, both as grassroots street cultures, piracy and DV cinema formed a strong symbiosis in the coming-of-age experience of the D-generation. And piracy nurtured the D-generation's alternative film practice mainly in two ways: first, by providing a unique "pirate film school" with a vast collection of films and a close network and community; second, by offering a precious distribution channel, through which independent and alternative cinemas can reach wider audience.

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[7] The same D-buff also suggested that they open a DVD store together, and make enough money to make films. See http://bbs.hlgnet.com/info/u4_1308674/. Last retrieved on March 31, 2011.

For decades, Chinese film education remains highly exclusive. Beijing Film Academy, for a long time, was the only legitimate film school in the entire country, and it is largely considered an institute for elites. But this highly exclusive film education system was dramatically challenged by piracy. The pirate market not only introduced a wide variety of films that had never been seen in China before (due to quota and censorship), but its remarkable accessibility, affordability and diversity also helped democratize film education to a large degree. As Ou Ning puts it: "(Before,) only privileged people in the film archive and the Beijing Film Academy could have access to the unofficially released films. But nowadays, every household can get hold of a VCD/DVD player very easily. With the DV medium and pirated VCDs and DVDs, the cost of understanding films is lowered and we have a very energetic film culture here in the PRC" (Cheung, 2007). Indeed, piracy made film education into a grassroots movement and an everyday consumer can easily afford a systematic introduction to world cinemas through pirate DVDs. The D-buff community centered around piracy also became a vibrant "classroom," where many D-generation filmmakers learned their first film lesion from follow D-buffs. If DV technology made filmmaking into an accessible practice, then it is piracy that made film education no longer lofty. Precisely because both DV and piracy made film studying and practicing into an affordable and accessible process, the D-generation can include filmmakers from such diverse social and cultural backgrounds. It is the "pirate film school" that offered people like Xiao Ou, a former pirate vendor coming from countryside, a unique opportunity to achieve their film dreams.

Besides its function as a film school, the pirate market also offers the emerging D-generation filmmakers a precious circulation channel to distribute their works that would otherwise never be able to reach a large audience. As a shadow system well beyond the authority of censorship, the pirate industry has long served as a powerful circulation channel for Chinese independent cinemas that are produced outside the state-controlled film institutions. Due to the "long-tail" quality of piracy's viral market, releasing an independent film from an unknown filmmaker to a niche audience can still be very profitable, thus providing commercial incentives for pirate industry to explore this alternative side of Chinese cinema. The amazingly successful release of Zhang Ming's low-budge, independent film *Rain and Cloud Over Wushan* (*Wushan Yunyu*, 1997) in the pirate market set an early example. Its success sent such a strong signal to the pirate industry that a wave of pirate release of various independent films was soon launched. Although the tremendous success of *Wushan* was largely due to the pirate releaser's "ingenious" yet controversial repackaging of the film into a soft porn (Figure 2), its wide popularity still effectively influenced a broad range of film audience and filmmakers, who suddenly began to recognize pirate market as a viable distribution platform for their alternative cinemas. And the viral infrastructure of piracy, with its density, ubiquity, and flexibility, proved to be the most suitable channel for distributing these alternative, independent cinemas that target only a niche group of like-minded audiences. Therefore, a load of unknown, independent and "minor" filmmakers of the D-generation, including Zhang Yue, Zhang Lu, Wong Shouming, and Ying Liang, all found their own films being distributed in the pirate market. And most of these films are made in a minimalist, semi-amateur DV fashion with almost zero budget, and they are never legitimately released in China. Although the unlikely alliance between piracy and independent cinema is no honeymoon (many filmmakers have complained about the exploiting nature of the pirate industry), independent filmmakers still feel great benefit from the pirate system, which offers them a unique opportunity to reach to a wide audience that they would otherwise never be able to enjoy. As film critic Hu Yuan puts it: "The intensity of circulation through piracy is far

