

Two of Zhao Benshan's Comic Skits:¹ Their Critical Implications in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This paper explores the critical significance of two of Zhao Benshan's comic skits *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* in the context of contemporary China. Through a close analysis of the commercial mode of deception, this paper establishes the critical potential of Zhao's skits to expose the art of influence and the paradigm of power in the general practice of hegemony. In so doing, this paper proves its central claim: Zhao's skits, by way of showing how the desired customer is constructed, point to the inherent problems of market ideology and the danger of modernization as homogenization. In the skits' aesthetic engagement of the audience and in the plurality of meaning that the audience's responses manifest, this paper locates Zhao's critical power—posing a forceful critique of the promotion of any absolute (concept, perspective, or mode of life) and cultivating a critical consciousness for the continuing creation of democratic sensibility.

Keywords

Zhao Benshan, comic skits (*xiaopin*), market ideology, popular culture,
art of influence, modernization, practice of hegemony,
“Three Represents,” legitimacy, audience reception

¹ Zhao Benshan (趙本山, 1958-), born of a peasant family in northern China, started his career as a comedian in the 1980s. He had been performing in local art forms in his native area until he was “discovered” by a celebrity comedian from the nation's capital, Beijing, and was invited to perform at the most competitive Chinese New Year Gala show in 1990. He has been a constant presence there ever since. His comic skits have been collected in DVD format and have wide circulation in China. His other works include *I Want to Have a Family* (我想有個家 *Wo xiang you ge jia*), *The Cart Driver* (三鞭子 *San bianzi*), *Xiaojiu and Laole* (小九老樂 *Xiaojiu laole*), *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (昨天, 今天, 明天 *Zuotian, jintian, mingtian*). Zhao is also the leading man in Zhang Yimou's recent film *Happy Times*. In early 2002, he directed and starred in his first TV drama. He Qingkui (何慶魁), Zhao's collaborator, was mostly responsible for the scripts of the two skits to be discussed in this article. He wrote *Selling a Wheelchair* and finalized *Selling Crutches*, which was originally written by Gong Kaibo (宮凱波).

Short, brisk, humorous, and often poignant comic skits (小品 *xiaopin*)² have been a popular “staple dish” in the “feast” of Chinese television’s New Year Gala Show for the past twenty years.³ No skits, however, have caused nearly as big a stir as Zhao Benshan’s two on how to sell—*Selling Crutches* (賣拐 *maiguai*) in 2001 and *Selling a Wheelchair* (賣車 *maiche*) in 2002. The former captivated the national audience in such a way that Zhao’s punch lines became catch phrases throughout the country overnight and Zhao himself “the king of comedy.” The inevitable sequel also greatly satisfied the popular palate and won once more the first prize of the 2002 Gala Show by popular vote (Luo 12). The success of both skits created the “Zhao Benshan phenomenon” (趙本山現象 *zhaobenshan xianxiang*).⁴ The audience’s hearty laughs and endorsements clearly show that Zhao Benshan is funny. The focus of this article, however, is neither the psychology of humor or comic routines nor an explanation for why Zhao Benshan is funny. The center of attention here is the critical significance of Zhao’s two hit skits, especially in the context of China’s recent social and economic changes. With such a focus, I join the debate on the “Zhao Benshan phenomenon” that has been going on in China for the past three years. My analysis of the particular operations of Zhao Benshan’s skits provides some insights into the conditions of popular culture in contemporary China in general and its critical potential in particular.

Can an art form that aims to induce laughs, the achievement of which is measured by popular votes and commercial successes, be socially responsible and critically significant? Scholarly opinions in China differ. Critical attention has been heaped on

² Du Wenwei defines the term *xiaopin* as “theatrical skits” performed on stage and television” (383) or “short and comic theatrical performances” (382). Originally referring to “theatrical sketches or improvisation employed for theatre education or audition” (Du 382), *xiaopin* as an art form first appeared on stage and was televised to the national audience in 1983. About 15 minutes in length, *xiaopin* performances are mostly “light comedies in the *huaju* (spoken drama) style” (Du 383). Humorous, quick to assemble, flexible of venues, and popularized by top-notch comedians including Yan Shunkai, Chen Peisi, Hou Yaowen, Huang Hong, and Zhao Benshan, *xiaopin* “has developed spectacularly in history, as one of the most lively and best-received art forms on China’s stage and television” (Jin Enju 18). A good introduction to *xiaopin* as a theatrical genre, Du’s article provides substantial information on *xiaopin*’s format, development, and popularity in China.

³ The New Year Gala Show is broadcast live by China Central Television nationwide on the Chinese New Year’s Eve. The televised show has become part of the ritual of the New Year celebration and enjoys arguably the largest national audience. The screening process for the show is, therefore, very stringent. It is a legitimate concern that Zhao Benshan’s skits are state-sanctioned popular cultural products. The duality of Zhao Benshan’s art—a subversive act within state-sanctioned performance, and the dynamic between its conformist and subversive aspects are too important and complex that they require at least another article to do them justice. My position in this article is that such cultural products can, especially under the current market conditions in China, function autonomously and critically. This article partially addresses the concern by showing the critical potential of two of Zhao Benshan’s skits.

