Pirate Cinema: Pirate Economies and Postsocialist Chinese Urbanity at the Turn of the Millennium

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March 2025

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

Contents

Abstract *1*

Acknowledgements *6*

Introduction *9*

VCD *24*

Chapter 1: Copyrights *32*

China-U.S. Wrestling **38**

Digital Capitalism: A Marxist Critique **46**

Chapter 2: Pirate Spectatorship *55*

People as Pirate Infrastructure **55**

Piracy as Multimedia Assemblages **64**

Chapter 3: Subtitles *79*

Words and Sound on Screen **79**

More than Pirates: Zimuzu in China **89**

Conclusion *103*

Bibliography *111*

Abstract

English Abstract:

This thesis examines the intricate relationships between pirate economies, postsocialist Chinese urbanity, and the broader global intellectual property regime at the turn of the millennium. Focusing on the materiality and sociality of piracy, it challenges dominant narratives that frame piracy as mere copyright infringement, instead arguing for its role as an infrastructural force embedded within China's socioeconomic transformation within the neoliberal order. Through a blend of autoethnography and existing scholarship, it examines piracy's material, cultural, and labor dimensions across three interconnected chapters. Here, piracy is positioned not as "a parasitic aberration, but as a negotiation of technological constraints that generates unique modes of engagement."

Chapter One anchors its analysis in the political and economic negotiations between China and the United States regarding intellectual property rights, contextualizing piracy within China's market liberalization and state-capitalist contradictions. The chapter frames piracy as a symbiotic shadow economy that coexists with official channels, legitimized in part by fulfilling unmet

educational and cultural needs. By embedding piracy within China's state-capitalist contradictions, the author repositions it as an infrastructural necessity, sustaining flows of labor, capital, and knowledge amid rapid socioeconomic change.

Chapter Two shifts to pirate spectatorship, arguing that audiences themselves act as piratical infrastructure. Through case studies of *Pirated Copy* (2004), an amateur film depicting early 2000s piracy ecosystems, and *Paigu* (2005), a documentary on a Shenzhen vendor cultivating arthouse cinephilia, the chapter illustrates how piracy fosters vernacular cultural economies. Spectatorship transcends passive consumption, evolving into interactive, socially embedded practices that forge transnational intimacies and expertise. These "multimedia assemblages" reveal piracy's role in sustaining informal networks that challenge top-down media control, reframing copyright violation as participatory cultural exchange.

Chapter Three delves into the labor of zimuzu (technically adept subtitling collectives), highlighting their dual role as technical innovators and cultural mediators. Beyond translating labor, zimuzu engage in interpretive acts that shape not just how media is comprehended, but how it is perceived in China, infusing subtitles with political and aesthetic elaborations. Their decentralized, labor-intensive practices democratize access to foreign content while contesting monopolistic control over media flows. By tracing zimuzu's evolution from tape-recording niches to P2P platforms, the chapter positions subtitling as a site of creative resistance, where technical skill and collective labor negotiate cultural accessibility and circumvent state censorship.

Synthesizing these threads, the thesis reimagines piracy as a contested terrain of technological improvisation and cultural memory. By centering formats like VCDs, practices like communal spectatorship, and P2P actors like zimuzu, the study contributes to broader discourses

on media accessibility, labor under digital capitalism, and the enduring resilience of informal economies within piracy scholarship.

French Abstract:

Cette thèse examine les relations complexes entre les économies pirates, l'urbanité chinoise postsocialiste et le régime mondial de la propriété intellectuelle à l'aube du nouveau millénaire. En se concentrant sur la matérialité et la socialité de la piraterie, elle remet en cause les récits dominants qui réduisent la piraterie à de simples infractions aux droits d'auteur, soutenant plutôt son rôle d'acteur infrastructural inscrit dans la transformation socioéconomique de la Chine dans l'ordre néolibéral. S'appuyant sur une combinaison d'autoethnographie et d'études existantes, elle analyse les dimensions matérielles, culturelles et laborieuses de la piraterie à travers trois chapitres interconnectés. Ici, la piraterie est présentée non pas comme « une aberration parasitaire, mais comme une négociation des contraintes technologiques générant des modes d'engagement uniques.

Le Chapitre Un fonde son analyse sur les négociations politiques et économiques entre la Chine et les États-Unis concernant les droits de propriété intellectuelle, en contextualisant la piraterie dans le cadre de la libéralisation du marché chinois et des contradictions du capitalisme d'État. Le chapitre présente la piraterie comme une économie de l'ombre symbiotique qui coexiste avec les circuits officiels, légitimée en partie par la satisfaction de besoins éducatifs et culturels non comblés. En ancrant la piraterie dans les contradictions du capitalisme d'État chinois, l'auteure la repositionne en tant que nécessité infrastructurelle, soutenant les flux de main-d'œuvre, de capitaux et de savoir dans un contexte de mutations socioéconomiques rapides.

Le Chapitre Deux se tourne vers la spectature pirate, soutenant que les publics agissent eux-mêmes en tant qu'infrastructures piratiques. À travers l'analyse d'études de cas telles que

Pirated Copy (2004), un film amateur illustrant les écosystèmes de la piraterie des années 2000, et *Paigu* (2005), un documentaire sur un vendeur de Shenzhen cultivant une cinéphilie d'art, le chapitre montre comment la piraterie favorise des économies culturelles vernaculaires. La spectature dépasse la consommation passive, évoluant vers des pratiques interactives et socialement ancrées qui forgent des intimités transnationales et une expertise. Ces « assemblages multimédias » révèlent le rôle de la piraterie dans le maintien de réseaux informels défiant le contrôle médiatique descendant, requalifiant la violation du droit d'auteur en un échange culturel participatif.

Le Chapitre Trois s'intéresse au travail des zimuzu (collectifs de sous-titrage techniquement compétents), en soulignant leur double rôle d'innovateurs techniques et de médiateurs culturels. Au-delà du simple travail de traduction, les zimuzu se livrent à des actes interprétatifs qui façonnent non seulement la manière dont les médias sont compris, mais aussi perçus en Chine, en infusant les sous-titres d'élaborations politiques et esthétiques. Leurs pratiques décentralisées et laborieuses démocratisent l'accès aux contenus étrangers tout en contestant le contrôle monopolistique des flux médiatiques. En retraçant l'évolution des zimuzu, depuis des niches d'enregistrement sur bande jusqu'aux plateformes de partage en pair-à-pair, le chapitre présente le sous-titrage comme un espace de résistance créative, où la compétence technique et le travail collectif négocient l'accessibilité culturelle et contournent la censure étatique.

En synthétisant ces éléments, la thèse réinvente la piraterie comme un terrain contesté d'improvisation technologique et de mémoire culturelle. En mettant en lumière des formats tels que les VCD, des pratiques comme la spectature communautaire et des acteurs P2P tels que les zimuzu, l'étude apporte une contribution significative aux débats sur l'accessibilité médiatique, le

travail dans le capitalisme numérique et la résilience persistante des économies informelles au sein de la recherche sur la piraterie.

Acknowledgements

The journey of completing this thesis has been one of unexpected challenges and profound transformation. Graduate school became a crucible of growth: a space where I immersed myself in the works of theorists I had long revered but never fully engaged with, grappled with the art of scholarly writing, and learned to navigate life in a city both foreign and exhilarating. This process was marked by moments of paralysis: staring at blank pages, balancing the weight of research, intellectual tensions, and the rhythms of daily existence. It is precisely these struggles that have made this culmination so meaningful.

I am very lucky to have landed at McGill, it is wild how much this place shaped my work. My supervisor, Jenny Burman, generously provided insights on academic writing and guided me through the academic journey with professional support when graduate school felt like a never-ending maze.

Montreal, with its vibrant café scenes, became an unexpected collaborator in this endeavor. I am thankful for the nourishment found in its corners: to Jonathan Sterne, who helped me refine my reading list, and to Will Straw, who sparked illuminating conversations on piracy, cinema, and

the city's cultural pulse during an unexpected encounter. These exchanges reminded me that scholarship thrives in the spaces between rigor and spontaneity,

To Michael Angell, my anchor and my compass: your presence has been my greatest gift. You offered so much more than intellectual support—reading drafts, debating philosophy, and refining ideas—but also the quiet grace of shared humanity. From patient lessons in Québécois phrases to the solace of mutual tears and laughter, from weekend brunches to every meal we have cooked together, you taught me that love guides all meaningful work. This thesis bears every dawn we have weathered together.

My final gratitude goes to my mother, a woman who almost earned her accounting degree in her early twenties, her ambitions suspended by the swift currents of societal and marital expectations for Chinese women. My childhood unfolded in the silence between financial strife and emotional absence, a solitary only child seeking escape in anime and cinema while my parents navigated their ill-prepared familial union. I was an introspective child, fluent in solitude but socially estranged.

Her devotion to my education was mercilessly unyielding. She quit her career to ensure I attended all the cram schools. I never skipped a single day of school, even after spending the previous night in the hospital with a severe fever. This rigor often felt like a blade: her unfulfilled dreams grafted onto my adolescence, creating a suffocating guilt and obligation. Unlike my father's indifference, her dedication felt piercing and uncomfortable. Nonetheless, she never compromised on providing me with the best educational resources possible—paths she herself was barred from walking.

As a first-generation undergraduate and soon-to-be graduate scholar, I recognize her imprint on my academic journey, not as a flawless generational legacy, but as a fractured mirror

of inherited longing. She labored within the confines of her era: a Chinese woman who was told to abandon college education, endured marital abuse, and now wrestles with the dissonance of having a gay son. Though this thesis borrows my father's storefront as its locus, it is ultimately a testament to my mother. Across continents, I carry the weight of her shadows of cruelty and love. To her, I dedicate these pages.

All translations of Chinese texts presented in this thesis are my own, unless otherwise specified.

Introduction

I remember when my elementary school in rural Wuhan hosted a film screening and asked everyone to bring their own small chairs. The municipal government sought to ignite the revolutionary spirit in the youth through vernacular film screenings, arranging a makeshift cinema by putting up a large black box, where the projectionist stood behind us as we took our seats. The excitement surrounding the event remains more vivid in my memory than the film itself. The collective anticipation was perhaps the most effective propaganda of all, indoctrinating children with the cinematic magic of something not magical at all. I observed the labor of constructing the enclosed space and setting up the projection system. What I did not realize at the time was that I was experiencing cinema in its intimate naked form: the loud, mechanical hum of an overheating projector, the uncontainable chatter of the crowd, and the electric thrill in the air.

The indoctrination worked. I grew a voracious appetite for films of all kinds, fed by my father's VCD rental shop. The shop was a chaotic haven of pirated discs, mustard-colored protective sleeves, and dusty organizational systems. I remember piles of VCDs being organized into a

portable wallet-like carrier inside a fake leather cover, with individual discs put into transparent plastic sleeves. My father burned discs late into the night, transmediating[1] content from tapes into portable discs to keep up with the demands of hungry renters.

These personal experiences ground my scholarly engagement with piracy and inform my intellectual journey. The stakes of pursuing Chinese Media Studies within the Anglo-American academic sphere are both intellectual and theoretical. The dominant academic traditions and theoretical frameworks, deeply rooted in Western epistemologies, often struggle to account for the idiosyncrasies of media practices that fall outside well-established paradigms. This tension feels particularly acute when writing as a Chinese international student in Canada. Both nation-states are embedded in global neo-imperial systems of exploitation. Am I in the position to write about Chinese piracy, a phenomenon so intimately tied to a specific cultural and political landscape, while being physically and intellectually situated elsewhere? This dissonance evokes a sense of theoretical placelessness, despite my access to rich intellectual resources to navigate it.

During a brief exchange with my Canadian partner's brother, I mentioned my research on Chinese piracy, to which he responded, "That's all the Chinese ever do." I initially felt compelled to challenge this statement but ultimately chose to shrug it off. My internal dialogue shifted from questioning the reductiveness of his claim, "What makes you think that is a holistic justifiable assertion?" to recognizing how his remark inadvertently resonated with much of the existing academic literature on piracy.

Being in Canada has surrounded me with privileges that would have been unimaginable in my childhood, access to films that will never receive official releases in China due to the absence of a rating system and multilayered censorship, streaming platforms offering uncensored and up-to-

[1] The process resembles translation but does not involve migrating or transferring content. Instead, it duplicates media through a video capture device, relying on manual transmediating labor.

date television series, and even a Canadian visa card that aligns with international financial standards. Growing up with limited access to such resources, however, did not entirely preclude me from engaging with them; it simply required a few extra steps.

Here, I developed a deep fondness for local cinemas, grassroots film festivals, and curated streaming platforms such as the Criterion Channel. Eventually, I turned to piracy to access films unavailable on major streaming services or in commercial theaters. However, I was not particularly drawn to movie-going as a child; the journey from my home to one of the city's few modern cinemas required hours of transit. With both of my parents frequently away for work, I spent much of my time alone, watching anime on a second-hand disc player. Piracy occupies a significant place in my nostalgic register, not because I long for the days of waiting patiently for non-theatrical releases to circulate online during my teenage years, but because these piratical landscapes have continued to influence my engagement with cinema.

As I grew up, China's economy surged, and public transportation infrastructure expanded dramatically. The Wuhan of my childhood is almost unrecognizable today: towering office buildings, an extensive and heavily trafficked metro system, and numerous modern cinemas embedded in high-end shopping malls. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic changed the global reputation of my home region, I find myself wondering: where do my memories fit within this transformed urban landscape?

I struggle to take pride in Wuhan's rapid economic development, due to the human and environmental costs that accompanied it. Additionally, luck plays an undeniable role in the economic transformation of my family unit: urbanization opportunities enabled my family's class mobility and afforded me the privilege of studying in Canada. I seek to extract meaning from this period of immense socioeconomic and political transition in China, a time when the nation fully

embraced market capitalism while the Party further solidified its role as the country's destined leadership. Yet, these grand narratives do not define my personal recollections. Rather than macroeconomic shifts, it is the seemingly trivial objects and everyday experiences that have left the deepest impressions on my memory. In Chapters 1 and 2, I will explore the relationship between piracy and the formal infrastructures on which it paradoxically depends, framing piracy as a ghost economy that exists in tandem with official systems during China's socioeconomic transition.

In an effort to reconnect with distant memories, I asked my mother back home to find the disc player I once adored; it was gone. The tangible evidence of my screen-saturated childhood no longer exists. The device that played countless discs, many of which never had official distribution, can now only be commemorated as a ghost media player. I do not see this loss as theoretical setback but rather as a fissure, one that prompts me to reconsider my relational position to piracy. It is disingenuous to deny the profound impact of informal and illicit media consumption on my intellectual and personal development, even if its influence cannot be neatly conceptualized within theoretical terminologies. In shaping my childhood memories into autoethnographic material, the guiding questions of this thesis emerged: What constitutes the Chinese piratical landscape? Is piracy merely a means of filling cultural gaps, or is it deeply entangled in processes of global market liberalization? How does the informal circulation of pirated media engage with audiences, if at all? Why do Western piracy scholars focus so heavily on copyright and the perceived cinematic value of films? What roles do urban infrastructure and labor play in sustaining piratical economies? And finally, what does the embodied experience of spectatorship—watching a movie in a makeshift cinema or on a pirated disc player reveal about these larger questions?

To engage with these research questions, I navigate scenes from my childhood not as mere nostalgia but as sites of tension and paradox. Paradoxes are neither illogical nor incoherent; rather, they serve as necessary negations of the one-size-fits-all analytical models that often shape piracy discourse. Many ambiguities surrounding ephemeral yet widely circulated media objects remain underexplored in existing scholarship. This thesis begins by foregrounding the significance of the Video CD (VCD) format within media and piracy studies. While now considered obsolete, VCDs played a crucial role in the circulation of pirated media and in shaping Chinese media consumption habits. Their affordability, adaptability across devices, and compact size made them ideal for piracy at the time, despite their poor audiovisual quality. I argue that the widespread use of VCDs reflected an attempt to repurpose "technological leftovers," challenging the dominant narrative that positions piracy as a response to access scarcity. This perspective underscores that media evolution is not linear but rather shaped by regionally specific conditions that often defy conventional expectations.

VCDs carry generational memory, yet they remain largely absent in piracy scholarship, in part because the format is unfamiliar outside of certain regions. This neglect signals the need for closer attention to VCDs, particularly in relation to format wars and mass duplication. Companies like Sony aggressively promoted proprietary formats such as DVD Forum and later Blu-ray, both of which incorporated Digital Rights Management (DRM) and region coding to restrict unauthorized duplication. VCDs, by contrast, had no region codes, making them a preferred medium for piracy.[2] Despite their technical limitations, such as small storage capacity and low-resolution playback, VCDs intensified piracy's reach and accessibility in an unprecedented

[2] Shujen Wang. *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China*. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 49-51.

manner.[3] VCD's eventual obsolescence was inevitable, yet technological disappearance does not erase their lingering effects. Outdated formats can retain both cultural and theoretical relevance. Opening this discussion with VCDs is particularly compelling because, although they are no longer in mainstream use (except among collectors and archivists), their spectral presence continues to shape media consumption in ways that may only be fully recognized in hindsight. One such example is the enduring reliance on hard subtitles, a phenomenon that will be explored in detail in Chapter 3.

The first chapter, "Copyrights," explores the contradictory tension between China's market liberalization and the state's need to maintain political control. Labels such as illegality and counterproductivity fail to fully capture the local realities that operate on a contingent level. Shaped by both domestic and external policies and enforcement mechanisms. Laikwan Pang writes that in China, cultural policies function simultaneously as instruments of propaganda and economic opportunities, complicating hegemonic corporate narratives that seek to reduce piracy to a simplistic legal or economic problem.[4] Instead, piracy occupies dualistic roles: on the one hand, it reinforces capitalist labor relations; on the other, it democratizes access to media that would otherwise be unaffordable, particularly in the Global South.[5]

According to my father, his decision to rent a storefront for pirated discs was purely economic. The pirate market economy came into being on a widespread scale during the turn of the millennium (1990s to early 2000s), facilitated by contingent infrastructural nonavailability. In this context, piracy emerged as a mechanism to navigate media scarcity, operating within a shadow

[3] Ibid.
[4] Laikwan Pang, *Creativity and Its Discontents: China's Creative Industries and Intellectual Property Rights Offenses*, 1 electronic resource, vols., Online Access with Subscription: Duke University Press (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), https://www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=1004301, 63-64, 90-93.
[5] Yonatan Reinberg, "Evasionary Publics. Materiality and Piracy in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil," in *A Reader on International Media Piracy: Pirate Essays*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 27–50, https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048527274-003, 27-29.

economy that fills the gaps in official distribution networks and relies on them for sustenance. During the early 2000s, the economic boom had yet to reach the peripheral region of rural Wuhan where my family lived. To sustain his business, my father would travel to Hankou (previously romanized as Hankow), the historical trade center of the province, later transformed into a commercial and cultural hub, to purchase DVDs, which he then transmediated into VCDs for rental. This was a pragmatic strategy embedded within the peripheral economy, compensating for the deficiencies in formal media distribution. However, he eventually withdrew from the industry as the rise of the internet and smartphones in China rendered disc-based piracy obsolete. As he put it, "Disc pirating had fulfilled its historical mission and lost its raison d'être once and for all."[6]

Yet, a closer examination of China's inner-city shadow economy reveals that the decline of the disc-based market cannot be understood as a simple, linear demise. Chapter 1 addresses this complexity by first analyzing the political and economic negotiations between China and the United States, particularly the external pressure from the U.S. to comply with bilaterally recognized copyright protection agreements. In *The Politics of Piracy: Intellectual Property in Contemporary China*, Andrew Mertha chronicles the Sino-American struggle over intellectual property rights, beginning with the establishment of the National Copyright Administration of China (NCAC) in 1985 and culminating in the 1992 Sino-U.S. Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), following widespread foreign criticism of China's ineffective compliance.[7]

Mertha's fieldwork in Guangdong, a South China region geographically close to Hong Kong, demonstrates the pattern of partial compliance, in which micro-social and municipal-level

[6] WeChat Communication, June. 2024.
[7] Andrew C. Mertha, "The Copyright Problem" in *The Politics of Piracy: Intellectual Property in Contemporary China*, 1 online resource : 5 tables, 4 line drawings, 8 halftones vols. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501728808, 119. 123-130.

enforcement mechanisms weaken China's commitment to combating piracy. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, budgetary constraints, and the prioritization of censorship efforts on politically sensitive or pornographic content often take precedence over intellectual property enforcement.[8] Hence, anti-piracy campaigns exist in a liminal space between compliance and noncompliance, where the illicit circulation of media becomes intricately tied to bribery, informal monetary transactions, and broader urban shadow economies.

These dynamics position piracy not merely as an individual act or a symptom of bureaucratic failure but as an integral component of the social assemblages that facilitate labor, capital, and media flows within China's urban landscape. In this sense, these human-sustained networks have shaped a distinct, domesticated understanding of copyright with Chinese characteristics: one that aligns more closely with the principles of fair use than with rigid intellectual property frameworks.

The increasing consumer agency over media consumption has coincided with a growing public consciousness regarding the importance of supporting legitimate businesses in China. External legal pressures have contributed to China's efforts to reframe its national image and move away from its longstanding reputation as the piracy/counterfeit capital. Yet, despite litigation and the increasing monetization of media access, engagement with piratical landscapes persists on a vernacular level. A new form of political optics has emerged, emphasizing the necessity of supporting officially released and copyrighted media products while simultaneously justifying access to otherwise unavailable media for educational purposes. By framing piratical practices as educational, Chinese pirates have effectively domesticated the fair use doctrine, positioning their actions as an expansion of access to materials for the broader dissemination and democratization of knowledge. Chapter 1 also interrogates the contested nature of intellectual property in the digital

[8] Mertha, 140.

age, where ownership remains under constant political negotiation. Digital media, paradoxically, exploits both artists and consumers within the framework of neoliberal digitization, in which access is increasingly commodified and controlled by monopolistic distribution platforms.