more effective... Piracy can reach every common person." (Cheung, 2007) Indeed, it is facilitated by such a wide and dynamic viral circulation system of piracy that the D-generation was able to build an alternative yet far-reaching film culture in China, through which oppositional or subversive voices can be produced and distributed outside the tight state control.
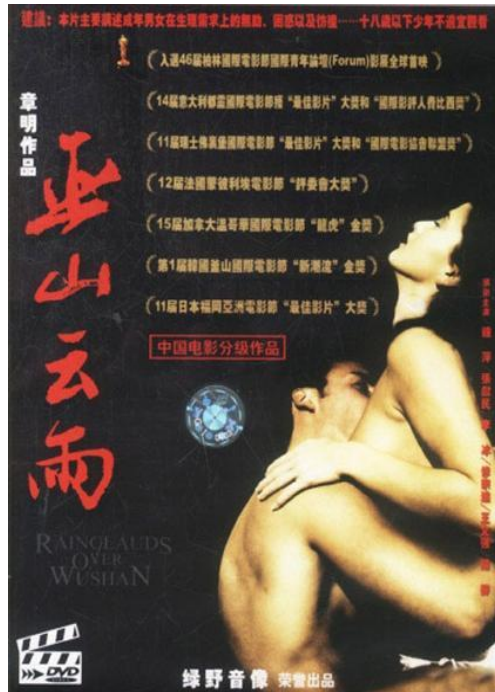
Figure 2: Pirate DVD of Zhang Ming's *Rain and Cloud Over Wushan* (Wushan Yunyu, 1997), featuring a much "sexed-up" cover image that was not taken from the actual film. Despite the fact that the film itself has no explicit portray of sex at all, the packaging scheme helped selling millions of copies, which also effectively "promoted" Chinese independent cinema in the pirate market.

Pirate Film Culture ---- An Alternative Public Sphere in Urban China

Laikwan Pang once argued that the widespread consumption of film piracy transformed Chinese cinema from a collective public event to a private one, and thus shattered cinema's political function toward collective articulation (Pang, 2004). This notion, however, seems to be challenged by the collective identity and practice of the D-buffs and the D-generation who demonstrate a substantial degree of public engagement. This contradiction forces me to re-examine the public/pirate dynamics of cinema in a wider context of transforming media spectatorship. Pang's observation of a public-to-pirate transformation of Chinese cinema is based on the assumption that it is "public film screening" that fundamentally defines the political position of cinema (2004, p. 113). Pang's focus on "public screening," in fact, largely echoes the classical model of a bourgeois public sphere that was conceptualized by Habermas (1991), which emphasizes face-to-face communications. However, in this bourgeois-liberal model, the dialectic between public and private would only unravel in today's context of mass media, which has transformed communication into individualized and mediated consumption. And this marks the fundamental uneasiness between Habermas' bourgeois public sphere and cinema, especially when cinematic spectatorship has increasingly been transformed --- by home videos, computers, and the Internet -- into a technological act of private reception. To solve this paradox, Miriam Hansen seeks a more complex and inclusive definition of the "public" in her conceptualization of cinema as a public sphere (Hansen, 1983, 1993, 1994). Borrowing from Negt and Kluge's

critique and expansion of Habermas's concept of bourgeois public sphere, Hansen emphasizes the multifaceted political nature of cinema's publicness. According to Negt and Kluge (1993), instead of a pseudo-autonomous bourgeois public sphere, the notion of "public" should rather be understood as a "social horizon of experience," and it should be traced to the new commercial-industrial public, because this commercial "public sphere of production" is relatively more inclusive due to its aims to maximize profits. But these different types of publics do not exist in singularity, but instead, the public should be conceptualized as "a mixture of competing modes of organizing experience," thus "a potentially volatile *process*" (Hansen, 1993, p. 205). In Hansen's words: "It is the seams and fissures between uneven institutions of public life that alternative alignments can emerge and gain a momentum of their own" (1993, p. 205). Therefore, it is precisely in the space of "seams and fissures" where Hansen locate an alternative public sphere of early cinema (1994). And this public sphere of cinema --- this specific "social horizon of experience" --- is not simply an organization of public screenings, but rather the relations between the films and spectators. Therefore, to conceptualize an alternative public sphere of cinema also means "envisioning alternative media products and an alternative organization of the relations of representation and reception" (Hansen, 1993, p. 208).