⁴ For a more comprehensive discussion of the “Zhao Benshan phenomenon,” see Chen Xiaoying, et al.

Zhao's work since the performance of *Selling Crutches*. On 17 March 2002, Peng Li published his article, “*cusugaoxiao li yishu you duo yuan—ping zhaobenshan xianxiang*” (How far is vulgar laughter from art—on the “Zhao Benshan phenomenon”), to denounce the value of Zhao's work. The article made four basic points: (1) Zhao Benshan is not an artist, because he bears no resemblance to acknowledged “people's artists” in the past; (2) the content of his work does not contain “eternal value,” therefore, cannot be deemed a work of art; (3) mainstream culture should function to cultivate aesthetic taste by guiding its orientation towards the elegant and the refined; (4) different categories of art deserve different venues, comic skits should be relegated to the proper place for low art.⁵ Peng's article started an exchange of “artillery” in the media. Soon Sun Zhenjun joined Peng's ranks by denouncing as irresponsible a work that encourages deceitful profit-making at the expense of good and honest people. Yet another critic condemned what he regarded as a total disregard for people with disabilities: “*Selling Crutches* opened a wound last year and *Selling a Wheelchair* covered it with salt this year.”⁶ He believed that with *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* Zhao had positioned himself in opposition to the people.⁷

In mid-May 2002, a special conference on the “Zhao Benshan phenomenon” was held in Shanxi to debate the issues further. Zhao's defenders celebrated his simple, clear, and effective ways of exposing deception and insisted that the popularity of his art is its reason to be. They claimed that like any other work of art, Zhao's has roots in

⁵ On 17 April 2002, Peng Li wrote a rebuttal entitled “Zhao Benshan shibushi shijie yishu dashi?” (Is Zhao Benshan a world-class artist) to an article “Ye tan Zhao Benshan xianxiang” (My take on the Zhao Benshan phenomenon) that defended Zhao's work. Peng's rebuttal repeated these four points.

⁶ The name of the source is unknown. The editors of the “Opinion” program of *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) started a discussion entitled “Zhao Benshan ‘mai che’ quefa renwen guanhuai?” (Is there a lack of humanist concern in Zhao Benshan's *Selling a Wheelchair*?). This opinion was cited to get the discussion going. The Special Education Department of the Institute of Education Research under the central government put the exchange of opinions on a website, <http://www.specialneeds.org.cn/news/page> (last accessed on 30 August 2002). A point worth repeating here is that *all* comedy involves risk. As Craig Hergert pointed out, any comedian worthy of his/her salt “has a story about the most seemingly inoffensive material upsetting some audience member or another” (4). He cited Edmund Gwenn to support his point: “Dying is easy, comedy is hard” (5). Basing one's evaluation of a comedy on the reaction and sentiments of one person or a particular group can be limiting.

⁷ This critique of the skits' insult to people with disabilities is significant in that it points to a changing notion of the self and human worth. It seems to be demanding the sameness across bodily differences and the conceptualization of human worth not in terms of some pragmatic market values. What these critics of Zhao Benshan failed to see, however, is the affinities between their view and what the skits critique at a more fundamental level. Both deceptive business practices and the discrimination of people according to physical differences share the same disrespect of and disregard for basic human value and rights. If Zhao Benshan, in trying to show the market's construction of desiring subjects, hurt the feelings of handicapped people, his critics, in denouncing his insensitivity, neglected his critical thrust.

real life and also functions to cultivate the mind. They listed all the art forms that comic skits have incorporated to argue for the maturity of the art form. They traced the gradual popularization of the art in China to claim that, as an art form, the comic skit's day has come.⁸

As healthy and valuable as these debates were in the Chinese context, they did not show us much more than the socialist residue and the postmodern divides in intellectual responses to contemporary cultural phenomena.⁹ Absent from both the "prosecution" and the "defense" teams at the conference are two things: (1) a close textual study of the "case" in question, that is, the written and visual texts of Zhao Benshan's comic skits; (2) the intended position and function of the audience. Both sides, therefore, fell short of showing how Zhao Benshan's comic skits actually work and how their reception is related to China's recent historical transformation. Neither side yielded much productive understanding. The critical implications of Zhao's skits about selling have not got the attention they deserve; the real significance of the Zhao Benshan phenomenon is yet to be articulated.

This article approaches the "Zhao Benshan phenomenon" in two parts: first, a close reading of the texts of *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair*; second, a contextualized study of their reception and critical significance. The close textual study especially focuses on the issues of how the deception is accomplished and what is being ridiculed in both cases. The examination intends to prove the point: simple and fascinating as enigmatic fables, Zhao's skits on selling do much more than expose unethical business behavior.¹⁰ In three steps this section will analyze how these skits expose the construction of desired and desiring customers and/or subjects, unveil the absurdity of the habitual way of thinking and behavior, and lay bare the sinister workings of hegemonic power.¹¹

The second part of the article puts Zhao's work in its historical and discursive

⁸ This is a summary of Zhao Benshan's defense at the conference. It included the opinions of Lin Yiliu, Chen Xiaoying, Tang Yi, and Wei Lichun.