I conclude Chapter 1 by considering a Marxism analysis of the context of digitization, given China's nominal commitment to socialism, and applying it creatively to the study of Chinese piracy. The instantaneity of digital consumption has transformed data into a commodity asset, intensifying capital accumulation. Marxist scholar Gavin Mueller, in *Media Piracy in the Cultural Economy*, argues that commodity circulation is essential for realizing value and that efficient circulation directly influences capital growth. The digitalization of media has significantly lowered maintenance costs, minimized both variable capital (labor costs) and fixed capital (machinic digital infrastructure), and optimized value extraction.[9]

However, the very infrastructural advancements that facilitate the production and circulation of media commodities have simultaneously enabled the expansion of pirated media. As Mueller and Adrian Johns suggest, digital capitalism has amplified access to surplus audiences, those excluded from state-approved content due to censorship or economic barriers to formal monopolistic distribution.[10] In this framework, the unimpeded flow of capital encounters lines of flight, acts of piracy that disrupt dominant systems of production and circulation by creating alternative networks of exchange and pluralizing spectatorship. Piracy shapes not only what, when, and where we watch, but also how we watch and with whom. This conceptual bridge leads to

[9] Gavin Mueller, "Theorizing Piracy" in *Media Piracy in the Cultural Economy: Intellectual Property and Labor under Neoliberal Restructuring*, 1 online resource vols., Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1781052, 82-86.
[10] Mueller, 105.
Adrian Johns, "A General History of the Pirates" in *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates*, 1 online resource vols. (Chicago, Ill., Bristol: University of Chicago Press ; University Presses Marketing, 2010), http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=481233, 1-8.

Chapter 2, "Pirate Spectatorship," which examines how Chinese piracy informs modes of viewership and engagement with media. It foregrounds the role of individuals, rather than merely technological innovations, as the infrastructural agents of piracy and considers how this dynamic involvement with pirated media reshapes cultural and economic exchanges beyond the Western cinecentric understanding of expected spectatorship.

This chapter references two media texts. The first is *Pirated Copy* (2004),[11] an underground amateur film that explores the lives of individuals in China whose livelihoods are intertwined with the pirated media trade. Interestingly, acquiring this film for research purposes proved to be a significant challenge: a film directly addressing China's piratical landscape was entirely absent from torrent sites and streaming platforms, with no seeders and almost no trace of its existence. That was until I turned to an online forum populated by dedicated DVD collectors. With a small monetary contribution, I received a downloadable link from a private drive within five minutes. In awe of the sheer size of this collector's archive, I found the process itself hilariously meta: a film about piracy that had been largely forgotten, seemingly obsolete even on piracy sites, yet still readily available within underground networks of media circulation. Such encounters highlight the vernacular dissemination of archival materials, where the collector is more than just a pirate, they function as an informal archivist.[12]

Although *Pirated Copy* has been criticized for its non-professional production techniques, I find it valuable as a contemplative, meta-textual exploration of piratical citizenship in early 2000s China. Street vendors and disc shops serve as the essential backbone for distributing films and music, their physical presence shaping cultural and artistic learning on both collective and individual levels. These interactions are not state-funded infrastructural projects but

[11] Jianjun He, "Man Yan (*Pirated Copy*)," 2004, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0461539/.
[12] I later found the film on *Internet Archive,* for free. https://archive.org/details/PiratedCopyChinaFilm2004.

improvisational relationships that shape spectatorial habits: browsing, socializing, bargaining, and interpersonal taste-sharing exchanges are practices that form part of viewership within everyday urban life.

Drawing from infrastructural scholars such as Brian Larkin and AbdouMaliq Simone, chapter 2 approaches people as piratical infrastructure, dynamic agents who reshape systems through informal practices, and examines the assemblages of pirate sociality that emerge from these interactions, challenging the notion of infrastructure as merely operational.[13] Instead, it is recast as the product of social relations it enables or constrains. This concept is vividly illustrated in the film *Pirated Copy*, which employs tight, medium, and close-up shots to focus on mobile vendors and customers congregating on a highway overpass. These cinematographic choices foreground the microsocial engagements that underpin everyday urban productivity. The overpass, originally designed solely for vehicular traffic, is repurposed here into a microcosm of pirate sociality. Through this adaptive reuse, the film reveals how urban spaces function not as fixed, neutral backdrops but as fluid sites of negotiation, where communities reimagine and reclaim infrastructure to meet their needs. In doing so, *Pirated Copy* underscores the tension between formal urban planning and the informal, often invisible labor that sustains cities.

The fluidity of these vendors connects seemingly disconnected demographics, facilitating interactions that rely on discretion and localized knowledge. For these exchanges to function smoothly, locals must navigate an informal economy through an intimate awareness of its spatial logic: knowing where to find vendors, how to secure the best prices, and how to identify new sellers. These non-macro actors cannot be separated from the broader study of spectatorship.

[13] Brian Larkin, "Introduction" in *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 7-8.
AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 407–29, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-407, 422.

Piratical spectatorship is marginal but not peripheral; it is both temporally dynamic and spatially mobile, deeply embedded within the fabric of the city's storytelling. Piracy, then, does not merely exist outside the cinematic apparatus, it actively shapes its aesthetics and mechanics, functioning as a de facto cinematic praxis.

This chapter then shifts to an analysis of piracy as a multimedia event that extends beyond the film itself, using the niche yet widely recognized documentary *Paigu* as a case study.[14] Pai Gu is the pseudonym of a well-known disc vendor in Shenzhen, whose expertise in and knowledge of arthouse cinema have fostered a localized cinephilic culture centered on world arthouse cinema. Operating within a cluttered yet intimate storefront, Pai Gu's space serves as a multimedia hub where knowledge is cultivated through small-scale, everyday interactions. His role is not simply that of a vendor, educator, or facilitator of media access; rather, he is an integral component of the social ecosystem that sustains and enriches local cinematic engagement.

Chinese scholars such as Weihong Bao and Chenshu Zhou have respectively reintroduced mediumship as a mediating environment[15] and expanded cinema to encompass off-screen activities.[16] Pai Gu's storefront embodies Bao's theoretical precision, functioning as a mediating environment where social relationships, cultural exchange, and media distribution intersect. This physical space enables mutable connections between individuals and ideas, transforming the storefront into more than just a site of commercial exchange. Rather than reinforcing customer passivity, it operates as a living interface, negotiating the boundaries between formal and informal, individual and collective, local and global.

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[14] Gaoming Liu, *Pai Gu*, Documentary (Fanhall Studio, n.d.). 2005, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12061022/.
[15] Weihong Bao, "Introduction" in *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945*, 1 online resource (479 pages) vols., Quadrant Book (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), http://site.ebrary.com/id/11036298, 5.
[16] Chenshu Zhou, *Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China*, 1 online resource (282 p.) vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520974777?locatt=mode:legacy.

Zhou's work, which examines the history of socialist China's mobile film projectionists, further informs an understanding of Pai Gu's role. In socialist China, projectionists were not merely laborers transporting films and movie projector but were also pedagogical agents who actively curated, assembled, and disseminated knowledge in rural areas. Their work epitomized infrastructural mobility, not only fulfilling an educational mission through physical toil and material struggle but also embodying socialist imagery as they moved across rural communities. These projectionists were hybrid figures, blurring the distinction between human labor and machine function, merging with the ideological spectacle they helped stage.[17]

A striking parallel emerges between these mobile projectionists and storefronts like Pai Gu's. The enclosed yet makeshift theaters that sought to recreate a "cinematic" experience exemplify the labor, creativity, and adaptability inherent in pedagogical media practices. This renders cinema not as a self-contained medium but as part of a broader multimedia assemblage.[18] At the same time, Pai Gu's storefront was deeply entrenched in local networks while remaining global in transmission. The circulation of pirated discs was not simply an act of copyright violation but a participation in intricate cultural economies and transnational intimacies. Both mobile projectionists and storefront-based piracy function as intermedial agents, embodying infrastructural mobility in distinct yet parallel ways, operating across divergent modalities and sociopolitical contexts.

By challenging cinecentric traditions that confine spectatorship to enclosed theaters, the piratical media experience emerges as inherently interactive and communal, echoing scholarship on pedagogical media experiences. A more participatory approach to piracy viewership is urgently needed, one that accounts for the social, spatial, and material conditions shaping engagement with

[17] Zhou, "Labor," 56-59.
[18] Zhou, "Multimedia," 82-84.

media. Following this line of thought, the third and final chapter of the thesis turns to the role of subtitles, not only in terms of their translational function and labor but also in how they shape cinematic experience, particularly in the context of piracy.

Chapter 3 starts by engaging with Michel Chion's concept of "audio-logo-vision," which conceptualizes the interplay between sound, text, and image. Subtitles, or words on screen more broadly, mediate between the visual and sonic elements of a film, offering an additional interpretive layer. As paratextual elements, they exist alongside the film's primary text, shaping perception rather than simply secondarily facilitating comprehension.[19]

Sound's role in this interplay extends beyond technical necessity. Chion exemplifies this by using Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1957), which famously demonstrates how voiceovers can politically reframe identical footage. Chion, however, reaches a different conclusion than Chris Marker: rather than solely dictating ideological framing, subtitles and other paratexts structure perception by merging text with image and sound Building on these theorizations, I argue that subtitles function as both visual aids and secondary interpretations of media. In the context of piracy, where official translation infrastructures are often absent or unreliable, subtitles take on an even more critical role, not only in linguistic mediation but in shaping spectatorship and perceptual understanding of media itself.

Subtitling is a meticulous process that demands collaboration and expertise, as it involves condensing dialogue, standardizing formatting, and integrating text into the visual narrative. Unlike closed captions, which are designed to serve deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences by attempting to transcribe all sonic elements, subtitles primarily function to translate foreign-language dialogue. Consequently, the labor of translation is susceptible to manipulation, including

[19]Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Second edition, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), https://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product/538829, 167.

nationalistic bias, censorship, and distortion. Official subtitling practices in media distribution can significantly alter a work's textual and perceptual meaning.[20] For example, in the first episode of the popular South Korean drama *Reply 1988* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), the officially distributed version in China presents a scene in which Bo-ra and her younger sister, Deok-sun, are depicted as engaged in a mere sibling dispute, thereby reinforcing negative perceptions of Bo-ra as overly sensitive and violent. In contrast, alternative translations and subtitles produced by underground groups reveal a deeper sociopolitical critique: Bo-ra, portrayed as a university student engaged in activism, condemns the 1988 Seoul Olympics for its role in government propaganda and the displacement of marginalized communities, a narrative with striking parallels to critiques of the 2008 Olympics.

These discrepancies in subtitling practices point to the multifaceted motivations for seeking pirated media, which extend beyond issues of mere accessibility. Chapter 3 nostalgically traces the history of zimuzu (字幕组) in Taiwan and later, in China. Zimuzu, or in an approximate English translation, "subtitle groups," are more than just pirates; they function as cultural mediators, labor collectives, and technological innovators. From early videotaped imports to contemporary digital torrents and P2P file-sharing, zimuzu have continually adapted to technological and regulatory shifts, embedding themselves deeply within the fabric of Chinese media consumption. The legacy of the VCD era, when hardcoded subtitles were a necessity rather than a choice, has left an indelible mark on Chinese audiences, establishing subtitles as an essential component of media consumption rather than an optional aid.

Unlike official subtitle programming, the work of zimuzu adds cultural nuance, annotations, and visual elements, rendering foreign content more immersive and accessible. Although their

[20] Markus Nornes, "For an Abusive Subtitling" in *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 156-157.

labor-intensive efforts are driven by enthusiasm, zimuzu operate within a precarious space, as commercialization and government crackdowns, exemplified by the forcible shutdown of YYeTs.net, threaten their survival.[21] Nonetheless, their cultural impact is undeniable, having granted generations access to media otherwise obstructed by censorship, paywalls, or substandard translations. Much like Prometheus's theft of fire, zimuzu challenge monopolies over information, democratizing media consumption and keeping global media within reach.

Piracy scholarship has long explored the tensions between legal frameworks, economic systems, and informal media infrastructures, frequently problematizing the vilification of piracy. In this thesis, I embark on an exploration of Chinese piracy from the perspective of memory, media, and contestation. Positioned between the rudimentary and the cinematic, the hyperlocal and the global, the illicit and the legitimate, Chinese piracy occupies a fertile ground for disrupting media normativity. Its hybridized and pluralized media landscape offers a critical counterpoint to existing literature, inviting a reevaluation of established notions of media consumption and control.

VCD

[21] Rong Chen, "YYeTs.net: From Digital Prometheus to Copyright Criminals," in COMM 2140 UGEC 2634, May 11, 2021, http://mediachina.today/2021/yytes.

Video CD (VCD) remains an unfamiliar term for most. With a 4:3 aspect ratio and a frame rate of 29.97 frames per second, VCD accommodates approximately 74 minutes of video content, compressed onto a standard 74-minute audio CD to match the bitrate requirements for CD reader compatibility, as noted by Aaron Mefford.[1]

The term VCD occupies a significant yet understudied position in the technological and cultural memory of late 20th-century China and Southeast Asia. Emerging in the mid 1990s,[2] VCDs rapidly dominated these regions as the de facto medium for home entertainment and piracy, despite being swiftly overshadowed by DVDs due to the latter's superior storage capacity and audiovisual fidelity. While VCD's fleeting commercial lifespan, constrained by its technical limitations, might suggest historical insignificance, its socioeconomic adaptability and role in shaping informal media economies warrant critical reappraisal. The format's widespread adoption was driven primarily by its low production costs and device compatibility, enabling accessibility across socioeconomic strata. VCDs and Compact Discs (CDs) share identical physical dimensions, yet their technical specifications and intended applications diverge significantly.

As Reddit user Kristina Yukino observes, VCDs functioned across diverse platforms: home and portable DVD players, automotive entertainment systems, and even computer CD-ROM drives. Derived from the compact disc, VCDs leveraged existing manufacturing infrastructure to achieve consumer-friendly pricing, while their durability against humidity (unlike magnetic tape-

[1] Aaron Mefford, from "What is a VCD?" *Quora*, 2019, https://www.quora.com/What-is-a-VCD.
[2] Wang, "VCD Killed the VHS Star." 47-51.

based VHS) and compact physical profile facilitated mass production, distribution, and piracy.[3] Crucially, the format's technological obsolescence now threatens the preservation of its content, particularly in contexts where institutional archives neglect older media. This absence of formal preservation mechanisms has inadvertently incentivized piracy as a grassroots form of cultural archiving, sustaining access to otherwise ephemeral materials.

A 2024 initiative by UCLA's Library Digital Collections team to digitize optical media underscores VCD's scholarly marginalization. During this project, archivists encountered a disc from the National Library of China initially misclassified as a standard audio CD. Closer inspection revealed its unique technical structure: multiplexed audio-video data encoded as a single stream, unlike DVDs' discrete track separation.[4] This misidentification reflects broader academic oversight of VCD's pivotal role in Asian media piracy networks. As Shujen Wang chronicles, VCD's trajectory was paradoxically truncated by its own creators: developed collaboratively in 1993 by Sony, Philips, Panasonic, and JVC, the format was abandoned within three years as these corporations pivoted to DVD development. Despite its low resolution (352×240 pixels) and limited storage capacity (74-80 minutes per disc), which required multi-disc sets for feature films and resulted in grainy visuals, VCD thrived in piracy ecosystems. In addition, bootleg editions often featured amateurish subtitles or dubbing, yet their affordability and adaptability satisfied burgeoning demand in regions with lax and flexible intellectual property enforcement.[5]

[3]@Kristina_Yukino, "Why do you think the Video CD is/was only popular in most of Asia?" https://www.reddit.com/r/askasia/comments/12fen76/why_do_you_think_the_video_cd_iswas_only_popular/, 2023.
[4]Maile Chung. "Preserving an obscure optical media format – the video CD." *UCLA Library*. 2024. https://www.library.ucla.edu/about/news/preserving-an-obscure-optical-media-format-the-video-cd/.
[5] Wang, 49-51.

As relics of obsolete technology, the VCD still holds historical agency. The global tech industry's CD overproduction in the 1990s, a miscalculation of market demand, created surplus materials that were gleaned and repurposed through informal networks, transforming corporate waste into a vibrant pirate currency. The technological leftover and its vitality thus need further interrogation. A Chinese tech reviewer on YouTube notes that during the 1990s, video recorders and VCRs in China were not positioned as consumer goods for individual households but as expensive commercial products.[6] The overproduction of CDs by tech companies, contrary to corporate expectations, facilitated their redistribution through informal and peripheral networks, minimizing losses from mass overproduction.[7] While DVD later became synonymous with piracy due to its replicability, VCD offered an even cheaper and more compact format. Despite its subpar resolution (352×240 pixels), VCD achieved unexpected widespread popularity in China as household staples thanks to its low production costs and compatibility with existing CD manufacturing infrastructure.[8]

In Western markets, where the format scarcely registered due to direct transitions from VHS to DVD, the VCD remains culturally illegible. However, across Southeast Asia and China, it functioned as a democratizing medium, circumventing the cost barriers of licensed VHS and early DVDs. Unlike region-locked, copy-protected DVDs, VCDs operated outside corporate control: their absence of Macrovision anti-piracy technology and region-free playback enabled unfettered duplication and circulation.[9]

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[6] @redwinetom, "The Evolution of CD-R Discs, VCDs, and the Historical Development of Optical Data Storage," 2021, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mAVFRuDAGk, 7:45 – 10:45.
[7] Mueller, 99.
[8] @redwinetom, 11:42 – 12:26.
[9] @vitualis, "VCD very popular in Asia, huh?" *VideoHelp Forum.* https://forum.videohelp.com/threads/26952-VCD-very-popular-in-Asia-huh-mmm-READ-THIS!, Jan 23rd, 2002.

However, fleeing corporate control did not equate to equitable distribution; rather, VCDs sustained informal market hierarchies that mirrored broader socioeconomic disparities. Format theorist Jonathan Sterne's framework of mediality, which posits that a medium's significance arises from its embedded "ways of doing things, institutions, and sometimes belief systems," illuminates VCD's cultural valence.[10] As a salvage technology, VCD mediated between global media content and regionally specific consumption practices, repurposing discarded industrial materials (technological and material surplus) into vehicles for localized piracy. Its technical flaws, blurry resolution, fragmented multi-disc sets, became markers of a distinct aesthetic of access, fostering communal and improvisational viewing practices that persist in today's higher-fidelity piratical ecosystems.

VCD's proliferation further destabilizes narratives of content scarcity. While corporate discourse framed limited media access as an issue of purchasing power, VCD piracy revealed audiences' capacity to forge alternative distribution channels. As Wu notes, the phenomenon transcended mere techno-economics, reflecting a collective desire to engage with global cinema despite monopolistic barriers: "the world is too fabulous, cinema too splendid, and appetite too wide." [11] This compulsion to participate in transnational cultural flows, even though imperfect means, underscores VCD's role as both a product and enabler of piracy, a duality shaped by state ambivalence toward copyright enforcement and corporate miscalculations in media production.

These intersecting factors highlight how media formations emerge from specific sociocultural contexts rather than functioning solely as temporary conduits for communication that fade once their primary utility diminishes, a process my dad framed earlier as VCDs completing their

[10]Jonathan Sterne, "Format Theory" in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, Sign, Storage, Transmission (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.
[11] Wu A.X., "Broadening the Scope of Cultural Preferences: Movie Talk and Chinese Pirate Film Consumption from the Mid-1980s to 2005," *International Journal of Communication* 6, no. 1 (2012), 509.

historical mission. As an ephemeral, transitional format, VCDs were creatively adapted to the sociocultural needs of 1990s China, even as they struggled commercially beyond East and Southeast Asia.

The format's regional dominance, and its absence in Euro-American contexts, exposes the geopolitical asymmetries underlying piracy studies. By examining VCD's technical specificities (non-selectable tracks, non-optional multiplexed track and low resolution) alongside its material repurposing, scholars can reframe piracy not as a parasitic aberration, but as a negotiation of technological constraints that generates unique modes of engagement. In an era of algorithmically curated streaming platforms, VCD's spectrality and circulation remind us that media preservation often depends on informal practices operating outside institutional and corporate frameworks.

The technical and material specificities of the VCD name how technological operations are governed by material and sociopolitical conditions. The popularity of VCDs was inextricably linked to the rising regional demand for pirated media in the 1990s, positioning the format as both a product and a catalyst of piracy. Its production and distribution networks were inherently localized, flourishing under state ambivalence and consumer complicity. Weak regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic inefficiencies enabled pirate producers to exploit the technology, tailoring their operations to regional markets and consumer appetites. This non-globalized model of media circulation thrived in contexts where formal distribution channels were underdeveloped or inaccessible, allowing VCDs to fill gaps left by sanctioned industries.[12]

These intersecting factors, such as technological accessibility, flexible state tolerance, and consumer demand, reveal that media formats are not neutral conduits for content but are profoundly shaped by the mediating environments in which they operate, as seen in the VCD's

[12] Wang, 54-55.

persistence in 1990s China, which aligned with localized infrastructural constraints, informal distribution networks, and grassroots cultural practices. Such cases illustrate how media obsolescence is not a fixed endpoint, but a contested process shaped by lived realities: formats deemed outdated in one context may retain operational or symbolic value in others.

The unprecedented scale of VCD production in China left an indelible cultural imprint on generations. Prior to the dominance of DVDs and digital streaming, VCDs operated within a distinct technological ecosystem defined by affordability, adaptability, and informality. The obsolescence ascribed to such formats by mainstream media industries often reflects a prioritization of technical fidelity and commercial control, marginalizing regions where official distribution infrastructure was once sparse or exclusionary. Obsolete media like VCDs cannot be reduced to lesser-than artifacts within a teleological narrative of technological advancement. Instead, they demand critical re-examination as dynamic pirate currencies that transcended their original industrial purposes. In contexts of rapid economic transformation, VCDs functioned not merely as vessels for audiovisual content but as carriers of generational memory, informal labor networks, and cross-cultural exchange. Their decline underscores a broader resistance to profit-driven, globally regulated media systems, which often erase localized practices of access and preservation.

While the low-resolution, bootleg-quality aesthetics of VCDs are unlikely to undergo a nostalgic revival akin to the Y2K era's rediscovery of analog technologies, their sociohistorical relevance endures in contemporary discussions of digital piracy. Modern streaming platforms, governed by technopolitical regulations such as digital rights management (DRM) and geoblocking, replicate earlier tensions between corporate control and grassroots access. These systems, designed to safeguard capital flows and intellectual property, criminalize informal sharing

practices that once sustained knowledge circulation.[13] Yet the historical example of VCD piracy offers a critical lens through which to analyze the mechanisms of illegality in neoliberal economies. It exposes how market liberalization and state-capital collusion often coexist with, and even depend on, informal economies that operate outside legal frameworks.