Miriam Hansen's much opened conceptualization of public sphere enables us to look at the public aspect of Chinese cinema far beyond Pang's somewhat nostalgic emphasis on public screenings. It is certainly true that Chinese cinema's highly regulated mode of public exhibition and reception has largely declined and unraveled, which led to the potential collapse of cinematic institution as a dominant public sphere --- not a normative bourgeois public sphere though, but an authoritarian publicity functions as a propaganda machine. However, the collapse of this ideologically controlled publicity doesn't necessarily lead to a complete privatization of Chinese cinema. On the quite contrary, it is precisely such decline of the hegemonic pseudo public sphere of Chinese cinema--- which nevertheless masquerades as *the* public sphere of unified "Chineseness" --- that gave rise to an alternative organization of public life that is much more inclusive, diverse, and unruly. Indeed, as suggested by Hansen (1993, 1994), it is in the "seams and fissures" between the uneven and competing institutions that alternative possibilities can emerge. And this is exactly the case in Chinese cinema. As I discussed earlier, the contradiction and unevenness between China's propaganda-centered cultural control (authoritarian publicity) and market-driven commercialization (industrial-commercial publicity) resulted in painful restructuralization of Chinese cinema, thus opened up space for an alternative organization of cinematic representation and reception --- piracy. No longer pretending a collective articulation of pseudo-unified "Chineseness," this much diversified and heterogeneous "social horizon of experience" provided by piracy, however, is no less "public" than the hegemonic forms of Chinese cinema in public screenings.

If there is possibility of an alternative public sphere in the structure of pirate cinema, then where can it be located? How does it operate? Since piracy is largely operating in the realms of film distribution and consumption, its critical potential hinges on its alternative mode of organizing film spectatorship. Like pre-classical cinema in the nickelodeon era, film consumption through piracy fashions a much less regulated spectatorship. No longer dictated by the schedules or locations of film theaters, spectators are now offered by pirate videos a much greater freedom to determine the time and space of their own film viewings. Such a non-disciplinary spectatorship, however, does not prescribe film consumption into a completely private act as many have imagined. But on the quite contrary, the piracy-mediate, non-

16

controllable spectatorship, which puts forward different relations between cultural representation and reception, rather functions "as a catalyst for new forms of community and solidarity" (Hansen, 1993, p. 208). And the D-buff subculture may well be one of such "new forms of community." From early cineaste clubs to today's online forums, blogs and social networks, D-buffs have indeed formed an intimate, dynamic, and interactive community network, centered around their collective experience of piracy consumption, which, as I have demonstrated in earlier passages, involves active communications with fellow D-buffs in videostores, clubs or Internet, as well as dynamic interactions with piracy retailers and producers through constant feedbacks. The community function of piracy consumption was especially visible when the popular fame of a certain film became "viral" among D-buffs, and suddenly a peculiar, unknown independent film would become an overnight hit in the pirate market. Although D-buffs are mainly young, urban, middle-class consumers, the public function of this community, I would argue, is not simply determined by its statistical demographic compositions. But instead, as Hansen suggested, the meaning of the public horizon of film spectatorship should rather be examined "in terms of multiple and conflicting identities and constituencies" (1993, p. 208). In fact, with its highly affordability, accessibility, and diversity, piracy has offered a much wider and inclusive cinematic spectatorship than the hegemonic form of theatrical screenings that are not only heavily regulated but also over priced.[8] The urban poor and rural immigrants, who have been socially and economically excluded from the newly built, luxury multiplexes in urban China, are now offered their first encounters with a wide variety of international films as well as "master auteurs" (such as Godard, Fellini, and Ozu) through the pirate circuit and D-buff communities. He Jiangjun's gloomy and sensual film *Pirated Copy* (*Man Yan*, 2004), which depicts a immigrant pirate dealer's passionate and destructive encounter with both Godard's cinema and a female film professor, offers a symbolic, yet realistic portray of such "conflicting identities and constituencies" in the pirate organization of spectatorship in urban China. The diversity of identities constituted by the inclusiveness of the pirate spectatorship also foregrounds some of the most marginalized groups in China, including the shadow communities of gays and lesbians who have long been suppressed in mainstream Chinese cinema. One of the illuminating cases is the surprising success of Gu Changwei's independent film *And the Spring Comes* (*Lichun*, 2007) in the pirate market. The film, which failed badly in box office, nevertheless found itself an unexpected cult following --- largely through pirate DVDs and BitTorrent downloads ---among gay communities, who not only organized constant group screenings of the film but also use popular quotes from the film as their favorite phrases of communication. Although the film is not explicitly about gay culture, its huge followings among homosexual D-buffs rather suggest how spectators creatively use the public/private dialectics of piracy consumption to negotiate their collective marginal identities that are heavily suppressed by the hegemonic public. And such is precisely the function of an alternative public sphere, as a "social horizon of experience," to articulate the un-speakable through the pirate film culture in urban China.