The susceptibility of VCDs to unauthorized copying, a fact that is indisputable, nonetheless offers a critical lens through which to examine the historical mechanisms of media illegality. Such practices emerged at the intersection of market neoliberalization, characterized by deregulated trade and privatized media ecosystems, and political contestation over intellectual property regimes. By analyzing how VCD piracy thrived within these conditions, scholars can interrogate the symbiotic relationship between formal economic policies and informal cultural practices, revealing how systemic gaps in governance and enforcement paradoxically enabled grassroots media access despite corporate and state opposition.

[13] Look what happened to internet hacktivist such as Aaron Swartz downloading articles from JSTOR (faced $1 million in file and 35 years in jail, ended his life in 2013), versus Meta downloading 80+ terabytes of books from Z-library, LibGen, and Anna's Archive to train their LLM AI. See @artificialintelligencenews.in https://www.instagram.com/p/DF1Fq3sSqLw/, February 8th.

Chapter 1: Copyrights

The distribution and circulation of pirated media in the globalized era require a more nuanced and complex analytical framework that views these media beyond their legality or impact on capital accumulation. The widespread yet temporally bound proliferation of VCDs demonstrates that consumer demand for these discs is not merely driven by novelty but rather represents a pragmatic response to marketization. This demand emerges from the increasing tension between economic reform and the state's tightening regulatory control.

In Laikwan Pang's 2012 book *Creativity and Its Discontents*, she highlights the contradictory forces at play between China's market liberalization and the state's persistent need for political control. Pang reexamines the historical trajectory of China's cultural policy as an instrument of both propaganda and governance. She traces this trajectory from Deng Xiaoping's

economic reforms, where cultural oversight was temporarily relaxed, to the early 2000s, when cultural industry regulation became an official state policy.[1]

These contradictions complicate the very notion of illegality within an emerging state-capitalist system, as piracy assumes both counterproductive and productive roles. Piracy can be seen as counterproductive because it paradoxically functions within and even reinforces capitalist labor relations. A 2008 report by the OECD on the *Economic Impact of Counterfeiting and Piracy* underscored concerns regarding the circulation of pirated software, such as Photoshop and Windows, which paradoxically solidify these products as industry standards.[2] While piracy undeniably bypasses formal contributions to the intellectual property economy, its broader cultural and systemic consequences warrant nuanced analysis. On one hand, piracy's prevalence can stifle the growth of open-source alternatives by normalizing consumption practices that prioritize accessibility over ethical engagement. This normalization risks reinforcing the very labor exploitation it ostensibly circumvents, as users habituated to pirated content may remain indifferent to the inequitable production chains underlying both legitimate and illicit media. Corporations often instrumentalize piracy's perceived threat to legitimize monopolistic control over content distribution, framing stringent copyright enforcement as necessary to protect creativity, even as such measures consolidate corporate dominance over cultural and material production.

On the other hand, piracy's role in democratizing access cannot be dismissed, particularly in regions of the Global South where uneven infrastructural availability, such as limited broadband availability, underdeveloped formal retail networks, or financial exclusion from digital payment

[1] Pang, 63-64, 90-93.
[2] OECD, *The Economic Impact of Counterfeiting and Piracy* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008), https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/trade/the-economic-impact-of-counterfeiting-and-piracy_9789264045521-en.

systems (credits cards that fit international financial standards), renders participation in formal media markets structurally difficult for many. Piracy thrives in these techno-economic gaps, often relying on informal infrastructures like grey-markets, peer-to-peer sharing via USB drives, or decentralized DVD replication.[3] Scholar Yonatan Reinberg contends that by enabling affordable engagement with global cultural products through these alternative channels, piracy not only circumvents economic barriers but also destabilizes the neoliberal myth of a meritocratic, borderless world, a narrative contingent on a nation's adherence to hegemonic intellectual property regimes and its capacity to build the techno-legal architectures such as high-speed internet, digital rights management systems, and centralized distribution networks that enforce those rules.[4]

Reinberg continues to note that state-capitalist systems depend on architectures of property control that are both technological (e.g., centralized distribution networks) and spatial (e.g., geo-blocked media). [5] In this sense, China's post-1980s economic liberalization exemplifies this tension: as the state pursued market reforms, newly urbanized populations developed an appetite for Western media, yet official channels lagged in meeting demand. This disparity spawned informal networks of entrepreneurs who capitalized on the burgeoning desire for cultural connection.[6] Small-scale vendors and delivery operators, such as the storefront operated by my father, emerged as vital yet precarious nodes in a decentralized infrastructure. Unlike state-sanctioned systems, these networks relied not on institutional machinery but on human labor and infrastructural availability, with bodies themselves becoming conduits for media circulation. Vendors curated inventories based on localized tastes, while couriers navigated urban landscapes

[3] Wu, 502-506.
[4] Reinberg, 27.
[5] Reinberg, 28.
[6] Wu, 504.

to physically distribute discs, their earnings directly tied to communities' thirst for affordable cultural participation.

The pirate market economy gives rise to commodification practices on both local and national scales, facilitated by contingent infrastructural non/availability. In this context, one cannot assume the absence of capitalist relations merely because China is nominally a socialist country. Piracy, as a pragmatic response to artificial media scarcity, is not an isolated practice but is deeply embedded in the shadow economy, compensating for deficiencies in official infrastructure.

Slavoj Žižek capitalized on the widespread availability of pirated DVDs during his visit to Nanjing as a guest lecturer in 2007. Within ten days, he purchased approximately 100 semi-illicit discs, though some were confiscated at customs[7]. In a conversation with a Chinese reporter, Žižek candidly discussed his engagement with pirated media, humorously reflecting on his own contradictions, being a Marxist philosopher while simultaneously benefiting from capitalist practices.[8]

Piracy in China embodies this very contradiction: a nominally socialist country fully integrated into capitalist practices, producing a cascading butterfly effect. This paradox originates from economic reforms that promote marketization while simultaneously reinforcing political control for regime stability.[9] The coexistence of pervasive political oversight and conditional skepticism toward governing authorities alongside an acceptance, or even endorsement, of economic benefits derived from market reforms, including the normalization of widespread piracy, underscores this tension.

[7] Fan Hong. "My unpublished report on Žižek." *Douban*, 2007. https://www.douban.com/group/topic/1726072/?_i=4520314WOzzntM,5596654vWPwZkA
[8] Ibid.
[9] Jinying Li, "Piracy Cultures| From 'D-Buffs' to the 'D-Generation': Piracy, Cinema, and An Alternative Public Sphere in Urban China," *International Journal of Communication* 6, no. 0 (April 12, 2012), 544-546.

Žižek highlights a dual attitude in the neoliberal postmodern world: a persistent cynicism combined with the pursuit of capitalist pleasures, while remaining symbolically cautious.[10] Magnus Wilson further elaborates on this duality, describing it as a form of transgression that does not impede functional effectiveness. Market liberalization has pushed China toward a state of partial ideological contradiction: the rapid expansion of its capitalist economy, coupled with restrictions on domestic cultural production, has created a gap that compels citizens to act pragmatically, even beyond legal boundaries when necessary.[11]

The ideological pluralization of Chinese subjectivity under neoliberalism, marked by adaptability, flexibility, and pragmatism, demands recognition as a necessary corrective to Euro-American piracy scholarship. Far from hypocrisy, these contradictions expose the untenability of framing China through rigid categories for interpretive comfort.[12] In reality, however, it is possible to maintain a critical, even cynical, distance from global neoliberal ideologies, much like principled Marxists do, while simultaneously maneuvering within the neoliberal order in a contradictory manner.[13] These entanglements are not failures of logic but sites of generative friction, where intimacy, mobility, and contradiction dismantle the purist fantasies of both state socialist idealism and neoliberal hegemony. To dismiss this complexity is to perpetuate an intellectual myopia that privileges Euro-American epistemic dominance over the messy, vital realities of postsocialist China.

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[10] Magnus Wilson, "Transgressive Conformity: DVD and Downloading in China," *International Journal of Zizek Studies*. Vol. 3 (1), 2-3.
[11] Wilson, 4.
[12] It is important to distinguish the Chinese state socialism of today, and the Marxism that an average North American-based scholar-reader know of. It is a common misconception that equates state socialism solely with a strict, anti-capitalist Marxist doctrine. In reality, the socialism practiced by the Chinese state today is a pragmatic, state-managed and hybrid system, instead of an ideological crusade against capitalism.
[13] Žižek's 2023 collaboration with Bilibili, a paid course called *Reinterpreting Marx, Hegel, and Lacan in the 21st Century*, 24 lectures, 180 CNY exemplifies tensions between radical critique and capitalist commodification. While Žižek denies profiting, Bilibili's @Academia claims revenue-sharing, underscoring how platform capitalism repurposes dissent.

Laikwan Pang argues that adherence to intellectual property rights (IPR) extends beyond a pragmatic strategy for China's economic integration into the global economy; it also functions as an ideological tool to exert control over media production and consumption, thereby micro-managing the domestic media landscape to regulate social change.[14] For the state, embedding itself in the mechanisms of cultural production ensures political legitimacy by positioning economic growth as the central doctrine for governance, while maintaining strong economic complementarities with countries reliant on China's mass production and export power.

Pang interrogates the inherent contradiction between market liberalization and state nationalism as a defining tension of China's participation in global capitalism, not merely an "inevitable consequence" but a structural paradox forged through competing demands to assimilate into neoliberal economic systems while enforcing rigid political-cultural controls. The intersection of pluralistic discourses on the cultural-creative economy and nationalism functions simultaneously to externalize the national image and to diplomatically consolidate a sense of belonging through cultural exportation.[15] But how do ordinary citizens navigate an economy reliant on both the production of creativity and its control? Pang asserts that piracy exemplifies a form of irrational, mimetic reproduction that challenges modern capitalist rationality and control.[16] Yet, as previously observed, this does not imply that piracy is inherently liberatory or anti-capitalist. Piracy in China has flourished as a byproduct of market liberalization, despite encountering substantial legal and administrative obstacles both domestically and internationally.

[14] Pang, 12-13.
[15] Pang, 10.
[16] Pang, 190.

China-U.S. Wrestling

> "Copyright [is] a matter of policy, of a bargain among the state, its authors, and its citizens."[17]
>
> Siva Vaidhyanathan, 2003

Following its economic reforms and promised integration into the global market at the turn of the millennium, China faced international pressure to comply with global copyright agreements. However, the trajectory of compliance has been "flexible" due to several factors. One major factor is the cultural and historical aversion to copyright principles, which emphasize the sharing of knowledge for the greater communal good.[18] Although the concept of intellectual ownership may seem alien, blogger Hugh Stephens argues that piratical practices in China are often driven by commercial interests, exploiting epistemological differences as a means to catch up with rapid economic development.[19]

At the macro level, the United States has been one of the primary actors exerting pressure on China to establish a bilaterally recognized copyright law. Andrew Mertha provides a legislative chronology of copyright and patent laws, tracing their drafting and debate in the early 1980s, the establishment of the National Copyright Administration of China (NCAC) in 1985, and the signing of the Sino-US Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) under intense foreign pressure in 1992.[20] Despite these efforts, longstanding disputes and concerns

[17] Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 23.
[18] @hughstephensblog, "Why Is Piracy So Common in China? Confucian Cultural Traditions or Just Plain Commercial Advantage? (A Historical Perspective)," *Hugh Stephens Blog*, June 15, 2020, https://hughstephensblog.net/2020/06/15/why-is-piracy-so-common-in-china-confucian-cultural-traditions-or-just-plain-commercial-advantage-a-historical-perspective/.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Mertha, 119, 123-130.

regarding intellectual property rights in China have yielded limited protections, as demonstrated by previous discussions on VCDs, pirated disc shops, and the role of individuals as piratical infrastructure.

The pressure to implement legislative measures aimed at curbing piracy and counterfeit goods to protect intellectual property and trademarks has led to some compliance, though only partially. The official ratification of intellectual property protections at the macro-national level often loses momentum when translated into municipal and local administrations.[21] In the early 2000s, audiovisual piracy was flexibly tolerated due to personnel and budgetary limitations, which were further undermined by broader bureaucratic priorities. For example, the Press and Publications Administration (PPA) was more focused on censoring politically sensitive media than on enforcing intellectual property laws.[22] The tension between distribution and piracy remains ambivalent, characterized by pressures for deterrent enforcement that are consistently challenged by local complexities in law enforcement.

Mertha's observations on partial adherence materialize through bureaucratic structures and segmented agencies, making piratical networks tolerable as long as they do not threaten socio-political harmony or the status quo.[23] The notion of urban harmoniousness is contingent upon local colloquial practices, or the ways in which individuals communicate and collaborate with urban management units.[24] Corruption within these units (for example, street police) in China has been a significant factor in the abuse of power at a micro-level. Burdened by reporting duties and a

[21] Andrew Mertha and Robert Pahre, "Patently Misleading: Partial Implementation and Bargaining Leverage in Sino-American Negotiations on Intellectual Property Rights," *International Organization* 59, no. 3 (July 2005): 695–729, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050241.
[22] Mertha, 140.
[23] Mertha, 8-9.
[24] Although street vendors selling pirated goods are not as prevalent as they once were. the harmonious initiative still applies in the age of combating digital piracy as vague enforcement policies.

hierarchical bureaucratic structure, lower-level bureaucratic machinery with low pay often experiences administrative inertia.[25] Financially motivated, these people may exploit their authority by threatening to shut down small vendors unless compensated with cartons of cigarettes or other gifts.[26] However, the normalization of bribery, particularly through informal transactions, has functioned as part of urban productivity, facilitating the flow of labor, capital, and media objects. While this is not to justify such informal taxation practices, as they can easily mutate into economic and interpersonal abuse, the shadow economy of piracy, driven by demand for pirated goods in night markets, often creates economic hubs that benefit vendors, consumers, and the police alike.

The local social assemblages that form around piratical economies complicate efforts to combat counterfeiting and protect copyright, though enforcement is not impossible. Administrative actions against counterfeiting are shaped by foreign corporate pressure, as foreign trademark holders and private investigators influence local policies. Mertha's work in Guangdong in the mid-1990s offers a valuable illustration. In examining the Administration for Industry and Commerce (AIC), the Chinese agency responsible for raiding and confiscating pirated goods, he observes that foreign clients frequently pressed the AIC to destroy confiscated items, a process both labor-intensive and costly. Mertha concludes that anti-piracy and anti-counterfeiting enforcement in this context follows a functional division: private investigators assume the burden of enforcement costs, whereas bureaucratic authorities exercise legal oversight. This arrangement

[25]Suzanne E. Scoggins and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Unhappy Police," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 2 (2016), 230.
[26] This is a testimonial statement from a person I know who worked part-time as street police in Wuhan, summer of 2023.

is sustained through reciprocal benefits, which are not necessarily monetary but often take the form of social gatherings, including dinners, karaoke sessions, and similar events.[27]

It is important to recognize that Guangdong province should not be generalized as a representative case for all of China. Guangdong's geographical proximity to Hong Kong significantly shapes its economic activities and political economy. While local anti-piracy policies are sometimes enforced flexibly, this does not imply leniency or institutional protection. The destruction of confiscated pirated goods serves more as a symbolic gesture than an effective deterrent to media piracy. Instead, penalties are commonly leveraged to minimize financial losses and maintain an implicit mutual understanding, where street-level ingenuity ensures the continued operation of shadow economies within urban productivity.

The ambiguous legal status of media-sharing practices undermines intellectual property policies and regulations, yet it does not entirely negate their value. These localized networks of production challenge the very temporality of intellectual property, which, rather than an absolute right, more accurately functions as a temporary trade monopoly.[28] Sterne distinguishes between ownership and copyright, arguing that the latter constitutes an exclusive but time-limited trade relationship that grants the right to reproduce a media artifact.[29] Unlike theft of physical property, which deprives an individual of their property, copying a file does not alter or damage the original material conditions of that file. Digital piracy, therefore, disrupts lingering capitalist conceptions of private property by questioning the exclusive monetization of cultural products. The rise of

[27]Mertha, 166-167. These payments are meant to make one gain face/appearance as a symbol of personal propriety by making others happy or satisfied; it does not involve direct monetary transactionally but practiced through voluntary repayment of one's help.The reciprocal relationality shapes the doctrinal ethics of practical sociality, whether purchasing discs on credit with interpersonal and communal credibility built on time and trust, or the effort to localize foreign media collaboratively strengthen a piece of media with increased knowability that increases sales and creditability. Non-monetary labor and transactions are not peripheral activities but central to the infrastructural ecology of both anti-piracy enforcement and piratical sociality.
[28] Sterne, 191.
[29] Sterne, 193.

digital media exposes the artificiality of scarcity, although widespread piracy alone does not guarantee the democratic reorganization of media industries. As evidenced by vernacular markets in which piratical networks operate, piracy remains embedded within capitalist labor relations. This paradox invites further discussion on piratical labor and infrastructure, which exist simultaneously as products of global capitalism and as vulnerabilities to micro-privatization.

While anti-piracy awareness has increased as China integrates into the global economy, fair use doctrine complicates clear legal stances, and outspoken opposition to piracy remains minimal. At the same time, decentralized consumption of pirated media persists, adapting to how official systems distribute and platform content.

Lucas Hilderbrand, in *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright*, highlights the contested nature of fair use in the United States, emphasizing its paradoxical status as an exception rather than a guaranteed right. Fair use applies only to copyrighted materials on a case-by-case basis, marked by legal ambiguity and conditional exemptions. Analog copies, however, benefit from more flexible governance under fair use, which resists a rigid binary classification of legitimate versus illegitimate usage.[30] Jonas Schwarz argues, however, that in the digital age, the content industry has sought to impose an uncompromising dichotomy: one must either pay for access or be classified as a pirate, with no middle ground.[31]

Siva Vaidhyanathan, in his analysis of U.S. intellectual property laws, including patents and trademarks, contends that while these legal instruments are intended to incentivize innovation through limited monopolies, they frequently fail to ensure consistent quality for consumers and

[30] Lucas Hilderbrand, "The Fairest of Them All? Home Video, Copyright, and Fair Use" in *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright*, 1 online resource (xxiii, 320 pages) : illustrations vols., E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392194, 83-84.
[31] Jonas Andersson Schwarz, "Honorability and the Pirate Ethic," in *A Reader on International Media Piracy: Pirate Essays*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 81–110, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048527274.004, 86.

may even hinder alternative modes of creative and cultural exchange and connection-making.[32]Here, piratical access to non-physical goods is justified through utilitarian frameworks, providing access to those excluded from official structures of media distribution.

Despite ongoing litigation and the growing monetization of media access, Chinese piracy has not merely assimilated principles of fair use but actively reengineered them into a form of legally literate defiance, a transformative adaptation that simultaneously fosters legal consciousness and carves out culturally-specific exemptions. For instance, some pirated movies distributed in MP4 format include a bullet commentary that scrolls across the top of the screen, often generated by subtitle groups through automated mechanisms (more details in Chapter 3), which states,

> “郑重声明：本作品之片源、字幕均来自互联网，仅供个人欣赏、学习之用，版权归发行公司所有，任何组织和个人不得公开传播或用于任何商业盈利用途，否则一切后果由该组织或个人承担。本站和制作者不承担任何法律及连带责任！请自觉于下载后24小时内删除，如果喜欢本片，请购买正版……”[33]

> “The video source and subtitles of this work are obtained from the internet and are provided for personal viewing and learning purposes only. The copyright belongs to the distributing company. No organization or individual is permitted to publicly distribute or use it for any commercial purposes, otherwise, all consequences shall be borne by that

[32]Vaidhyanathan. 17-19, 28-30.
[33] This text is copied from a movie found in an online pirate platform. Many variations of this commentary exist, but they share a central message emphasizing the need to support official distributions.

organization or individual. This site and the creators do not bear any legal or joint liability. Please delete the downloaded content within 24 hours. If you enjoy this work, please purchase the official version."

The commentary functions as a paradoxical instrument, operating in an ironic dual capacity: it underscores the necessity of endorsing officially copyrighted media products while simultaneously subverting this principle through practices justified under fair use doctrines within capitalist commodification frameworks. The referenced commentary above indicates that the source material is obtained from the internet without disclosing specific origins on purpose. This omission strategically absolves the creators of joint liability. By framing piratical practices as educational endeavors, the commentary aligns itself with legal defenses of fair use, which position expanded access to materials as a societal benefit, even when such access conflicts with proprietary rights.

Although the usage of copyrighted content here does not constitute transformative work in the conventional legal sense, the text juxtaposes an acknowledgment of its quasi-legal status with a deliberate claim to a legitimate right of consumption. This duality is epitomized in the contradictory injunction: Do not watch pirated media, even though we know you are here for that very reason. Just this once! Unless... Here, the commentary superficially endorses the economic legitimacy of distribution companies' profit motives while exempting its own activities, and implicitly, its audience, from scrutiny on a situational basis.

Digital piracy's technological spatiality, the material and infrastructural dimensions of its labor, reveals how pirate practices reconfigure both virtual and legal landscapes. Building on

Schwarz, pirate platformization transcends mere "non-physical circulation"; it generates counter-archival infrastructures that formalize alternative modes of cyberspatiality, such as decentralized torrent networks or crowdsourced translation hubs.[34] Crucially, these systems depend on invisible administrative labor: maintaining servers, negotiating decentralized hierarchies, and moderating user communities, all acts that constitute piracy as a deliberately structured ecosystem, not an anarchic free-for-all. Even mundane tasks like drafting disclaimers or proofreading subtitles become tactical interventions: by embedding fair-use rhetoric into piracy's workflows, participants weaponize legal ambiguity to erode the boundary between "legitimate" and "illicit" consumption.

Within capitalist IP frameworks, unauthorized reproduction carries dual consequences: it undermines revenue streams and symbolically destabilizes the mythification on artistic non-reproducibility. As Ramon Lobato and Jens Schöter argue, the digital erasure of material distinctions between original and copy necessitates artificial markers of authenticity, watermarks, holograms, proprietary logos, to reinscribe legitimacy. These mechanisms privilege producers by gatekeeping valorization, despite similar functionalities between legitimate and pirated versions.[35] The Chinese recontextualization of fair use doctrine further complicates this dynamic, reframing digital reproducibility in relation to spectatorship and access rather than ownership.

Crucially, piracy does not negate authorship; instead, it amplifies recognition through non-monetized, vernacular circulation channels. Unlike plagiarism, which appropriates creative work

[34] Schwarz, 81-85.
[35] Ramon Lobato, "Six Faces of Piracy" in *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution*, 1 online resource: illustrations vols., Cultural Histories of Cinema (London: Palgrave Macmillan [on behalf of the] BFI, 2012), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1348473, 78-82.
Jens Schröter, "Reproducibility, Copy, Simulation: Key Concepts of Media Theory and Their Limits," in *A Reader on International Media Piracy: Pirate Essays*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 167–80, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048527274.008, 167-170.

to erase authorship, piracy disseminates content while retaining attributions, thereby contesting monopolistic control over cultural access. Copyright infringement allegations frequently overlook the self- and cross-referential nature of cultural production, wherein works inherently build on existing tropes and texts.[36]

Therefore, intellectual properties are under constant political contestations beyond the scope of China-U.S. relations. The nature of digital "ownership" comes with an expiration date, paradoxically exploiting the artists and consumers alike. The piracy market contends with both external and domestic pressures, coexisting with the rise of neoliberal state capitalism. Next, we will look at the labor and urban productivity of piracy from a Marxist perspective.

Digital Capitalism: A Marxist Critique

It feels weird to write about China without writing about Marxism. Mao's adaptation of Marxist-Leninist principles to an agrarian context has, over time, evolved alongside market-oriented reforms. Consequently, this country now has a complicated situationship with Marxist philosophies while flirting with state capitalism. This section will not rehearse Marxist labor theory in an orthodox sense but will instead turn to scholarship that revisits Marxism in the context of piracy under globalized capitalism.

According to Marx, the value of commodities operates similarly to social hieroglyphics, wherein labor is abstracted from its physical form. This process of abstraction, embedded within the formation of a market, transforms labor power into a tradable and purchasable commodity.[37]

[36] Piracy exists in a dynamic relationship with cultural imperialism and, at times, reinforces it through spatial organization of the storefront.
[37] Marx, Karl, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 125.

The continuous reduction of socially necessary labor time is driven by the mechanization of increasingly advanced means of production. In the digital age, where consumption is instantaneous and data has been transformed into valorizable assets, labor power becomes increasingly difficult to conceptualize. The use value of commodities is further abstracted through imagistic representations, while exchange value assumes primacy.

In *Media Piracy in the Cultural Economy*, Gavin Mueller revisits Marx's argument that commodity circulation is essential for the material realization of value. The efficiency with which commodities circulate directly influences the speed of valorization, thereby shaping the overall productivity of capital accumulation. Although circulation, transportation, and storage do not generate value in the same direct manner as production, these processes still require capitalists to invest in both fixed and variable capital, much like the production of commodities itself.[38]

Within the era of digitalization and cloud-based infrastructures, capitalists increasingly seek to minimize both variable capital (by reducing wages) and fixed capital (by cutting transportation and logistical costs). This tendency extends to the realm of cultural commodities, where mechanization and automation enhance the efficiency of circulation, thereby maximizing the extraction of surplus value. The dominance of digitalization, characterized by significantly lower maintenance costs, further amplifies value generation.

The infrastructural advancements driving digital circulation, lauded for enhancing capitalist efficiency, ironically enable media piracy, which exploits the same technical and logistical innovations (e.g., cloud storage, P2P networks) developed by formal markets. This duality underscores a dialectical relationship: media commodities generate monetary value through both production and circulation, yet the automation that streamlines legal distribution also reshapes

[38] Mueller, "Theorizing Piracy," 82-86.

piracy's logistics. Whereas formal systems rigidly regulate automation to protect profit, informal networks adapt these tools to decentralize operations, shifting piracy from large-scale smuggling to fragmented, hyperlocal markets where competition drives down margins.[39] As Mueller notes, digital tools have democratized media production, granting informal actors, such as audiences excluded by state censorship or paywalled platforms, the means to bypass gatekeepers and redistribute content at scale. Here, piracy emerges not as a failure of regulation but as a byproduct of capitalist infrastructure itself, repurposed to serve those alienated by its exclusivity.[40]

Some argue that piracy exists at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum, functioning as a destructive force that undermines both businesses and creativity within the cultural industry. However, challenging this reductive binary, Adrian Johns situates piracy as a reaction to monopolistic practices, which have, in turn, catalyzed innovative transformations in media consumption and engagement. The informalization of media distribution through piracy fosters more competitive and consumer-oriented practices.[41] Local vendors and small-scale distributors play a crucial role in decentralizing media circulation at relatively low costs, enabling the illicit yet, in some instances, legitimate movement of "foreign" media commodities. This is particularly evident in contexts where access is restricted due to global economic disparities or, more notably, state censorship, such as in China.

In 2023, I was helping the organizer of Kingston's Reelout Film Festival, M, with converting MP4 files into a Digital Cinema Package (DCP) for screening, and we found ourselves discussing the pervasive issue of piracy in China. M spoke softly yet passionately about how piracy undermines smaller film distribution companies. His office, its walls lined with carefully curated

[39] Mueller, 105.
[40] Mueller, 108.
[41] Adrian, 6.

Blu-ray collections and vintage movie posters, offered a vivid glimpse into his deep love for queer cinema. I found myself drifting into an internal dialogue as I considered M's concerns. In my mind, I began to question the very structure of film distribution: What if the entire system of distribution channels simply disappeared? What if theatrical releases vanished, not only in far-flung markets but right here, in the everyday, Canadian world? M's office-based special collection of niche queer films, meticulously acquired during his time in Toronto, spoke volumes. I remembered the frustration of encountering titles I longed to watch, only to find them inaccessible on digital rental platforms because they'd never received an official release. In that quiet moment, these thoughts mingled, deepening my belief that the opaque nature of film rights and distribution not only limits our access to culture but also leaves passionate cinephiles like me yearning for a more open and inclusive cinematic worldliness.

The unrealized gap in disseminations echoes what Mueller refers to as "surplus audiences, "an insatiable desire among disadvantaged populations to integrate into the global cultural sphere, yet they are abandoned by formal and legal distribution systems. To many capitalist film distributors, these audiences, constrained by limited purchasing power, are seen as unprofitable and not worth the investment.[42] Thus, legitimate access to cultural content is reserved for those who can afford it, or simply luck into being born in certain places.

Copyright protections, or more precisely, the monopolies that determine who may legally reproduce media artifacts, act as barriers. They restrict unfettered access to cultural goods, channeling consumption into rigid social, legal, and economic structures. Yet, the collective yearning for entertainment, cultural enrichment, and global connectedness continually forges new

[42] Mueller, "Global Piracy," 100-106.

pathways, lines of flight under these rigid territorializations, and spectators participate as agents without the mandatory classification imposed by late-stage capitalism.

This reflection is not meant to portray piracy merely as a utilitarian response; rather, it highlights how economic and legal structures contribute to the stagnation of art, knowledge, and entertainment. Even when piracy is monetized through advertising or data extraction, it remains a vital, if imperfect, conduit for cultural flow in a system where official channels often fall short. When formal admittance is legally denied and surplus demand remains unfulfilled within the framework of the globalized legal apparatus, it's no surprise that many turn to informal or even illegal means to participate in cultural consumption. When participation in the cultural economy is ticketed, illegal engagement or sharing is thus perceived as nonparticipation.

Cultural communications, entertainment, and access carry non-monetary value that cannot be diminished by the logic of profit and investment. Lobato stresses that piracy isn't a fringe issue but a core part of global media culture. Informal, vernacular pirate circuits that prioritize curatorial practices are driven by the enthusiasm of small traders and non-professional cinephiles who facilitate such distribution. These unauthorized channels, while often perceived as a force that undermines creativity, actually enhances media marketability by increasing exposure in marginalized regions.[43] This process is further shaped by demand, the availability and popularity of various pirated copies are always contingent on cultural specificities.

These piratical networks operate in the shadows, nurturing shadow economies that are not merely peripheral to official media dissemination but constitute an integral component of global film reception. Piracy has never been confined to local contexts but remains entangled

[43] Lobato, 18.

within intricate webs of trade, circulation, and state power. This entanglement persists, and arguably intensifies, in the era of digital piracy.

Wang articulates the operational logic of digital piracy as hierarchical power dynamics that govern the velocity of media distribution across global, national, regional, and local scales. The simultaneous interplay of power structures, spanning state actors, transcontinental corporations, transnational trade agreements, manufacturing intermediaries, and local socio-political complexities, simultaneously destabilizes and reconstitutes territorial boundaries in film distribution, piracy, and consumption.[44] Digital piracy, according to Wang, does not prioritize debates over quality degradation. Instead, the mass introduction of personal computing technologies, has drastically lowered piracy's operational costs. She frames this shift as the liberation of content from material constraints, rendering regulatory efforts to reassert territorial control increasingly futile.[45]

While Wang's 2003 study presciently identified media platforms as dual sites of governance and piracy, this thesis proposes an alternative perspective on her analysis of networked governance's strategic and logistical frameworks. My aim is not to undermine Wang's academic contributions but to expand upon them by examining dimensions that have emerged since her work's publication. Specifically, I argue that contemporary analyses of networked governance dynamics must critically engage with the interplay between decentralized decision-making architectures and evolving technological infrastructures.

Globalized intellectual property (IP) regimes, designed to engineer capital flows through encryption and trusted-system frameworks, fail to fully liberate content from materiality. Corporate strategies of cloud-based storage and data-driven content management are not

[44] Wang, 15-16.
[45] Wang, 12.

metaphysically detached; they retain material and ecological consequences, exemplified by energy-intensive data centers. Conversely, personal hard drives, despite their digital nature, possess finite storage capacities, rendering digital files materially contingent on physical storage space. This observation holds significance for Marxist critique: assertions of digital nonmateriality obscure the material foundations of production.

Claims of ephemerality obscure environmental and labor responsibilities under centralized control. Streaming platforms function as digital landlords, wherein consumers pay premiums for curated access, yet both copyright holders and users lack substantive ownership. The illusion of borderless media accessibility is undermined by class-based hierarchies that prioritize exchange value over use value, leaving marginalized audiences reliant on semi-public piracy networks, from private torrent sites to peer-to-peer platforms, to access censored or otherwise unavailable ghostly content.

More niche streaming platforms like Mubi and Criterion curate diverse cinematic archives, yet their exclusionary subscription models contradict ideals of democratized access. Those excluded by cost or seeking content beyond copyright regimes generate a surplus audience dependent on piracy for cultural participation. The deprivation of tangible possession, similar to landlords contractually controlling essential livings spaces through the rental agreement that does not guarantee long-term tenancy, unilaterally controls the terms for curation, renovation, and ultimately displacement. Therefore, non-monetizable audiences rely on pirate networks from semipublic platforms to private torrent sites that require consistent seeding for alternative cultural engagement, accessing ghostly content that is otherwise formally non-existent or censored.

Expanding on private property's digital logic, Tarleton Gillespie critiques technological solutionism in his book *Wired Shut*, arguing that corporations embed temporal and spatial

restrictions into media ecosystems through trusted-system architectures. Such systems enforce static, licensed consumption by limiting access duration or frequency. Technology is not disconnected from historical and ongoing socioeconomic infrastructures; they permeate into digital spheres.[46] These techno-material barriers metaphorically and materially constrain user agency, choreographing acceptable consumption under revenue-driven logic.[47] Capital-driven technological fixes, from Netflix's geolocational restrictions to invasive data harvesting, reshape consumption practices, obstruct sharing, and spectralize content as transient commodities under corporate control. Trusted systems are the result of socially engineered technological frameworks embedded in digital commodities: restricting the number of times a file can be accessed or limiting the duration of availability.

The supposedly unimpeded flow of capital to ensure profit, ultimately meets its lines of flight named piracy, a transformative undoing of fixed systems of production and circulation through acts of creation, though not always democratic.[48] While the rotten system of labor exploitation and the disciplinary instrumentation of power are strengthened by networked conglomerations, they are also precariously destabilized by network-oriented dissemination. This dissemination

[46] Tarleton Gillespie, *Wired Shut: Copyright and the Shape of Digital Culture*, 1 online resource (viii, 395 pages) vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10190462, 9-12.
[47] Gillespie, 62-64, 70-71.
[48] Baidu Cloud NetDisk, one of China's largest digital file-sharing platforms, allows users to upload and store media through its corporate-controlled cloud infrastructure. While Baidu passively permits the circulation of pornographic and pirated content, sustaining a persistent underground peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing ecosystem, this mode of distribution remains tethered to corporate-technological infrastructures subject to state censorship and strategic bandwidth throttling. The intentional degradation of download speeds prolongs file acquisition, coercing users into purchasing premium subscriptions for unhindered access, thereby implicating them in monetized viewership practices even within ostensibly illicit piracy frameworks.

This reterritorialization of networked piracy exploits the precarious conditions of film consumption in China, mirroring the paradox inherent in Marxist-Leninist revolutionary doctrine: just as the proletariat, upon seizing state power, undergoes a reconfiguration of institutional positionalities that alienates their interests from the working class, corporations capitalizing on piratical networks consolidate monopolistic control over systems already marginalized by state and market forces. In effect, platforms like Baidu evolve into gatekeepers of their own piratical ecosystems, narrowing access and replicating the very hierarchies they initially circumvented.

transforms singular profit-driven production into webs of exchange and difference. These decayed networks still possess the capacity to grow rhizomes, offering potentialities of escape routes that reconfigure the ways individuals think about media consumption in relation to endlessly privatization and profit maximization.

This brings me back to my conversation with M, and raises the question: if personal possession is unsettling to digitized property owners, how does piracy influence not just what/when/where we can watch, but also how we watch, and with whom? The following chapter turns to some media examples as well as scholarly investigations that interrogate the notion of spectatorship beyond the individual spectacle within enclosed cinemas.

Chapter 2: Pirate Spectatorship

People as Pirate Infrastructure

The 2004 Chinese film *Pirated Copy* offers an experimental portrayal of diverse Chinese cinephiles, ranging from university instructors to sex workers, whose lives intersect through the illicit trade of pirated DVDs, facilitated by a college student working as a street vendor. Employing a multistrand narrative structure, the film intricately interweaves stories of Chinese subjectivities shaped by engagement with pirated media and the social relations it engenders.

For instance, a local college instructor uses a pirated DVD copy of Almodóvar's *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down* as pedagogical material for a lecture on sexual deviance, while a sex worker negotiates payment in the form of 50 pirated DVDs rather than cash, with Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* screening in the TV background.[1] Through meta-textual and self-referential exploration, the film examines how urban citizenship in China becomes entangled with media

[1] *Pirated Copy*, 29:10 – 33:40; 1:02:41 – 1:03:53.

piracy practices, positioning these activities as integral components of a broader media ecology. Street vendors and DVD shops form the foundational infrastructural network for distributing films and music; their physical presence and commercial spaces, in turn, function as nodal points within networks that shape cultural and artistic education through both public and interpersonal means. Each character is juxtaposed with specific films that co-constitute their fragmented subjectivities within an informal, amateur-driven media ecosystem characterized by perpetual flux.

The film has faced criticism for its ostensibly amateurish production quality. A prominent example is the visible intrusion of a boom microphone during a dialogue between a DVD shop owner and the instructor regarding consumer demographics for pornographic DVDs.[2] Such technical oversights would typically constitute grave errors in professional filmmaking, as would the use of handheld camcorder aesthetics, often perceived as low-budget or unrefined within contemporary equipment-centric cinematic practices. *Pirated Copy*'s visually chaotic style, further compromised by compression artifacts from disc-to-MP4 conversion, renders the production unpolished, even aesthetically impoverished. This blurring of textual boundaries and authorial intentionality complicates distinctions between degraded imagery and viewers' sensory immersion. Numerous Douban critics have dismissed the film's conclusion as superficial, dilettantish, and a derivative imitation of Truffaut's iconic ending in *The 400 Blows*.[3]

Does *Pirated Copy* merely function as a flawed imitative work that perpetuates negative stereotypes of Chinese citizens enmeshed in illegal consumption? Rather than interpreting it as symbolic representation of something else, I argue the film provokes critical reflection on the material effects of piracy and degraded media in its own vitality. Moving beyond binary

[2]*Pirated Copy*, 17:13.
[3] The ending of *Pirated Copy* pays homage to the well-known ending of *The 400 Blows* (1959), a long shot featuring two characters running from police arrest, echoing the ambiguity and emotional resonance of desiring freedom and the reality of constrained circumstances.

categorization of the film as either good or bad, it stimulates broader debates about the sociopolitical ramifications of China's early-2000s piracy ecology and how such material practices became embedded within everyday urban experiences. *Pirated Copy* frames media piracy as an organic facet of urban life through improvisational production techniques and intertextual allusions to internationally circulated pirated films prevalent in China during this period.[4]

In *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Brian Larkin's ethnographic study offers a nuanced infrastructural analysis of substandard pirated media production and consumption. Central to the book is Larkin's identification of a paradoxical duality within infrastructural embeddedness: while pirated media infrastructures fail to fully dismantle grandiose narratives of developmentalist modernization, perpetuated by colonial and nationalist elites, their very inadequacy becomes a site for critiquing colonial legacies.[5] By challenging the reduction of infrastructure to mere functionality and operability, Larkin posits that informational technologies possess inherent agency even when malfunctioning, engendering distinct phenomenological experiences that transcend conventional spectatorship modes.[6] Larkin's infrastructural framework on materiality and its dysfunction provides a critical lens through which to analyze *Pirated Copy*'s portrayal of urban piracy in China. By framing piracy not merely as illicit consumption but as a sociotechnical infrastructure, the film's degraded media quality and informal networks reflect broader tensions between globalized cultural flows and localized marginalization.

The proliferation of dysfunctional or piratical infrastructures enables global cultural participation while paradoxically perpetuating the marginalization of regions like Nigeria, a

[4] The film does not consider the fact that the quality and variety of pirated copies varies drastically based on cities, level of curation, and the locality's position within regional-global dynamics.
[5] Larkin, 7-8.
[6] Larkin, 123-125.

tension Larkin elsewhere terms an "infrastructural duality." This duality references both the material systems enabling circulation and the relational networks formed through temporal encounters.[7] Infrastructure's material properties not only facilitate the movement of electricity, water, or populations but also constitute sites of ideological mediation where exchanges of individuals, commodities, and ideologies occur. These heterogeneous social interactions, shaped by political dynamics, challenge presumptions of media technologies as ideologically neutral. In *Pirated Copy*, aspirations of socioeconomic integration and global exchange are enacted through quotidian infrastructural practices by localized actors. These exchanges manifest as interpersonal networks that reconfigure cinematic spectatorship patterns, suggesting that human actors themselves constitute the living infrastructure sustaining piracy networks.

The substandard quality of pirated materials sustains Chinese urban media ecologies while operating outside formal infrastructures. These bodies of infrastructure enable access to global cultural products (e.g., Almodóvar or Wong Kar-wai films) while simultaneously reinforcing socioeconomic precarity through their illegality. These sites of temporal encounters also echo Larkin's writing on the affective sphere of sites of mediation with negotiated social relations.[8] In such movements and temporal counters, spectatorship becomes embedded in assemblages of non/functionality, space, time, urban environment, and belonging.

[7] Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (October 21, 2013): 327–43, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522, 329.
[8] Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 162.

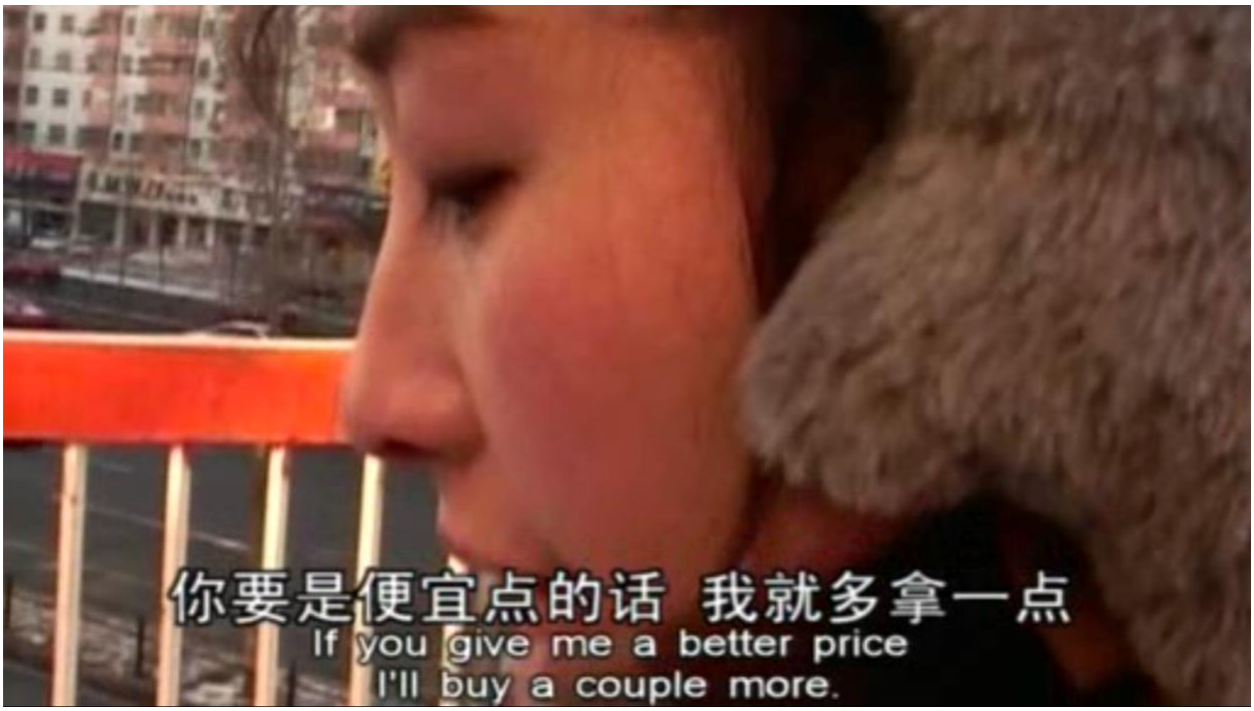


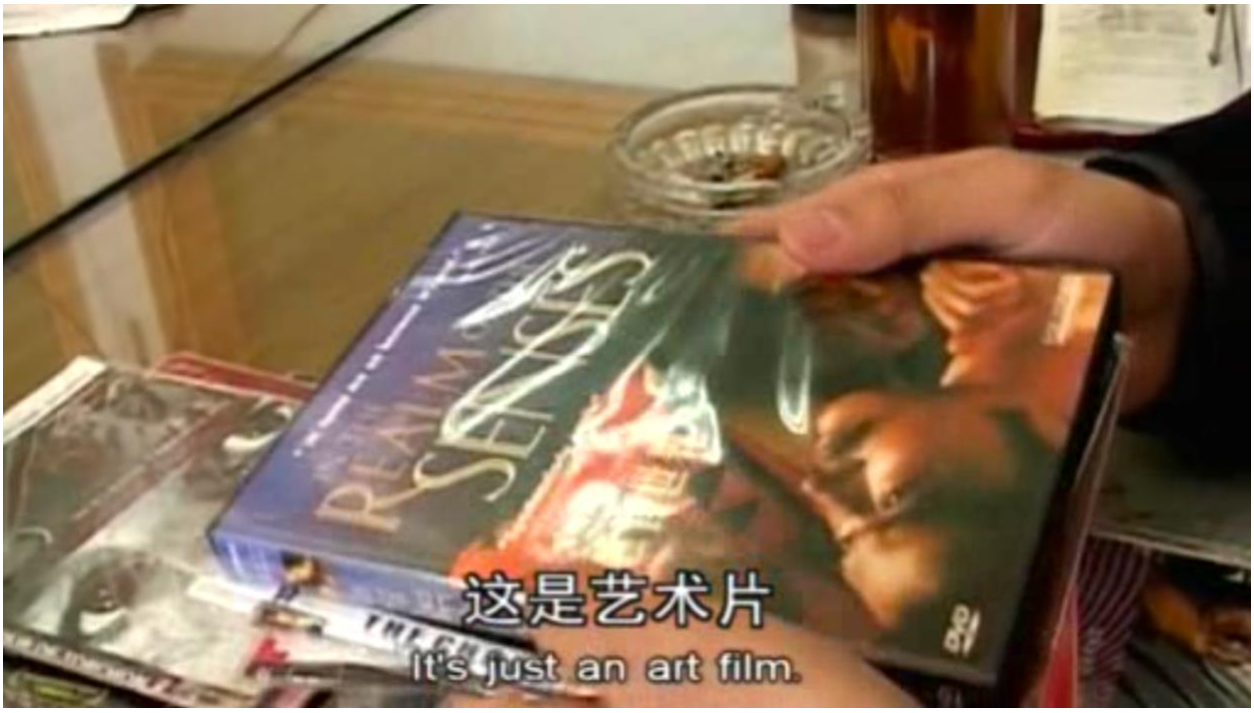
Figure 1: Screenshot from opening scene, *Pirated Copy* (2004): a buyer negotiates prices with vendors on the bridge: 1:52.