Through their collective practice and experience of piracy consumption, D-buffs not only organized a new form of community to negotiate their diverse yet collective identities, but they have also increasingly began to voice their collective agendas arguing for public access of cultural goods against state control. Even though these agendas are often not in the forms of

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[8] The average price of film tickets in Chinese major cities is about 50-80 RMB (7-12 USD), while the price of a pirate DVD is about 8-10 RMB (1-1.5 USD).

direct political opposition, they still somehow exhibit a certain degree of critical edge. In 2009, when Chinese government's overwhelming anti-piracy campaign closed down numerous videostores and BitTorrent websites, angry D-buffs staged a "virtual funeral" on the Internet, morning for their loss of a significant portal of cultural access. Though this collective "virtual demonstration" did not verbally articulate any explicit oppositional message, its visual presentation, which took the form of a series of photoshop-retouched pictures taken from actual peasant partitions that took place in rural China, rather implicitly expressed D-buffs' collective identification with the subdominant and the discontent. Even though their "political rights" as pirate consumers do not touch upon any concrete political problems, they still highlight the ongoing struggles between the rights of public access vs. political/economic restrictions. In China's particular case, the restrictions against public access not only come from copyright laws, but more from state censorship and political control. Given piracy's powerful destructions against these restrictions, however, the notion of piracy, as pointed out by Lawrence Liang (2011), remained silenced in the Western debates on the public domain. Such silence, according to Liang, points to the fundamental uneasiness between piracy and the normative bourgeois public, and thus highlights the nature of "pirate public" as a suppressed "other." In China, the pressures and suppression are two folds --- the alternative public of piracy is running against both the authoritarian state control of cultural access and the corporate ownership of copyrights. However, as suggested by Miriam Hansen (1993, 1994), it is often in its negative determinations of being suppressed, repressed, isolated, or assimilated, that an alternative public sphere manifests its critical potential and utopian edge. Therefore, the recently intensified anti-piracy efforts in China, collaboratively launched by both the state and the legitimate industry, may indeed be the best indication of the powerful potentials of an alternative public sphere to be developed in piracy's unruly organization of spectatorship.

My discussions on the possibilities of an alternative public sphere in piracy culture have so far been focused on questions of spectatorship. However, piracy's crucial role in developing an alternative cinema of the D-generation --- by providing them a "pirate film school" as well as a viral distribution channel --- suggests that the possibility of an alternative public sphere may also be found in the production side of Chinese cinema. There have been growing attentions and discussions on the public meanings of the D-generation's alternative, "minor" cinema --- its inclusiveness of a large body of amateur filmmakers from diverse social backgrounds, its edgy, critical, and challenging subjects, and its active engagement with social and political realities (Berry et al., 2010; Y. Wang, 2005; Yingjin Zhang, 2004). Their collective cinematic practices, as suggested by Zhang Zhen (2007), have indeed formed an alternative public sphere against both the uniformity of the "official" Chinese cinema and the hegemony of global Hollywood. And this alternative public sphere, I would further argue, is collectively claimed by both the D-generation filmmakers and their follow D-buffs, for the two communities are also largely overlapping. Together, the D-buffs and the D-generation, "are coming forward to embody a new century of image making and social, cultural, and political imagination" (Zhen Zhang, 2007, p. 35) These new forms of image making and imagination, conditioned by the unruly structure of piracy, also fashioned an alternative mode of organizing public experience, and made it possible to create a seemingly impossible public sphere in China --- one that is radically different from either the official, hegemonic public sphere or the commercial-industrial publicity. And this alternative public sphere may not be unique to China at all. But instead, it may point to a radical new meaning of "public" in a global cultural movement marked by the profound transformation

of cultural representation and reception in the digital age, from multiplex to BitTorrent, from global Hollywood to YouTube, from CNN to Wikileaks….

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