It may come as no surprise, then, that *Pirated Copy* foregrounds informal, mobile interactions among individuals, interactions situated within and facilitated by the material conditions of urban infrastructure. In the film's opening sequence, an unnamed young and inexperienced vendor is depicted among other disc sellers on a highway overpass. Against the backdrop of speeding vehicles propelling at high speed, the concrete bridge transcends its role as a mere physical structure enabling vehicular passage within a car-centric urban system. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic microcosm of social interaction, informal information and object exchange, and transactional relationality. Urban infrastructure scholars such as AbdouMaliq Simone conceptualize concrete materiality as emblematic of traditional infrastructural frameworks while advocating for a critical reimagining that positions human agents as infrastructural components. Simone's theoretical lens suggests that urban spaces exceed their perceived functional boundaries,

instead undergoing collaborative mutations, temporal fluctuations, and subversions of normative use.[9]

The film's opening scene (figure 1) avoids a full shot of the bridge, opting instead for medium shots and close-ups that emphasize the act of bargaining. This cinematographic choice mirrors how the city's reconfigured landscapes and traffic infrastructure become sites of informal exchange, paralleling the operational logic underpinning disc piracy networks, which extract surplus value by repurposing materials for alternative knowledge and economic circulation. For these transactional networks to function smoothly, participants must possess localized, vernacular knowledge: an understanding of vendor locations, strategies for securing favorable deals, and awareness of new sellers following police confiscations. While such provisional interactions stimulate informal economic flows, they also engender tensions and contestations, operating beyond the regulatory oversight of civil administrative bodies. This tension culminates in the narrative when municipal authorities apprehend the young vendor for distributing illicit pornographic discs (figure 2). Notably, prior to formalizing this administrative charge, the police engage in a deliberative debate over whether *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) constitutes pornography or merits classification as an art film (figure 3). The vendors exhibit spatial adaptability, bridging demographic groups that ostensibly inhabit discrete urban zones. The interdependence between vendors and consumers generates distinct temporal rhythms that actively shape the urban experience.[10]

[9] Simone, 407-410.
[10] Simone, 422.



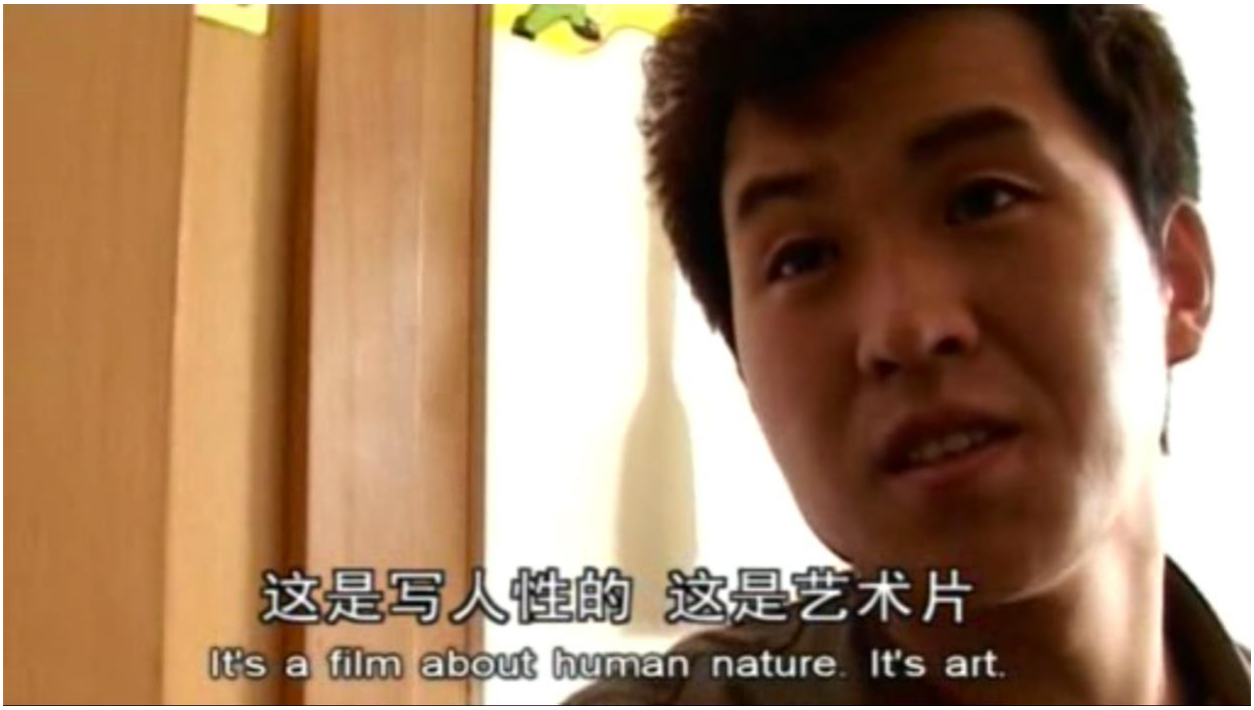


Figure 2 & Figure 3: Within the police station, a debate unfolds regarding whether *In the Realm of the Senses* constitutes sufficient grounds for pursuing charges related to pornography distribution. *Pirated Copy*: 10:42 & 11:19.

Echoing Simone's infrastructural analysis, Ara Wilson similarly contends that infrastructure transcends mere operationality, existing not as a passive background entity but as a dynamic force that simultaneously enables and constrains, directs and transforms intimacy.[11] Flowing piratical infrastructures may appear systemic and abstract in theory, but when contextualized within the circulation of pirated discs within urban spaces, their underacknowledged impacts on intimate relations, including regulatory interventions by administrative authorities, become evident. Whether manifested in fixed sites like storefronts, local bars, or college campuses, or in fluid practices such as inner-city delivery networks, the accessibility of vendors and consumers fosters a temporally situated familiarity. The networks and assemblages of improvised collaboration generate interpersonal exchanges as well as friction, exemplified by debates over whether a material constitutes pornography or art. This complex relationality of urban productivity, enacted through people-as-infrastructure, destabilizes singular interpretations of the film's textuality, rendering purely textual analyses vulnerable to contingency.

The creative subversion of intended infrastructural operability through interpersonal and cinematic encounters aligns with Larkin's observations on the malleability of technopolitical governmentality beyond commodification. Larkin emphasizes the cinematic value inherent in such social interactions,

> Film value here, has a dual character. One is tied to its nature as a standard homogenized commodity, deriving value from its circulation across space and time. The other comes precisely from the noncirculating locality of the cinema theater and the structure of

[11] Ara Wilson, "The Infrastructure of Intimacy," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (January 2016): 247–80, https://doi.org/10.1086/682919, 261-263.

> feeling that suffuses that space and is complicit in generating the sense of transgression, excitement, and desire integral to the affective experience of cinema. The experience of a film is produced from an encounter with it that cannot be reduced solely to the apparatus of film technology, the narrative organization of film, or the world outside it, but is an assemblage of all three.[12]

As non-macro actors of the city, street vendors and storefronts in *Pirated Copy* operate as active agents that both enable and constrain urban dynamics, reworking and rewriting the city by mediating intimate encounters. The desire to consume and distribute pirated discs, though policed, does not deter urban actors from transgressing regulatory frameworks. These actors navigate embedded infrastructures of illicit circulation that foster openness and unrealized connections. The potential for mobilization within these networks suggests unpredictable trajectories irreducible to purely imagistic conceptions of cinema. Informal pirate infrastructures materialize this potential through temporal territorializations, spatiotemporal configurations produced by pirate sociality.

When conceptualizing piracy as a productive mode of cinematic socialization, I do not place cinema as a fixed spectatorial practice but as a communal spectatorship intertwined with tangible infrastructural arrangements. Pirate sociality emerges through niche, vernacular networks of exchange and production that cannot be dismissed as extraneous to filmic practice. Piracy operates simultaneously on conceptual and technical levels, existing not outside the cinematic apparatus but as an integral component. Critiquing *Pirated Copy* as an amateurish imitation warrants legitimate scrutiny of its production techniques. However, dismissing its

[12] Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 162.

sociocultural utility constitutes a separate oversight. Analyzing disc-exchange scenes through the lens of pirate sociality reorients cinema as multimodal, challenging notions of isolated viewership in enclosed spaces.

I remember watching pirated anime on a portable disc player in the storefront of our family's business, where customer foot traffic, street chatter, and ambient noise inevitably disrupted the viewing experience. I could not focus. In this sense, does a pure, uninterrupted, standardized mode of cinematic exhibition truly exist? To further interrogate this tension between ideal and situated spectatorship, next section will engage with recent Chinese scholarship on cinema as multimedia, using a prominent niche documentary as a case study.

Piracy as Multimedia Assemblages

Paigu is an indie documentary that features a pirated DVD reseller and curator who goes by the pseudonym of Pai Gu (a name meaning "ribs" in Chinese) in Shenzhen. His extensive, specialized knowledge of arthouse cinema, from Bergman, Tarkovsky, and Edward Yang to Sergei Parajanov, sets him apart from other vendors. He is as, if not more, informed than the average criterioncel[13] today. Despite his self-deprecating remarks regarding his limited middle school education, which he claims prevented him from securing a more socially prestigious occupation, Pai Gu takes great pride in assisting customers seeking niche arthouse films by acclaimed directors. For instance, a client discovers Shōhei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983) in his shop, a rare and

[13] The term **"**criterioncel**"** is a meme culture neologism that adopts the suffix "-cel" (derived from "incel") to describe an individual, often stereotypically a man, who ostentatiously affiliates themselves with the Criterion Channel. A criterioncel takes great pride in their subscription and watches at least one movie from the Criterion Channel every week. The term lacks official definition, but the connotation is clear: curatorial elitism. The connotation critiques a subculture that leverages niche subscription platforms as distinct from mainstream services to signal uniqueness, often conflating curated consumption with moral or intellectual superiority.

controversial find. Pai Gu's inadvertent mastery of cinema has earned him not only financial success but also regional renown in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

As a documentary, *Paigu* not only captures the vernacular knowledge of a locally renowned vendor in Shenzhen but also narrates the particular context of unchecked urban growth in the region during the fervent period of reform and opening up. Echoing the preceding discussion on political and economic contestation, Wang examines piracy through the lens of regional economic complementarity under globalization, arguing that the significant economic interdependence among China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong fostered piracy networks that overlapped and interacted with legitimate and formal trade activities. Hong Kong, which has served as a transshipment hub for regional and global trade since the colonial era, functions as a critical node for all economic transactions, both legal and pirated.[14] Shenzhen, located just north of Hong Kong, is integrally embedded within this economic matrix shaped by globalization. The selective tolerance of pirated media constitutes an inevitable consequence of market liberalization, intercontinental trade, and local-regional communication.

The increased availability fostered and exacerbated by rapid economic development has influenced the ways in which films are consumed. Tony Tran counters the orientalist notion that piracy inherently resists global power structures, suggesting instead that it arises from the necessity of access in developing countries, where the demand for Hollywood films is often unmet by inadequate official infrastructure. [15] Tony Tran writes that DVD shops have long been regarded as "a waiting room for cultural modernity with impatient consumers," yet they are not exempt from

[14] Wang, 44-46.
[15] Tony Tran, "Piracy on the Ground. How Informal Media Distribution and Access Influences the Film Experience in Contemporary Hanoi, Vietnam," in *A Reader on International Media Piracy: Pirate Essays*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048527274-004, 52-55.

the dynamics of broader hegemonic social organizations[16]. The organization of pirate production and distribution is highly dependent on market trends, particularly those associated with Euro-American blockbusters. Despite its modest six-square-meter storefront in Shenzhen, the establishment is celebrated as a cultural landmark.

In this cluttered space, Pai Gu exemplifies a distinct dynamic by refraining from stocking excessive quantities of Hollywood films; his curatorial investment and commitment to sharing cinematic knowledge with customers, in exchange for their vivacity and personal connections, foster a localized piracy network with an exclusive focus on global arthouse cinema. In defense of film piracy, Pai Gu defines the filmic value of arthouse cinema as follows,

> "To achieve the potential value of cinema, it must reach people from all aspects of life. Everyone should be able to watch it, regardless of wealth or status. It's not simply because pirated copies are cheaper, but because many art films are unavailable, hard to find, or never officially distributed. Because [art films] don't often generate expected profit, so official distributors choose not to release them."[17]

Pai Gu's filmosophy attracts customers who resonate with him, who participate in an alternative economy, and who co-constitute a media ecosystem that mediates local and global cultural flows. The storefront fosters not only cinematic mobility but also configurations of social and physical proximity, negotiated through the practices of salespersonship (figure 4). Possessing specialized knowledge of film backstories, Pai Gu's recommendations are both well-informed and highly trusted by local cinephiles. The validation of his expertise transforms his storefront into a

[16] Tran, 67.
[17] *Paigu*: 48:14-48:35.

locus of cultural alterity. As the embodiment of Shenzhen's pirate infrastructure at the time, Pai Gu and his storefront serve as intermedial grounds where interpersonal intimacies and specialized knowledges co-evolve on a micro-level. Thus, it is crucial to view Pai Gu not merely as an iconic figure functioning as an educator or provider of media access, but also as an integral constituent of social space; his storefront must be situated as a mediating environment.

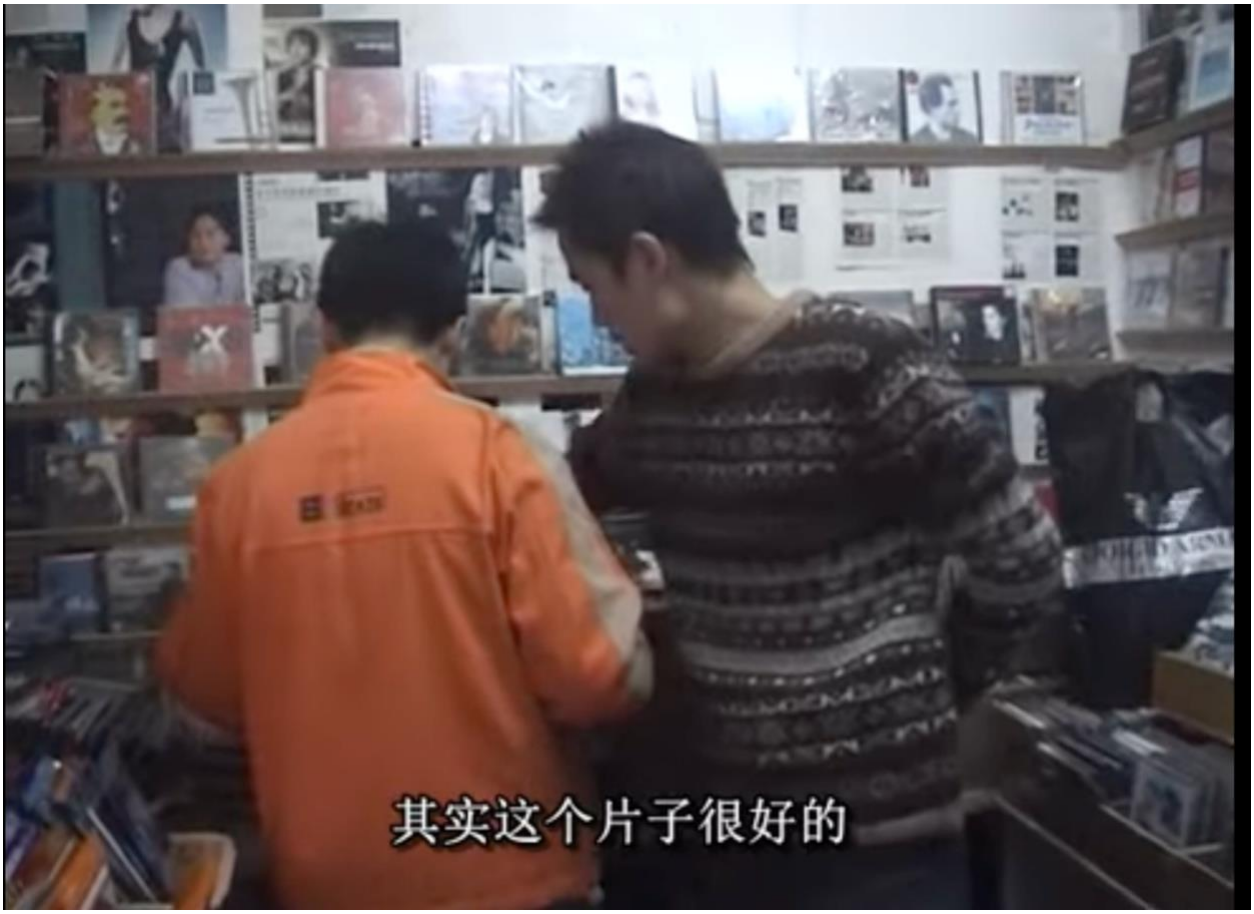


Figure 4: Pai Gu introducing films for his customers, "this film is actually great:" 6:37.

Recent Chinese scholarship has reinterpreted the definition of mediumship in intermedial and affective terms. In *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China*, Weihong Bao articulates medium not merely as a discrete technological channel but as a "mediating

environment" that intertwines material infrastructures, aesthetic practices, and social spaces. Central to her argument is the concept of the affective medium, which she describes as a shared social experience by the dynamic interplay between immediacy, meditation, and mass media institutions.[18] For Bao, affect is not intrinsic to individuals or reducible to specific media technologies; instead, it emerges from the manufactured environment created by the convergence of media forms, institutional practices, and collective spectatorship.[19]

Bao pluralizes the notion of mediumship by combining the linear model, which views medium as the direct transmission of a message, the intermediary model, which facilitates a two-way exchange between subject and object, and the spherical model, which treats medium as an environment that constitutes non–mutually exclusive assemblages.[20] Bao illustrates this through historical episodes such as the 1940 *Mulan Joins the Army* incident in Chongqing, where the deliberate staging of a protest during a film screening transformed the event into an intermedial spectacle blending theater, cinema, and public activism. Here, affective responses, such as rage and mobilization arose not just from the film itself but from the overlapping media practices and social tensions, positioning cinema as "vibrating art in the air."[21] Thus, cinema effectively becomes vernacular in its creation of a mediating environment through a syncretistic infrastructure. The dissemination networks and mobile infrastructure were symbiotic with the social milieu in 1930s-40s Chongqing, as individuals engaging with propaganda became part of a larger media ensemble.[22]

[18] Bao, 7-8
[19] Bao, 5, 7.
[20] Bao, 8.
[21] Bao, 1-3.
[22] Bao, 314-315.

Methodologically innovative, Bao situates film mediumship within the saturated media environment in which films are not confined solely to audiovisual storytelling but function as mechanisms of political and physical mobilization, thereby complicating the notion of a unified propagandic machine operating unidirectionally.[23] This conceptualization of technologies as processes, encompassing emotional resonance and subsequent social mobilizations,[24] challenges the perceived cinematic continuity and replaces it with a processual, multimedia cinematic vernacular. The notion of cinematic mobility revises, or challenges, the traditional bodily experience of cinematic purity, characterized by remaining silent and immobile within an enclosed, dark auditorium under the unseen guidance of the projectionist.

Following this line of thought, Chenshu Zhou offers precise insights on the "made visible labor" of projectionists in her book *Cinema Off Screen.*[25] The period from 1949 to 1966 in socialist China marked a cinematic departure from the invisibility of film projectionists in Western movie theaters and theoretical frameworks. With the expansion of cinema in rural areas through open-air screenings, film exhibition became a multimedia endeavor facilitated by the mobility and labor of itinerant projectionists, whether through the incorporation of physical objects, live performances, or slide shows. This multimedia ensemble is pedagogical, effectively communicating socialist messages via adaptable infrastructure that met local needs. The propagandistic efforts of the time visually portrayed projectionists as integral public figures responsible for educating the masses. Projectionists were depicted and validated as laboring bodies dedicated to socialist service,

[23] Bao, 268.
[24] The emphasis on the synesthetic medium echoes what Andre Bazin's position on the emotional resonance evoked by Soviet propaganda as ideological apparatus. See André Bazin and Timothy Barnard, *What Is Cinema?* 1st ed (Montreal: Caboose, 2009).
[25] Zhou, "Labor," 56.

echoing the celebration of manual labor and the proletarian spirit through the creative assembly and organization of media.[26]

Zhou argues that the emphasis on manual labor and the provisional nature of open-air screenings, particularly the visible and tactile presence of projectionists, established new political relationalities. In this framework, projectionists transcend their conventional role as static propaganda figures depicted on painted walls; instead, they emerge as interpersonal human interfaces imbued with allure and mystique.[27] These projectionists embody infrastructural mobility through their physical movement, not merely fulfilling educational imperatives via manual labor and material adversity but also physically articulating socialist ideology across diverse rural demographics. Following this logic, Chinese projectionists ensured film dissemination while simultaneously integrating themselves into the grand spectacle of spectatorship, functioning as human-machine hybrids within the cinematic apparatus.[28] One cannot avoid noting parallels between these mobile projectionists and the street vendors in Pai Gu who informally circulate vernacular knowledge. Both exemplify the intermedial capacity of humans to act as infrastructure, albeit calibrated to distinct sociopolitical frequencies.

While Pai Gu's storefront is not quite an open-air cinema, its mediating environment similarly evokes multisensory participatory experiences. This space extends beyond conventional social rituals to cultivate the joy of discovery, communal belonging, and tactile exchanges. Zhou conceptualizes such phenomena as atmospheric immersivity, a holistic mode of engagement contrasting with the controlled environments of modern cybernetic systems in modern cinemas. The act of privileging theatrical settings as the cinematic ideal rejects spontaneity,

[26] Zhou, 65-66.
[27] Zhou, 71.
[28] Zhou, 66.

interruptions, and the visibility of laboring bodies.[29] Resonating with this critique, scholarly attention should shift from evaluating representational fidelity in darkened screening rooms to interrogating how multimodal media configurations activate sensory environments and provoke action. The atmosphere in Pai Gu's storefront does not exclusively evoke cinematic pilgrimage; rather, micro-social encounters between laboring bodies fundamentally co-constitute its multimedia landscape.

This inseparability of human labor and infrastructure recalls my childhood experiences in black-box cinemas. Communal excitement in such spaces remains inextricable from multimedia contingencies, elemental factors like weather, wind, temperature, metaphorical/mechanical heat, and persistent ambient chatter. Even within cinema studies' theater-centric discourse, cinematic mobility and multiplicity persist as an analytical imperative. This is not to privilege the one over the other, but rather to lay out the elements at stake. Theatres themselves function as socialization sites governed by socioeconomic protocols: phone prohibitions, enforced consumption of cinema-provided concessions, and strictly moderated vocal exchange such as whispering. These social protocols are contingently applied and enforced, adapting dynamically based on the specific films being screened in specific theaters. One might further argue that such mobility reflects economic privilege, a perspective applicable to other media organizations discussed earlier, which assemble alternative social encounters through mobility contingent upon regulatory enforcement by governing authorities.

[29] Zhou, 132.

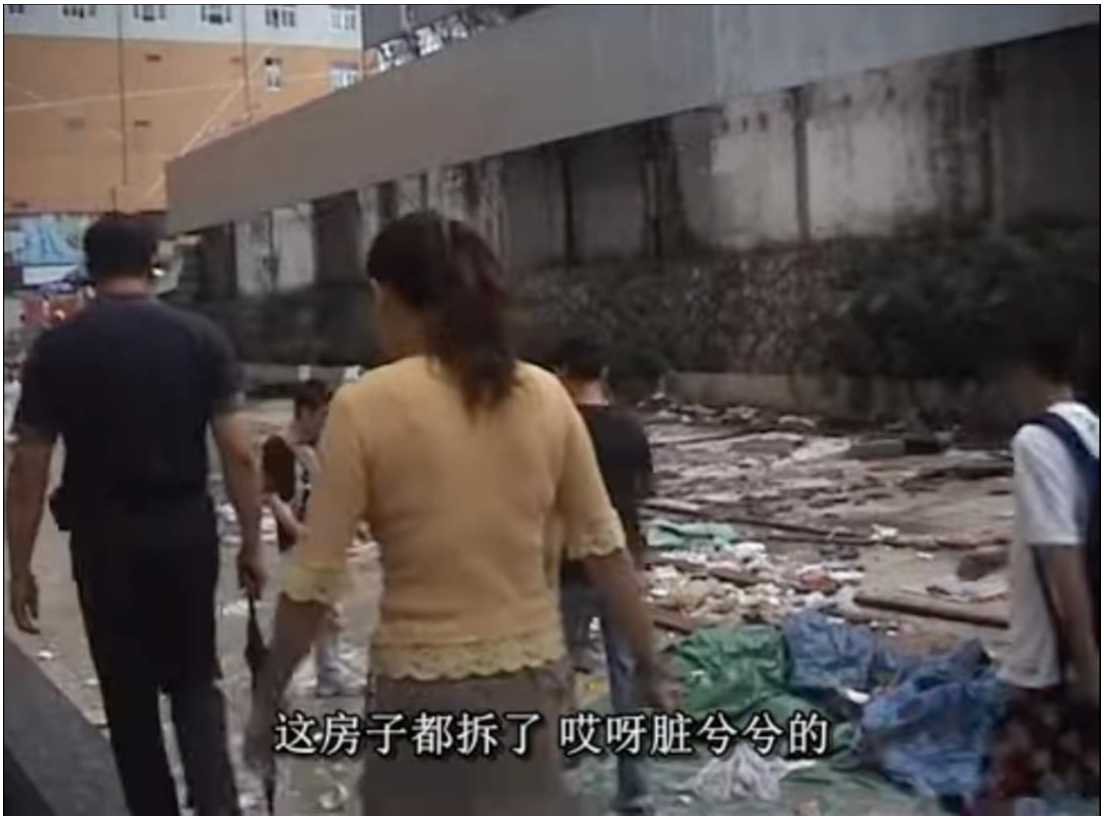


Figure 5: "This place has been demolished— it's filthy." *Paigu*: 1:41:58-1:42:07.

Approaching the end of the documentary, Pai Gu has to give up the storefront amid the intensification of anti-piracy enforcement measures. He transitions to selling discs as an itinerant vendor on an overpass bridge, adopting the role of a "walking ghost," (走鬼, Cantonese etymology that translates to "walking ghost" in Mandarin).[30]

In the closing sequence, Pai Gu returns to the now-demolished site he once prominently occupied. Smoking silently in the post-demolition debris, he observes the desolate space, while passersby remark on its newly degraded condition (figure 5). Perhaps the most melancholic shot

[30] Word imported from Hong Kong. A verb that refers to the act of evading law enforcement, typically in the context of unlicensed moving street vendors. See Josephine Smart, "Dog Kings Triads And Hawkers: Spatial Monopoly Among The Street Hawkers In Hong Kong," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 4, no. 1 (1983), https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.1983.9670056, 158-159.

of the documentary, Pai Gu's body, engulfed by pedestrians and scattered remnants of dark-green construction materials, stands as a spectral witness to the site's impending transformation into a shopping complex. The shopping mall could now be haunted by the ghosts of Pai Gu's once loyal customers.

The decline of pirated discs occurred at an unforeseen pace, eclipsed by the rise of digital piracy. This obsolescence rendered physical piracy economically untenable, reducing vendors like Pai Gu to spectral figures, "walking ghosts." The demolished site, once a hub of cultural exchange, lingers as a ghostly paradox. Pai Gu's body is both physically visible and dislocated. Pai Gu wonders at the now empty and unsanitary void, a space now functioning not as a repository of tangible media but as an archive of ephemerality. The multimedia mediating environment no longer preserves physical objects, but only evoking an ethereal, haunting quality of shadow, memories, and garbage.

This decaying landscape endures as both a vestige of the past and a site of nostalgia for transience. In a reflective blog post titled "The Year 2000 of Disc Browsing Has Passed, and I Miss It Dearly," Houchen Li poignantly recollects the tactile and affective dimensions of browsing physical media:

> Browsing and purchasing DVDs is an experience that should not be underestimated in its complexity. This process involved: other consumers sharing the same space, familiar shopkeepers, and friends accompanying you. These interactions created a subtle, mutual gaze, making the act of selecting DVDs both a process of constructing personal taste and an ongoing refinement of that taste through social comparison. The term "browsing" encapsulates an experience that is increasingly rare today. Hundreds of DVDs, sorted

> loosely by region or genre, would be placed in large bins. With limited funds, often enough to purchase only two DVDs, the decision-making process relied heavily on one's memory and experience, considering factors such as directors, actors, awards, and national styles. Each browsing session was a moment of self-reflection and interrogation of one's cinematic knowledge. The seemingly simple task of choosing the two films that best matched one's private taste became an exercise in personal discernment… "private viewing" represents both an individual-driven exploration, distinct from mass participation in cinema, and a personal environment that extends from one's immediate surroundings. This includes influences from family, peers, and local venues such as computer markets, all contributing to one's unique collection of DVDs. [31]

These storefronts evoke profound nostalgia precisely because of their intersubjective sociality. One's aesthetic preferences are never independent but are instead relationally shaped by the surrounding environment and its underlying infrastructure. In the case of this nostalgic blogger, urban spaces facilitate informal cinematic networks through interpersonal, temporal encounters. The mutual gaze that emerges as individuals come into proximity entangles them within infrastructural networks, rendering private taste never truly private but constantly influenced and contested.

In *Revolutionary Becomings,* Ying Qian introduces the concept of "eventful media" in describing documentaries as not merely passive representations of events but as active interventions that shape social interpretations and inscriptions, even creating events for the camera

[31] Houchen Li, "The Year 2000 of Disc Browsing Has Passed, and I Miss It Dearly," Dec 30th, 2019, https://www.pingwest.com/a/201672.

itself.[32] This notion of documentaries' active power to reshape and intervene in messages opens up avenues for multifaceted engagement beyond the conventional screen–spectator relationship. By conceptualizing content, aesthetics, and strategies as manifestations of attunement and reconfigurations of relationships surrounding the eventfulness captured by the camera, Qian establishes negotiations and mediations among entities that illustrate the power of propaganda documentaries beyond simple ideological programming.[33] Although *Paigu* is not a propaganda film and Li's anecdotal nostalgia does not signify a moment of revolutionary rupture, Ying Qian's epistemic re-examination of events, as moments of transformation and attunement, inspires me to examine more closely the micro-political assemblages and everyday occurrences, particularly in the context of physical browsing in storefronts.

The appeal and affective intensity of disc browsing derive from the participatory nature of informal media circulation and the communal, vernacular mediation environments that facilitate it. Activities such as banter, price negotiations, and casual commentary might superficially appear as transactional exchanges; however, such a reading overlooks the micro-political dynamics embedded in sustaining social relationalities grounded in informality. These intertwined realities form networks of communal spectatorship historically embedded within the economic and political contexts of an era defined by rampant physical piracy. Physical browsing entails a materiality socially contextualized by both immediate and systemic factors: daily operational interactions (among customers, suppliers, competitors, and law enforcement) and broader sociolegal, cultural,

[32] Ying Qian, "Introduction" in *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth-Century China*, 1 online resource (xiii, 305 pages): illustrations, maps. vols., Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=3627775, 3, 14.
[33] Qian, 5.

and infrastructural conditions (as illustrated by the chapter on copyrights) must inform any conceptualization of disc browsing as piracy-as-practice.

Browsing, negotiating, and purchasing transcend the conventional screen-spectator dyad. Unlike the regimented temporality of theatrical screenings, marked by the opening and closing of auditorium lights, these activities lack definitive boundaries. Acts such as selecting films, soliciting recommendations from peers and vendors, haggling, and engaging with environmental elements (e.g., casual dialogues, hierarchical disc displays reflecting popularity) collectively generate an intersubjective and vernacular affect of piracy that extends beyond mere screen viewership. These experiences are co-constructed through adaptive interactions among participants, infrastructures, and circumstantial factors, continuously reshaped by evolving preferences and contextual contingencies.

Within such attuned practices, media browsing becomes an experiential, event-driven interplay between actors. Where coded language and bargaining prevail, films acquire colloquial street names, and pirated discs often feature unauthorized commentaries or behind-the-scenes content absent from legitimate copies.[34] Such eventful encounters provide possibilities for vernacular alteration on a micro-scale, such as renaming a piece of media. These alterations subtly circumvent censorship while fostering intimate, informal relationships with media artifacts. The resultant regional lexicons and dialects infiltrate sensory and social perceptions of films, resisting static representational frameworks through their fluid informality.

The handheld DV aesthetics of *Paigu* do not merely replicate nostalgic analog conditions but provoke new inquiries into spectatorship that acknowledge digitality's transformative effects.

[34] Similar curatorial practices can be observed in film streaming sites such as The Criterion Channel. Known for its thoughtful curations, The Criterion Channel offers thematic collections with retrospective spotlights, interviews, exclusive content and special features, and recommendations.

Paigu is not a documentary that fits industry standard, but the film's affective resonance persists. While the documentary's directorial intent remains opaque, its capacity to attune cultural productivity and political intervention exemplifies how social interactions and technologies co-constitute one another as mechanisms of co-becoming.

The preceding analysis of informal media infrastructures challenges cinecentric models of spectatorship confined to enclosed theaters. *Pirated Copy* portrays lives enmeshed in pirate infrastructures sustained by laboring bodies, while *Paigu* interrogates the mediating environment of a disc storefront. Conceptualizing piracy as multimedia assemblages, encompassing not only film content but also eventfulness, atmospheric conditions, and informal networks, reveals alternative, participatory modes of spectatorship. This framework destabilizes the notion of pirated discs as stable or authentic texts, positioning them instead as contested, configured, and dynamically attuned entities.

Pirate infrastructures remain tethered to official infrastructures, precarious to demolition. Yet, they coexist with an unruly generativity, producing unforeseeable potentialities and historical trajectories irreducible to technological deterministic frameworks. This informality does not merely signal fragility; it incubates mobilizational capacities and ephemeral socialities, transforming piracy into a practice of tactical survival.

Far from being simulacral imitations of an authentic cinematic experience, pirated copies and pirate ecosystems cultivate distinct realities and vitalities, destabilizing referential hierarchies of viewership. These insights reframe piracy not as a deficient derivative but as multimedia assemblages: sites of experiential hybridity where material, social, and sensory layers converge to produce ephemeral yet potent cultural vitality. Building on this foundation, the following chapter

will deepen the analysis by interrogating the tactile dimensions of piracy via vernacular subtitling practices.

Chapter 3: Subtitles

Words and Sound on Screen

When one considers cinema as an artistic medium, concepts like immersivity, emotional resonance, sensory engagement, and compelling narrative construction frequently arise. While these concepts capture certain aspects of cinematic expression, they scarcely encompass cinema's full capacity to transform perception or mediate ideology. Jean-Louis Baudry, in his 1974 seminal article *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus*, theorizes cinema as a technical medium for transmitting dominant ideologies through its operational apparatus. Specifically, the interdependent mechanisms of the camera, projector, and editing technologies. Baudry argues that cinema's technical infrastructure extends beyond mere image-sound reproduction; rather, the systemic coordination of cinematic technologies actively structures spectators' perceptual experiences.

From the mechanical interplay of camera angles, projection speeds, and editorial cuts to the controlled viewing environment (for example, darkened theaters, fixed seating), the cinematic apparatus manipulates meaning by regimenting viewers' gazes and encouraging psychological identification with onscreen characters. From the camera's nonneutral metaphorical gaze to montages and continuity editing, which masks inherent discontinuity between shots, cinema conceals both technical fragmentation and ideological contradictions, naturalizing them both as coherent narrative wholes.[1]

While Baudry's critique productively frames cinema as an ideological apparatus, it overemphasizes spectator passivity, neglecting the viewer's active perceptual negotiations and subversions in the process of meaning-making. Cinematic discontinuity is not merely obscured through technical artifice or human labor but perceptually reconciled by audiences. Michel Chion offers a distinct perspective on perceptual synthesis in his book *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between visual and auditory elements, creating meanings beyond the mathematic sum of its parts. Chion conceptualizes cinema as a "place of images, plus sounds," wherein sound perpetually "seeks its place" within the audiovisual matrix.[2] This formulation does not subordinate sound to vision. Rather, Chion critiques visual-centric film scholarship by historicizing sound's evolution and demonstrating its indispensable role from what Chion calls early deaf cinema (silent cinema)[3] to talkies.

By isolating sound as an analytical category traditionally marginalized in film studies, Chion reveals how auditory and visual components interact through shifting relations of

[1] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974): 39–47, https://doi.org/10.2307/1211632, 41-43.
[2] Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 39-40,
[3] In rethinking silent cinema as not silent but deaf, Chion emphasizes the importance of musical scores, live sound effects, narrators, and audio noise that accompanied screenings. See Michel Chion, "When Was Film Deaf" *Film, a Sound Art*, [English ed.], Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3-6.

synchronization and synthesis, a process he calls synchresis. This interaction then forges an audiovisual contract, wherein sound and image reciprocally enhance one another, producing an added value, multiplying their individual contributions.[4] In questing for its place within this contract, sound enriches images by shaping contextual interpretations: Chion illustrates this via the example of a watermelon-crushing sound effect, which evokes humor in a slapstick comedy but visceral horror in a war film (simulating bodily destruction, body parts blown to smithereens), generating vastly different affect through the nonspecific value of sound.[5]

Furthermore, sound imposes temporality upon static images, altering perceived duration and emotional resonance. Chion's analysis of Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1957) demonstrates how sound montages fundamentally reconfigure visual meaning, arguing that sound actively structures political ideology by guiding vision rather than merely complementing it.[6]

To further examine sound's technical impact on the audiovisual contract, we can turn to Hollywood's transition to talkies at the advent of sound technologies. Heralding the bygone era of silent films, Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) declares, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." The statement metaphorically critiques both her fading stardom and the film industry's adoption of narrower frame sizes to accommodate optical soundtracks on celluloid.[7] This technical shift elevated dialogue as a narrative cornerstone, replacing intertitles. Similarly, the musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) satirizes challenges in producing early talkie films, such as bulky and long microphones requiring vocal projection,[8] a stark contrast to today's discreet body

[4] Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 36, 54,
[5] Chion, 39,
[6] Chion. *Audio-Visual*. 7-12, 20. In *Letter from Siberia*, Chris Marker experiences dubbing different voiceovers to achieve anti-communist or Stalinist propagandic purposes over the same clip, See *Letter from Siberia* (1958), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050633/, 25:42-27:40.
[7] This innovation also resonates with the popularization of television in the United States. Interestingly, at the level of experience, windscreen technologies actually make a lot of the early 50s feel bigger. See *Sunset Boulevard.*, (Paramount Pictures, 1950).
[8] *Singin' in the Rain*, Comedy, Musical, Romance (Loew's, 1952), 31:08-34:36.

mics that capture even subtle whispers. Sound technologies increasingly strive for perceptual invisibility even as their capacity to manipulate the audiovisual contract intensifies. As a result, dialogue emerges as a narratively potent device, thereby complicating audience reception for non-native speakers or those outside specific cultural contexts.

In reframing sound as an added value to the audiovisual compound, the intricate psychological interplay between sound and image might be encapsulated by foley artist Joanna Fang's assertion that "the gap between seeing the film and hearing the film is feeling the film."[9] Foley artists epitomize this interplay through their meticulous translation and organization of sonic elements, temporalizing moving images according to what would sound accurate (or deliberate sonic inaccuracy as counterpoint). Their labor multiplies the compounded perceptual value of images, rendering visceral textures that bridge sensory and emotional engagement.

Building on the premise that sound generates meaning through alignment or dissonance, Chion extends his framework to subtitles as agents that structure vision and perceptual interpretation, coining the term "audio-logo-vision." Subtitles, as visual representations of spoken language and sometimes sonic cues, mediate the audiovisual relationship by introducing a nondiegetic visual layer that recalibrates how viewers make sense of foreign dialogues with images. Therefore, I contend that subtitles occupy a paratextual status: they function simultaneously as visual aids and secondary hermeneutic interpretations of the filmic text. Just as translating poetry demands poetic sensibility, effective subtitle creation requires linguistic artistry to preserve rhythm, tone, and subtext.

However, subtitles, like all onscreen text, physically occupy visual space, redirecting viewer focus on textual meaning rather than auditory subtleties (such as vocal timbre, regional

[9] Joanna Fang appeared in *How This Woman Creates God of War's Sound Effects | Obsessed |WIRED* (YouTube, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFVLWo5B81w.

accents). [10] This visual dominance intensifies in bilingual or multilingual subtitling, where textual density mandates heightened attention. Chion argues that film's fleeting temporality further amplifies this dynamic: audiences, conditioned by silent-era intertitles to rapidly process transient text, must half-read subtitles while absorbing images. Unlike static art forms (paintings in a museum, for instance), traditional cinema's temporal urgency grants onscreen words more power in shaping perceptual integration subtly.[11]

Subtitling's labor-intensive nature stems from its need to condense dialogue, standardize fonts/visual codes, and balance readability with aesthetic coherence. This process demands collaboration among translators, editors, and designers. Casted as part of the variable visual narrative, subtitles provoke audience awareness of the act of reading and the fissures between audio and visual channels.[12] It is crucial to differentiate closed captions from subtitles, while both are captioning sonic content (dialogues and other sounds in the scene) as words on screen, the former is designed to accommodate deaf/hard of hearing people, while the latter is primarily used for foreign language dialogue translation. The distinction highlights subtitling as a dynamic and interpretive act beyond the logic of operation. Subtitles are negotiated and flexible, balancing fidelity to the original dialogue with the constraints of space, readability, and the film's visual style, often leading to choices about what to include, omit, or rephrase.

In *Translating Global Cinema*, Markus Nornes examines early Japanese subtitling practices that prioritized mise-en-scène by positioning text horizontally rather than vertically, avoiding obstruction of compositional elements. [13] Although the effectiveness of such artistic

[10] Ibid.
[11] Chion, "Diegetic Writing as Athorybos" in *Words on Screen*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 83.
[12] Chion, ibid., 149.
[13] Markus Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 124-125, 159-161.

endeavour remains questionable, Nornes's study informs how subtitles, albeit nondiegetic, are embedded within the film's visual composition from the point of view of the spectator. Subtitles are active participants in making and shaping the film's visual rhetoric, not just afterthoughts or supplementary materials. Nornes's analysis echoes with Chion's concept of audio-logo-vision, in which subtitles interact with gestures, performances with layered textuality. In this sense, subtitles co-constitute the audiovisual experience. The task is creative and political in nature, rather than simply mechanical.

For too long, audiences have taken subtitles for granted, overlooking their status as contingent artifacts shaped by both material constraints (e.g., the physical limits of celluloid space, film reel length, fixed seating distances in theaters) and sociopolitical conditions such as state or institutional censorship. Subtitles are not neutral translations but products of negotiation, translators often operate under social and political pressures, mandated to censor or alter content through subtle omissions, rephrasing, or strategic adjustments. These changes, sometimes imperceptible to viewers, can distort meaning or ideological intent, reflecting broader power dynamics in media production and distribution.

Official distribution practices not only monopolize the rights to disseminate media but also alter the textual and perceptual interpretations of content through abusive subtitling, as we see in the case of *Reply 1988* (2015).[14] Set in a Seoul neighborhood in 1988, this is one of the most renowned and popular South Korean dramas in China. In the original South Korean version of its first episode, the 1988 Seoul Olympics plays a significant role in establishing the series' overall tone. Sung Deok-sun, a member of the Sung family, is selected to serve as the Olympic placard bearer and practices her role incessantly. Living with her sister Bo-ra in a small room in the

[14] Won-ho Shin, *Reply 1988* (TV Series 2015–2016), IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5182866/.

basement, Deok-sun inadvertently agitates Bo-ra by accidentally striking her on the head with the placard while Bo-ra is attempting to read. In response, Bo-ra begins hitting Deok-sun with a pillow to express her anger (figure 6 and 7). Many people express disdain for Bo-ra, who is depicted as the older sister exploiting her privileged status as the eldest child to subject her younger sister to verbal and physical violence at her discretion.

When producing content analysis fan-videos, several Chinese creators such as L have noted an exaggerated tone in the subtitling, as Bo-ra accuses Deok-sun of "not knowing how many people are waiting to watch the Olympics" in an overly theatrical manner (figure 6). After all, this is only the first episode, and Bo-ra is portrayed as rude, unsupportive, and needlessly emotional despite being the eldest child and a top university student. These creators investigated the discrepancy they observed in the scene and sought out an alternative subtitled version from an underground subtitling group, ultimately becoming sensitized by the potency of abusive subtitling practices. This scene should more accurately be translated as (extending figure 7): "Is it really such a significant matter to hold a sign for the government? Do you understand the government's underlying plans? Are you aware of how many citizens were forcibly displaced as a result of the Olympics?"

In taking a step further, this creator L found the Taiwanese dubbed version, where Bo-ra explicitly accuses Deok-sun of being manipulated by the 3S (Screen, Sports, Sex) policy, which was implemented and propagated as a promotion for Korean culture while strategically diverting attention from the reality of Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship.[15] Content creator Shirley provides additional historical context for Bo-ra's enragement. As a university student at the time who was heavily involved in the anti-authoritarian student movement, Shirley explains that Bo-

[15] @L 君杂谈, "Winter's Must-Rewatch! Revisiting 'Hand in Hand' (Episode 1 of *Reply 1988*): Why Does Bo-ra Beat Up Deok-sun?" BiliBili, Nov 19th, 2021, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1wq4y1g7Fm/.

ra's remarks refer to the forcibly displaced citizens whose homes were requisitioned. Shantytowns along the Olympic torch relay route were demolished on the grounds that they were deemed "unsightly" and in need of beautification. Street vendors were compelled to abandon their livelihoods, while beggars and homeless individuals were involuntarily institutionalized within the prison apparatus.[16]

Although Bo-ra's response remains undeniably violent for theatrical effect, it appears significantly more reasonable when the added sociopolitical context is considered. The violent mistranslation of the source text not only distorts the character's intentions but also influences audience perception. Many viewers have expressed their dislike for Bo-ra as depicted in this scene, without recognizing the impact that the official subtitles have had on the overall viewing experience.

[16] @冰糖雪梨 Shirley, "1988 Olympics | 3S Policy | The Secret Behind the Years of the 'Reply' Series," BiliBili, Jan 4th, 2021, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1dX4y1N7da/?spm_id_from=333.1391.0.0&vd_source=f33cf1c105bbac8dde52eda40a617f86.

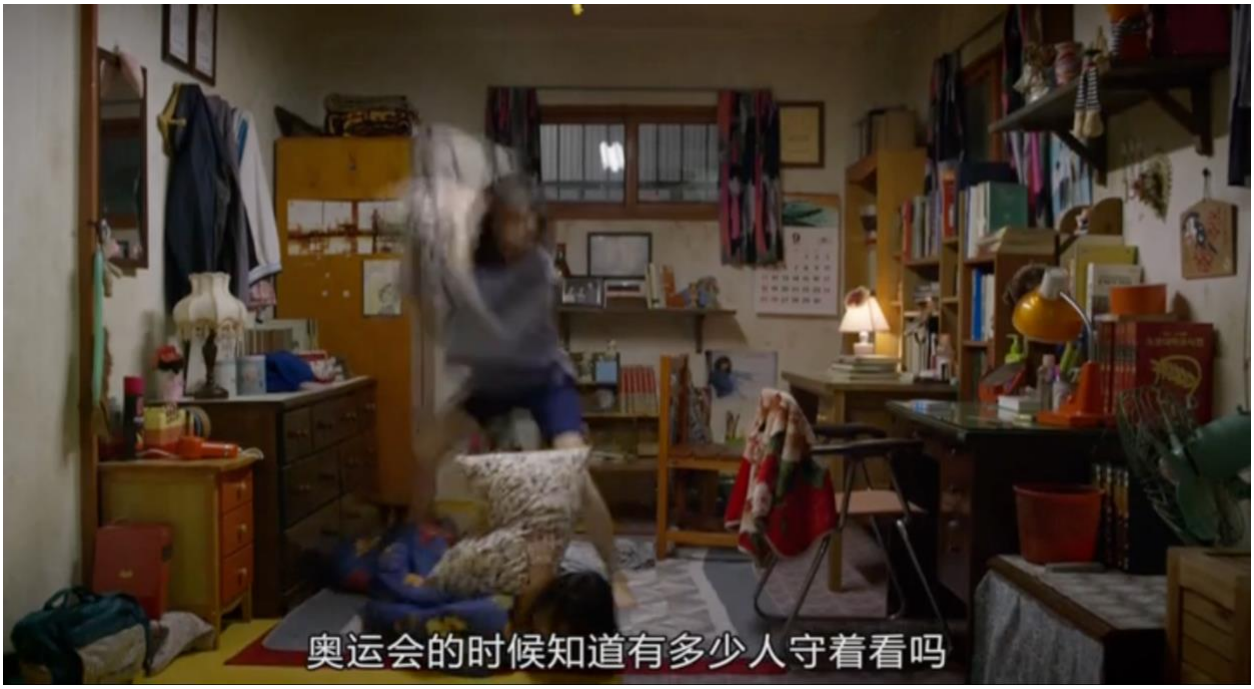


Figure 6: Bo-ra hitting Deok-sun with a pillow. The subtitle reads, “Do you know how many people are waiting to see the Olympics?” Episode 1 in *Reply 1988* (2015): 22:08-23:02.

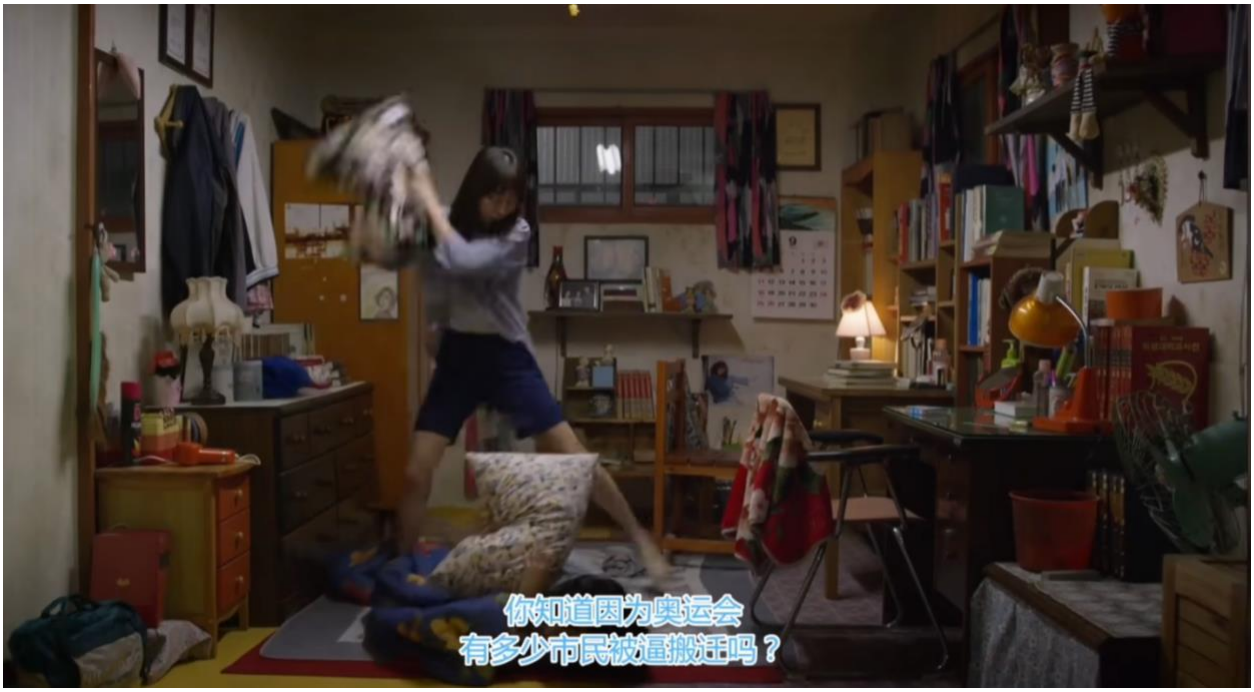


Figure 7: Same scene, differently subtitled. The subtitle reads, “Are you aware of how many citizens were forcibly displaced as a result of the Olympics?” Episode 1 in *Reply 1988* (2015): 22:08-23:02.

The effects of translation extend beyond the mere storytelling to encompass sensory comprehension and even the perceived likeability of certain on-screen characters. The mistranslations in *Reply 1988* are purposefully designed because, much like the strategies employed during South Korea's military dictatorship, other countries have forcibly displaced residents and implemented repressive, carceral models to "beautify" urban landscapes as part of grandiose national projects, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Even the slightest possibility of correlating a series of events, from one Olympic Games to another, and from student movement in 1988 to another student movement in 1989, must be effectively barricaded from the perceptual level. Hence, subtitles are not merely translational but interpretive, and as shaping not only "comprehension" but also "perception."

It is therefore unsurprising that Bo-ra's speech is both censored and subjected to abusive subtitling, intentionally misinterpreting the scene. Monumental public events of this nature, accompanied by the suppression of marginalized populations and unidirectional media control, simultaneously generate immense national pride (which can easily transform into chauvinism) and serve as a subtle form of indoctrination. These events inspire awe while suppressing alternative narratives that challenge the collectivist symbolism of perceived unity, progress, and openness, privileging televisual imagery over the provision of public welfare. Both the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 2008 Beijing Olympics were credited for successfully rebranding national images and facilitating rapid economic growth through foreign investment and further grandiose developmental projects. This rationale for disruption and displacement further underscores the importance of micropolitics, which highlights how seemingly trivial and mundane actions, such as raising a question, can challenge and counteract the sensorial expansion of propaganda.

Although perfectly harmonized viewership is unattainable, the impact of such censorship attempts cannot be underestimated; the censorship would remain undetected by those without proficiency in spoken Korean or who do not carefully compare the spoken dialogue with the on-screen subtitles. This particular example of censorship may appear insignificant on a grand scale, yet it serves as a microcosm that reveals the mechanical precision of an apparatus designed to both perpetuate and conceal violence through intentional mistranslations. Individuals who do not understand Korean must rely exclusively on the subtitles to interpret the imported audiovisual work, and consequently, they may perceive the scene as merely depicting the older sister bullying the younger sister rather than recognizing her political stance as an anti-authoritarian and anti-militarism student activist in late 1980s Seoul.

Subtitles are nonneutral visual variations; they can sensorially reassure hegemonic and grandiose narratives by bypassing the viewer's attentional register and intuition. This observation leads to the diverse motivations behind the pursuit of pirated versions, which extend beyond mere considerations of accessibility and financial cost. Viewers actively seek vernacular translations that circumvent state censorship. The next section will explore Taiwanese and Chinese fansubs in detail. It will pay particular attention to subtitling collectives called zìmùzǔ.

More than Pirates: Zimuzu in China

Subtitles epitomize the transnational movement and global circulation of screen media. However, subtitling cannot be reductively framed as merely rendering foreign dialogues intelligible or bridging cultural divides. Tessa Dwyer notes that subtitles function as signifying elements within

the multimodal framework of audiovisual translation, pluralizing screen media beyond a single-source and single-screen entity.[17]

Piracy and subtitles exhibit a symbiotic relationship: subtitles act both as an adhesive, enhancing viewability and perpetuating demand for pirated content, and as a magnifying glass that intensifies the core appeal of such material. The invisible labor behind subtitling pirated media entails collaborative processes, including meticulous coordination of timing, contextual adaptation, cultural sensitivity, linguistic idiosyncrasies, and textual readability. With the transitory nature of cinema mitigated by cassettes, DVDs, and digital platforms, subtitling repurposes media to bridge moving images with broader audiences, transforming content into modular, transmissible units of audiovisual exchange that circulate as informal cultural currency.

To date, scholarly discourse on subtitling remains predominantly Western-centric. However, I believe that China needs particular attention due to its understudied normalization of nonoptional, hard-subtitled content consumption, even for media originally made in Mandarin. Subtitling has become a default practice, a homogenized convention and implicit requirement among content creators across genres, from travel vlogs to mukbang[18] videos. Identifying a single representative example is challenging, as subtitling has been naturalized as essential labor in content production. A quick dive into major Chinese video sites will prove this normalcy. Chinese-language videos typically feature Mandarin subtitles, while non-Chinese content is often presented with bilingual, permanently embedded, hard-subtitles. This subtitling culture now permeates mainstream digital spectatorship.

[17] Tessa Dwyer, "Vanishing Subtitles" in *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation*, 1 online resource (240 p.): 32 B/W illustrations vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474410953, 67.

[18] A type of video or live stream trend where someone eats a large amount of food while interacting with audiences.

No singular explanation suffices for this dependency on subtitles. Some attribute it to the logographic nature of Hanzi, which facilitates rapid text processing (usually shorter than Latin languages), while others cite regional dialectal diversity as necessitating fixed subtitles.[19] Although linguistic and cultural factors for sure make contributions, they fail to adequately explain the absence of optional closed captions in such habituations. I position piracy as a primary yet underacknowledged driver of this normalization, operating alongside other forces to implement subtitling as a default practice in digital media consumption.

Remember VCDs? The overlooked medium that briefly dominated piracy markets due to its low production costs and adaptability. As a technological relic, VCDs lacked interactive menus or selectable audio tracks, often featuring permanently embedded subtitles prone to erroneous translations. The trajectory of translational labor and ephemeral media formats suggests that the demand for cultural accessibility resists strict regulation. In this context, vernacular fansub groups emerge as structured entities within piracy's commercialized sphere, systematizing the production and dissemination of subtitled content.

A Taiwanese YouTuber outlines the historical development of fansub practices in Taiwan and later in China: Following the Japan-RPC Joint Communiqué in 1972, underground Taiwanese groups began pirating Japanese media (predominantly through videotaping) to exploit economic opportunities during Taiwan's temporary ban on Japanese cultural imports. Even after the ban was lifted, factors such as stringent copyright protection and government censorship continued to facilitate the proliferation of media piracy. However, due to external pressure from the United States, specifically via the Omnibus Foreign Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988, Taiwan has

[19] @新熵, "Why Do Only Chinese Audiences Habitually Watch Content with Subtitles?" BiliBili, 2021, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hp4y1b7xq/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=f33cf1c105bbac8dde52eda40a617f86.

adopted a relatively more proactive stance in combating piracy and intellectual property infringement in order to safeguard its relationship with the United States. [20] That is not quite the same case for China.

At the turn of the millennium, digitalization took precedence as the internet became increasingly accessible in China. The emergence of well-known torrent sites, such as The Pirate Bay, assumed greater importance as pirated media circulated on blogs and forums. These downloadable media units, however, typically did not include subtitles. Such non-subtitled pirated media were vernacularly described as 生肉 (raw meat); some even referred to the act of watching non-subtitled foreign media as 啃不动 (can't gnaw through). Thus, dialectically speaking, there exists a counterpart, media that are fully cooked (熟肉). These online expressions stem directly from the pirate ecology, a figurative jungle of unseen materials/foreign food awaiting localization. This is where non-profit organizations known as zimuzu come into play.

No longer operating merely as individual video tappers, zimuzu has evolved into dedicated, organized, and enthusiastic groups that help audiences overcome linguistic obstacles via the internet, often rendering piracy the sole means by which many viewers access non-native content lacking official releases or hidden behind paywalls. Fan-subbing involves creating localized subtitles to render content more accessible and digestible, resulting in new versions imbued with distinct cultural essence and aroma. Zimuzu represents a distinctive approach to fan-driven subtitling that prioritizes contextual enrichment over commercial efficiency. Unlike mainstream subtitling services, which often minimize explanatory content, zimuzu integrates annotation techniques, such as wiki-styled histories and noun explanations, directly into subtitles as visual-

[20] @shasha77 "How Are Pirated Videos Made? A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Mysterious Work of 'Zimuzu,'" April 28th 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_GRX75nyvU.

textual elements (see figure 8). This transforms subtitles into dynamic tools for intercultural mediation, fostering deeper audience understanding of narrative universes or linguistic specificities of foreign languages.

Zimuzu leverages decentralized collaboration to produce translations surpassing official efforts, employing typographic language markers and cultural annotations while rejecting commercial subtitling's generic labels such as [inaudible] or [speaks in foreign language]. By balancing accessible phrasing with source fidelity, zimuzu challenges profit-driven localization, proving how collaborative, non-commercial labor enhances media literacy and cross-cultural engagement for niche audiences.

The labor of such vernacular collectives must not be underestimated. Zimuzu provides cultural annotations and idiosyncratic insights, thereby bridging knowledge gaps that are often overlooked in official versions due to their conformity with uniform industry standards. The operational logic underlying fansubbing depends on the laborious contributions of these groups; subtitling foreign media into bilingual or multilingual artifacts facilitates their dissemination. There is a hidden infrastructure to all of this, roughly following this specialized workflow:

> 片源 (source acquisition), 翻译 (translation and localization), 校对 (proofreading), 时间轴 (synchronization), 特效 (visual effects implementation), 压制 (compression and encoding), 发布 (distribution).

In this sequential production process, source acquisition and compression both demand intense computational processing capacity, while translation, proofreading, and synchronization require coordinated human labor and extensive time. Many fansub groups strategize the translation

process by dividing the media into segments for subsequent integration.[21] Through specialization, organizational structuring, and division of labor, zimuzu gradually develop a pirate ecology that expands audiovisual viewership through recreational practices.

Enthusiastic fansub communities worldwide deliver fast, accurate, and sometimes culturally annotated versions of media content. The ability to subtitle and distribute films and television shows with such exceptional speed and creative adaptation is no trivial undertaking. Different zimuzu groups maintain varying requirements. More stringent groups require subtitles to be precisely synchronized with the exact moment of sound production, a process commonly referred to as frame-timing. Dedicated zimuzus practice precision to the millisecond to ensure that subtitles are perfectly aligned with the audio. This process was considerably more labor-intensive and complex before the advent of automated digital tools such as Aegisub, which integrates audio waveforms, video playback, and subtitles into a single interface for synchronized playback.

Following the digitalized workflow, a final review process, known as "comprehensive proofreading," is conducted to examine the entire video and ensure the accuracy of the translation, synchronization, and effects. Only after these elements have been verified is the video encoded and released for distribution.[22] Some labor-intensive collectives meticulously adhere to quality control protocols: these groups address the exacting demands of audiovisual punctuation, a process that echoes Nornes's description of aligning subtitles with a film's spoken utterances. In other words, natural breaks in speech are critical for the temporalization of subtitles; they must be paced within the visual and auditory boundaries, or else the subtitles risk cluttering the screen and overwhelming the viewer.[23] The process becomes more sophisticated and time-consuming when

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Nornes, 166-168.

the source file lacks available subtitles in other languages, requiring translators to derive a textual translation solely from the audio.

Sometimes, people who have worked in zimuzus blog about their preferred formatting etiquettes, echoing previous writings on subtitles as negotiated artefacts. For instance, a writer from batcavecn.com shares their personal preferences on subtitling:

> "… bilingual subtitles should reduce text size for English to avoid bulkiness, use Latin punctuation marks to prevent potential misalignment, and employ legible fonts of moderate size (typically standard white or slightly desaturated yellow) without high-saturation colors.
>
> For enhanced readability, it is recommended to use outlines, shadows, semi-transparent backgrounds, or engraved effects; otherwise, subtitles may blend into the video background, rendering them difficult to read."[24]

On the one hand, officially released translations of foreign media enforce standardization of temporal pacing through technical parameters: these include restrictions on specialized vocabularies and culturally specific expressions, as well as quantitative constraints on characters per second/frame. Such limitations inevitably increase readability through rhythmic pacing, thereby shaping spectatorial experiences optimized for broad accessibility. On the other hand, while temporal synchronization remains an established expectation in professional subtitle production, the practical realization of this standard requires critical scrutiny. The inherent rigidity of formal guidelines, particularly prohibitions against incorporating creative adaptations,

[24] @匹克 "An Overview of the Chinese Subtitle Localization Workflow," October 2nd, 2023, https://www.batcavecn.com/?p=18227.

frequently results in a loss of nuanced meaning. These challenges become compounded in fansub transcription practices, which must simultaneously execute linguistic translation and contextualize content through cultural mediation, within a limited time frame.

In subtitling *Mobile Suit Gundam SEED Freedom* (2024),[25] a fansub content creator actively expanded the boundaries of visual intervention common in underground translation practices. To contextualize the narrative for audiences unfamiliar with the *Gundam* metaseries, the creator incorporated slash card-style annotations directly into the subtitles. These annotations functioned similarly to footnotes but became part of the visual narrative itself. Specific additions included inserting fictional institutional logos and summarizing organizational histories directly into the subtitle framework (see figure 8).[26] Here, fansub creators deviate from or reinterpret professional localization norms through their unlicensed modifications to source material, such as adding logos and lores.

Such definitional explanations and contextual background information are rarely prioritized by commercial subtitling groups, yet collectives such as zimuzu embrace this approach, framing it not merely as a technical process but as an intentional practice of intercultural mediation. Fan-subtitled media products function as cultural intermediaries that critically reshape audience engagement with and comprehension of media texts. This phenomenon explains why niche fansub collectives, often specializing in singular franchises or thematic content, are often valued over commercially produced subtitles. Notably, these annotative strategies deliberately reconfigure viewer agency by encouraging audiences to pause playback and engage in close analysis, in the form of attentional demobilization.

[25] *Kidô Senshi Gundam Seed Freedom*, Animation, Action, Adventure (Bandai Namco Filmworks, Shochiku ODS Business Office, Sunrise Beyond, 2024).
[26] @永世の剑鞘 "Gundam SEED Freedom: Decoding FX Subtitles, MS Schematics, and Lore Terms," BiliBili, June 15th, 2024, https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv35485819/?jump_opus=1.

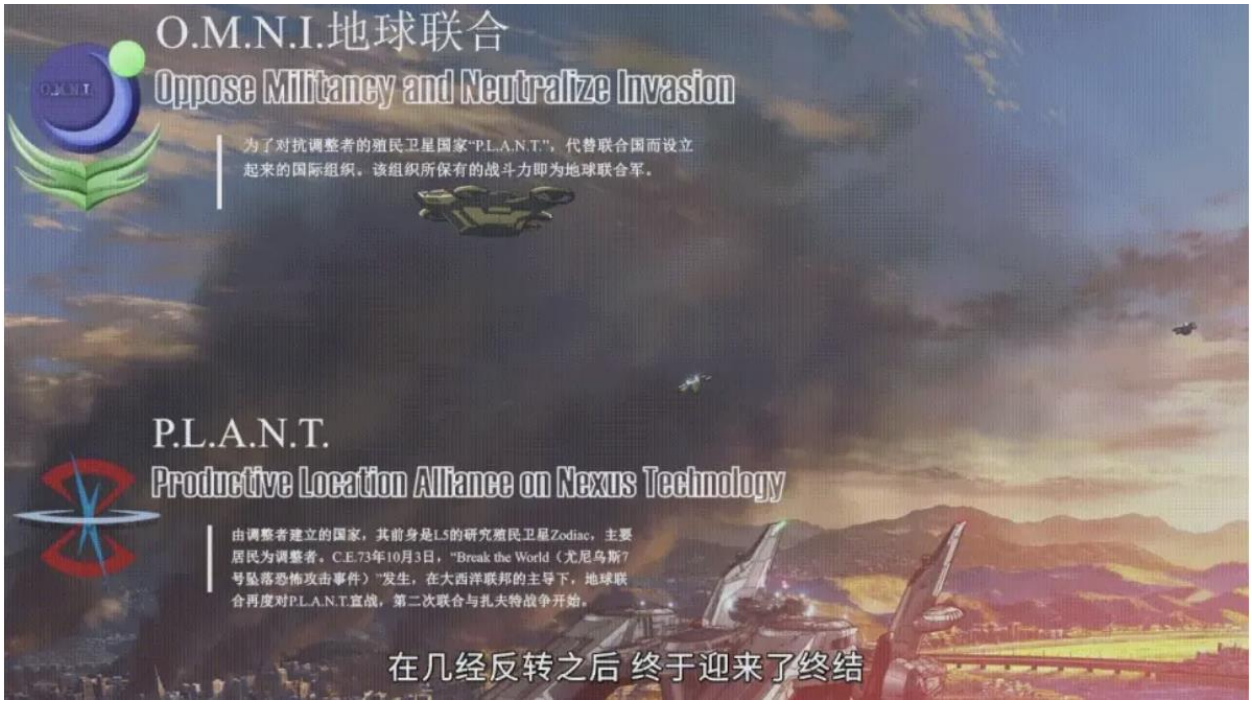


Figure 8: This creatively subtitled scene features the fictional worldbuilding details from th**e** *Gundam SEED* universe, specifically outlining two political/military factions: O.M.N.I. (Earth Alliance) and P.L.A.N.T.

This mode of engaged and intermediary spectatorship reconsiders cinecentric viewing paradigms within an era dominated by screen-saturated, user-controlled digital media consumption.[27] Subtitles, or more specifically, underground subtitle collectives, problematize the notion of cinematic immersivity without any manual/technical facilitation. Cinecentric theatrical traditions also involve hybrid formats and creative experimentation and manipulation, from cinematic commentators to live performances, from controlled temperature to seat comfortability. The cinematic immersion has always been facilitated, although to different extents. Digital

[27] Caetlin Anne Benson-Allott, "Going, Going, Grindhouse" in *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing*, 1 online resource (xiii, 297 pages) : illustrations vols., UPCC Book Collections on Project MUSE (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), https://www.degruyter.com/isbn/9780520954496, 132.

hyperavailability facilitates the shifts in the sensory registers, figure 8 disrupts directorial intentionality in viewership practices.

Underground subtitling collectives strategically alter viewers' experiences through deliberate, visible interventions added in postproduction. For example, they use color-coded translations (to distinguish speakers or tones) and on-screen glossaries (to explain cultural references), foregrounding how subtitles can actively reshape sensory engagement.

This contrasts sharply with traditional theatrical experiences, which prioritize sensory containment, a seamless environment where technical labor (the projectionist, acoustic tuning, temperature, and seat ergonomics) remains hidden. In theaters, everything aims to sustain immersion. By contrast, digital viewership fractures attention through hybrid practices. For instance, customizable SRT files[28] let viewers tweak subtitle timing or font size. Here, attention becomes a malleable resource, shaped equally by the viewer's choices and the subtitlers' interventions.

Both systems seek to modulate attention, whether through sensory containment or digital customization. Cinecentric management minimizes informational noise while subtitling practices introduces informational entropy. Neither is inherently superior; this analysis just shows that spectatorial immersivity has always been contingent and managed.

Despite operating largely without financial compensation, zimuzu achieves high-quality translations through efficient utilization of online infrastructures and digitized collaborative workflows. By contrast, official distribution channels not only restrict content availability but frequently underperform in translation quality and dedication. This is not to uncritically legitimize all fan-subtitling collectives but to observe that market-driven translation efforts often fail to meet

[28] SRT files are text-based subtitle formats synchronized via timestamps.

the standards set by unpaid, community-oriented labor. For instance, official subtitles typically offer generic explanations ([speaks in foreign language], or [speaks in Chinese]), whereas zimuzu meticulously translates dialogue, specifies language distinctions through color-coding or typography, and contextualizes culturally embedded terminology, narrative-specific worldbuilding, and comprehensive references. These practices effectively transform subtitles into integrated mediatic glossaries, enriching viewer comprehension. While the strategic use of culturally proximate colloquialisms enhances accessibility for niche audiences (enthusiasts such as Gundam fans), excessive localization risks compromising translational fidelity.

The prioritization of subtitling precision and the necessity to circumvent state-mandated censorship or corporate boycotts perpetuate reliance on piratical ecosystems. Audiences increasingly habituate themselves to piracy by selectively sourcing translations from trusted fan groups, a dependency reinforced by the perceived inadequacy of legal alternatives. Unlike practices during the VCD era, zimuzu extends its commitment by offering optional SRT files within downloadable media packages, enabling user-customized viewing experiences.

As China transitions into an era of capitalized licensed media distribution, marked by corporate conglomerates competing for exclusive streaming rights, anti-piracy enforcement intensifies. YYeTs.net (人人影视字幕组), established in 2003 as a fansub collective and later dominant piratical platform, exemplifies the resulting tension within subtitling communities. Rong Chen notes its bifurcation into YY Zimuzu (translation-focused) and a commercialized video platform. In 2021, legal crackdowns culminated in server confiscations and criminal penalties for implicated core members.[29]

[29] Chen, 2021.

Despite operational fragmentation precipitating final collapse of the site,[30] YY zimuzu retains generational significance as a cultural touchstone and a household name. Its influence spans demographics: my tea-obsessed neighbor keeps rewatching the first season of *Prison Break*; my college instructor uncle loves *The Big Bang Theory*, I find myself binge watching *Breaking Bad* on a secondhand iPhone, all mediated by zimuzu's interventions. These are not mere anecdotes but testaments to its socio-cultural reach. The platform's shutdown ignited public nostalgia and debates over piratical legitimacy, with popular narratives framing zimuzu as a Promethean figure, stealing fire and knowledge from corporate gods to democratize media consumption through localization.

This is an apt analogy, especially as prosecutorial actions frame this theft as legal transgression while obscuring the material conditions that necessitated such acts of cultural redistribution in the first place. The sheer unmet audience demands and restrictive technopolitical governmentality prove the necessity of these collectives. Zimuzu exemplifies decentralized knowledge consolidation within virtual spaces, dismantling informational hegemony beyond mere piracy. Perhaps, Zimuzu is also a culinary collective, using stolen fire to prepare raw media content, seasoned with culturally specific spices unavailable in official restaurants. These dishes cater not only to those excluded by financial barriers but also to audiences disillusioned by commercial platforms. When institutional failures perpetuate cultural deprivation, such kitchens inevitably emerge to clandestinely circulate resources, despite legal precariousness.

Zimuzu's translations extend beyond popular television shows to include arthouse cinema, documentaries, and open-source courses from prestigious universities. Behind the Great Firewall, fansub groups and zimuzu have long functioned as cultural intermediaries, facilitating

[30] Ibid.

synchronized access to global content through collective labor and coordination. The era in which zimuzu was a household name has passed, as licensed content now dominates China's media landscape. However, as previously discussed, the specter of zimuzu continues to shape spectatorial habits in the habituation of subtitling practices. The subculturalization of zimuzu persists on the fringes of the Chinese internet, where underground zimuzu groups often operate across disciplines, subtitling media while simultaneously serving as cultural commentators and film critics. Drawing from the principles of the Creative Commons movement, which advocates for open access to knowledge and creativity, a Chinese underground group known as The Dissidents explicitly articulates the nature of their discursive filmic space, and I close this chapter with words from their manifesto:

> "异见者可以是一个电影自媒体、一个字幕翻译组、一本电子刊物、一个影迷小社群，但最重要的是，这是一个通过写作、翻译、电影创作和其它方式持续输出鲜明的观点和立场的迷影组织。异见者否定既成的榜单、奖项、导演万神殿和对电影史的学术共识的权威性，坚持电影的价值需要在个体的不断重估中体现。异见者拒绝全面、客观、折中的观点，选择用激烈的辩护和反对来打开讨论的空间。异见者珍视真诚的冒犯甚于虚假的礼貌，看重批判的责任甚于赞美的权利。异见者不承认观看者和创作者、普通人和专业人士之间的等级制；没有别人可以替我们决定电影是什么，我们的电影观只能由自己定义。"[31]

[31] @TheDissidents, Jan 11th, 2023 https://www.douban.com/people/TheDissidents/?_i=8811449vWPwZkA.

“The Dissidents can manifest as a personal-media platform dedicated to cinema, a collaborative subtitling group, a digital publication, or a niche cinephile community. The Dissidents constitute a cinephile collective that persistently articulates distinctive perspectives and positions through writing, translation, filmmaking, and other creative practices. The Dissidents challenges the presumed authority of established canonical hierarchies, be they rankings, awards, auteur pantheons, or academic consensus on film history. We assert that the value of cinema must emerge through continuous individual reinterpretation. Rejecting seemingly universal, objective or conciliatory narratives, the Dissidents deliberately employ polemics and oppositions to carve out discursive spaces for critical engagement. The Dissidents prioritize sincere provocation over superficial civility, valuing the responsibility to critique above the privilege to praise. The collective explicitly repudiates hierarchical distinctions between spectators and creators, amateurs and professionals. No external entity may monopolize definitions of cinema, we determine our own cinematic realities.”

Conclusion

A central question explored in this thesis investigates: “How does media piracy in China function as an informal infrastructural system, which supplements state-sanctioned distribution networks, challenges established paradigms of media accessibility, labor practices, and spectatorship models, and reshapes cinematic consumption within the context of shifting global intellectual property regimes and ever escalating US-China geopolitical and technological competition?” While aligning with scholarly discourse on media piracy, this study has contended that China’s sociopolitical environment should not be reductively framed as an illicit deviation from formalized media distribution channels. Instead, it constitutes a complex economic and cultural formation shaped by persistent historical contingencies and material infrastructural conditions.

The first chapter, “Copyrights,” interrogated the dialectical tension between China’s market liberalization policies and the strategic deployment of regulatory frameworks. It demonstrated how copyright enforcement operates as a negotiated process contingent upon

international pressures and domestic institutional compromises. By analyzing how piracy mediates media access and sustains parallel informal economies, the chapter highlighted the ambiguous status of Chinese piracy as both a disruptor and an unwitting participant in state narratives. This phenomenon was explored through micro-level actors and contingent eventfulness. Employing a Marxist critical framework, the chapter argued that piracy crystallizes fundamental contradictions within the evolution of digital capitalism, wherein tensions between commodified ownership and democratized access remain unresolved.

Following the critical examination of Chinese piratical media ecosystems' contested development, the subsequent chapter, "Pirate Spectatorship," expanded scholarly discourse on unauthorized viewership by theorizing pirate spectatorship as an infrastructural question of media consumption. Employing case studies such as the underground circulation networks surrounding *Pirated Copy* and the vernacular arthouse curation practices pioneered by Pai Gu, this chapter demonstrated how piracy generates networked socio-technical assemblages that reconfigure distribution-spectatorship dynamics within cinematic ecosystems. By interrogating the role of individual actors as infrastructural agents within urban media ecologies, the analysis not only reoriented piracy studies from techno-legal determinism toward situated sociocultural practices embedded within broader media ecologies but also reconceptualized cinematic experience as transcending enclosure.

Continuing this line of thought, the final chapter, "Subtitles," examined the role of subtitles and translation collectives (zimuzu) in shaping cinematic experiences. By tracing their historical trajectory in Taiwan and China and analyzing the labor-intensive processes involved in subtitling pirated media, I argue that zimuzu function not merely as linguistic intermediaries but as active agents in the mediation of cultural commodities. These collectives challenge both state censorship

and the gatekeeping mechanisms of formal distribution. Although the crackdown and eventual dissolution of these vernacular collectives have diminished their visibility, their significance persists in discussions of digital labor and participatory media cultures, particularly in understanding them as adaptive and hybridized phenomena. Despite their cultural and practical importance, there remains a noticeable gap in academic literature addressing these collectives and their broader implications.

Historical contingency holds thematic significance in this thesis not due to its association with macro-epistemological frameworks that rely on granular, preexisting theoretical paradigms, but rather through its methodological emphasis on allowing primary sources and archival materials to guide the analytical trajectory. Retrospectively, I have synthesized autoethnographic reflections on childhood free-of-charge cinematic experiences mediated by obsolete media technologies (VCDs) with broader sociocultural phenomena: regional-global tensions, digital piracy infrastructures, nostalgic audience testimonies, and grassroots translation networks such as zimuzu. These ostensibly disparate elements coalesce around their collective demonstration of cinematic hybridity, which complicates dominant narratives centered around anti-piracy. Within these accounts of mediated cultural access, piracy emerges as a contingently constituted infrastructure for cultural participation in China, a lived assemblage of multimedia practices that structure quotidian engagements with cinema. By centering the Chinese sociotechnical context, frequently marginalized within Anglophone media studies scholarship, this thesis has advanced interdisciplinary piracy studies through its critical interrogation of legality, infrastructural (dis)functionality, immaterial labor, and spectatorial praxis.

This thesis has sought to resituate piracy within the paradoxes of digitized media economies, where it persists as both a legally proscribed activity and an indispensable conduit for

accessing transnational cultural flows. As such, it acts as an intermediary between regional-global piracy ecosystems and emergent postcinematic practices. In destabilizing classical cinematic continuity, piratical agents, encompassing both human actors and multimedia assemblages, facilitate non-diegetic modes of engagement. By expanding analytical focus beyond the audiovisual parameters of film consumption, piracy has been reconceptualized here as a gleaning practice, thereby reframing human subjectivity as constitutive of media infrastructures. This approach foregrounds the undervalued labor and systemic contingencies inherent to media production/consumption cycles, contesting idealized constructs of cinematic embodiment. Building on Roger Cook's formulation, postcinema engenders experiential intersections between agential human practices and evolving techno-material systems,[1] generating novel configurations of spectatorship that remain undertheorized in media studies.

Scholars of post-cinema, including Roger Cook and Jennifer Barker, have theorized cinematic interactions that transcend purely audiovisual modes of engagement. Cook posits that digitally manipulated moving images activate viewers at the sensorimotor level, eliciting tactile, somatosensory, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive reactions.[2] This biotechnological co-evolution finds further articulation in Barker's *The Tactile Eye*, particularly in her chapter "Musculature," which analyzes how cinematic techniques provoke mirroring effects in audiences through muscular empathy. Such kinesthetic engagement, Barker argues, is irreducible to character identification but rather oscillates between distance and proximity.[3]

[1] Roger F. Cook, *Postcinematic Vision: The Coevolution of Moving-Image Media and the Spectator*, 1 online resource (238 pages) : illustrations vols., Posthumanities 54 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2377233, 52-54.
[2] Cook, 22.
[3] Jennifer M. Barker, "Musculature" in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

In other words, physiological responses, such as leaning forward, covering one's eyes, breath-holding, or even acts of disengagement like boredom or bathroom breaks, become structurally integrated into the film's organic composition, reflecting the viewer's corporeal participation. Consequently, audiovisuality is reconfigured and fragmented as merely one component within the holistic cinematic experience. Under conditions of digital media hybridity, spectatorship becomes pluralized, surpassing classical theories of identification and the normative confines of the darkened theater. Instead, it foregrounds practices of remixing, editing, and reconfiguring established frameworks of film distribution and consumption. This thesis has contested the assumption that cinematic fulfillment depends solely on technological containment, consumerist etiquette, or paradigms of canonical film reviews. Rather, film viewership manifests as vernacular, disorganized, and discontinuous, a phenomenon exemplified by practices such as Pai Gu and nostalgic audience testimonies. Such evidence necessitates a critical reevaluation of the entrenched dichotomy between projected spectacle and passive spectatorship within film and media studies.

It is hard to resist the physiological urge to quote from an eccentric director whom I respect very much, one who, in 2008, famously expressed his disdain for computerized film viewership,

> If you're playing the movie on a telephone or on your computer, you will never in a trillion years—experience the film. You'll think you have experienced it, but you will be cheated. You'll be experiencing weakness and extreme purification of a potential experience in another world… If you don't have a setup for your films, it's a joke. It's just

the most sickening horrifying joke and this world. It's a such a sadness that you think you've seen a film on your telephone. Get real.[4]

Consider the makeshift black-box cinema in the beginning of this thesis: even if its experiential resonance eclipses the film content, does its ephemerality negate its significance? The notion of an unadulterated "Get Real" cinematic experience is itself illusory, as conventional theaters are perpetually susceptible to manual facilitation and disruptions, ranging from incessant chatter inciting popcorn-throwing reprisals, intrusive phone calls, infrastructural malfunctions, censorship, temperature, (dis)comfort, and acoustic tuning.

Still… Get real! Lynch's critique of computerized viewership remains very defensible, whether contextualized in 2008 or projected into 2025. I side with his insistence on the necessity of a curated viewing environment, a ritualistic preparation for cinematic immersion. Yet the enduring allure of the cinematic apparatus lies not in its purported audiovisual totality, but in the collective sociality and affective intensity it generates. My own cinematic formation is largely indebted to pirated media consumed in non-theatrical formats. The democratization of online film and television access has exponentially broadened global audiences' exposure to diverse works, enabling profound emotional encounters irrespective of their adherence to formal cinematicity.

Interestingly, contemporary media ecosystems witness a recursive interplay between analog film historicity and emergent cinematic infrastructures. As Caetlin Benson-Allott observes in her analysis of simulacral cinematicity, the film industry's appropriation of retro-technical aesthetics, grainy textures, jump cuts, or the revival of 4:3 and 1.33:1 aspect ratios, constitutes a

[4] David Lynch, featured in "David Lynch on iPhones – Full Clip (2008)," Uploaded Jan 16th, 2025, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQiQk8AJ0YI&ab_channel=SirMix-A-LotRareMusic.

commodified hyperrealistic nostalgia.[5] This fabricated cinematic utopia digitally simulates analog imperfection, not as replication but as an affective marketing strategy tailored to nowadays mutiscreen-saturated audiences. Benson-Allott further theorizes video spectatorship as a domesticized fantasy of media control, wherein viewers indulge illusory mastery through pausing, fast-forwarding, or skipping content, yet remain constrained by the predetermined parameters of playback technologies.[6] Her framework aligns with postcinematic theories that decouple canonical spectatorship from institutionalized theaters and sanctioned distribution channels.

I propose, however, that piratical engagement introduces a subversive dimension to this dynamic: unauthorized media access enables spectators to rework source materials through fan edits, remixes, and derivative creations. While such practices face legal barriers imposed by copyright regimes, they simultaneously generate innovative aesthetic and interpretive possibilities. By extracting and recontextualizing audiovisual elements, piratical interventions destabilize orthodox hierarchies of authorship and ownership, transforming media into mutable cultural artifacts.

Piracy thus operationalizes postcinematic critique as a desiring machine, to borrow Deleuzian terminology, forging unforeseen connections across social and technological assemblages. It fosters a participatory, fragmented viewing culture that rejects essentialist ideals of cinematic authenticity. As audiences increasingly engage films through decentralized, transnational, and extra-legal channels, the demarcation between sanctioned and illicit media experiences has been eroding. While this thesis does not wholly adopt postcinematic frameworks, it converges with critical media scholarship examining how digital informality reshapes

[5] Benson-Allott, 137-138.
[6] Benson-Allott, 207-208.

consumption paradigms. Crucially, this study does not seek to legally vindicate piracy but to recognize its irreducible role in mediating globalized cultural access.

Despite its interdisciplinary engagements, this research remains anchored in material and interpersonal histories, tracing how obsolete technologies (VCDs), informal economies (mobile street vendors), and collaborative networks (subtitling collectives) cohered into an alternative cinematic ecology in China. By synthesizing postcinematic theory with infrastructural and labor-focused analyses of piracy, this work proposes a methodological inspiration for future scholarship attuned to both the material precarity and digital fluidity of media practices.

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