⁹ I do not mean to write off the value of Chinese critics' reading altogether. They nonetheless left a gap in their exploration of Zhao Benshan's significance. I hope to fill some portion of that gap with this article.

¹⁰ It is obvious that Zhao Benshan's subject matter is not about politics, nor does it give any functional protest of a political nature. According to Ernst van Alphen, however, politically powerful art does not need to be about politics, nor does it depend on state-sponsorship or censorship. Art is "autonomous" because it has an agency of its own. In this article, I try to show how Zhao's skits function in this critical and political capacity.

¹¹ I borrow Gramsci's concept of hegemony to indicate the nature of the dominance elaborated in this article. This dominance is achieved through the combination of coercion and consent, with discursive power as the chief instrument of both.

context and contemplates its critical significance through a study of audience reception.¹² Why did the audience laugh? What are the implications of their laughter? Such contemplation, supported by popular reactions to the skits, will lead to the major argument of this article. Through a detailed presentation of how the desired customer is constructed, especially how the manipulation of market ideology bears many of the same characteristics and contradictions as the hegemonic ideology, Zhao Benshan's skits point to the inherent problems of market ideology and its promotion as an absolute mode of life. The true significance of Zhao's skits, this article asserts, lies in their critical stance that bespeaks an emerging awareness of hegemonic power, a new critical attitude towards established patterns of thought and behavior, and a (self) critical space that promises both the plurality of meaning and a public voice within the state apparatus.

Most sensitive to changes, popular cultural products often reflect what is happening at the most fundamental level. Deliberately emphasizing the skits' mockery of the mainstream ideology that promotes market and economic development at the expense of critical thinking and political rights, this article shows Zhao's current relevance. Alarmed by how the mainstream ideology is "directing mass desires and constructing the public imagination, numbing and postponing social awareness of crisis" (602), Wang Xiaoming, a Chinese critic, feels that it is imperative that we study how it exaggerates, simplifies, whitewashes, and fabricates. Zhao's skits have done that for us and the following analysis shows how.

I. A Close Reading of *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair*

In his "Dialectic of Deception," Ackbar Abbas links artistic innovations with specific moments "of social and political crisis resulting in the changes of cultural paradigms" and proposes that we attend to our fascination with art for its political "content" (363). Mainland China has been undergoing drastic social and cultural changes in recent years. The release of market forces and the promotion of consumption are quickly reshaping the Chinese landscape and replacing traditional and revolutionary values with those of the global market. As a result, the ideological orientation of art and literature is losing its prominence to their commercial counterpart.

¹² The study of the audience reception shows the gap between popular responses and critical readings and tries to find an alternative to bring the critical spirit in contemporary China to the foreground.

Like it or not, commercialization and media domination is the fashion of the day.¹³ Having generated tremendous critical responses, Zhao Benshan's skits bring forth an occasion to "attend to what our culture or even ourselves do not want to recognize" (Abbas 356). His skits and the responses to them take us to a direct encounter with contemporary Chinese culture, discourse and ideology. With their illuminating characters, absurd yet familiar stories, ambiguous but profound implications, these skits have fascinated viewers with their allegorical significance. To probe for their meaning, let us first take a look at the stories of *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair*.

An opportunistic businessman, Da Huyou (大忽悠, a nickname in the north-eastern dialect meaning "good at bluffing and blustering") has an acute sense of the market. But Da Huyou is not incapable of miscalculation. When a neighbor hurts his leg and has to stay in a wheelchair, the crutches Da Huyou made lose their targeted client. To realize the value of his labor, Da Huyou comes to the market place with his wife and a great determination to find a buyer for the crutches. Before long a potential customer comes along, totally unprepared for what is awaiting him. Da Huyou's calculated "guess" of the stranger's profession as a cook quickly establishes his credibility. Amazed by Da Huyou's ability to discern the truth, the cook surrenders to Da Huyou's command completely. He willingly follows Da Huyou's instructions which practically "cripple" him to fit Da Huyou's diagnosis of his physical condition. Gratefully, the cook accepts Da Huyou's cure for his illness—the crutches, at the cost of his bicycle plus all the money he had on him. The cook does not become furious until later when Da Huyou's wife tries to sabotage the transaction by telling him the truth. In fact, while Da Huyou is scheming about how to sell his bicycle to a real crippled person for more money, the cook leaves, on the crutches and full of gratitude.

The end of *Selling Crutches*, however, is not the end of Da Huyou's story of selling. In *Selling a Wheelchair*, about the same time next year, Da Huyou and the cook meet again in the market place. One is selling the crutches he never needed, the other a wheelchair made from a used bicycle. Upon seeing the vengeful cook, Da Huyou has no fear. He is sure that this time the cook will go home in the wheelchair. And so he does. With the lesson learned from last year, the cook is able to fend off Da Huyou's scary diagnosis of his physical condition at first. Although the cook knows

¹³ There is no doubt that the popularity and power of Zhao Benshan's performance owe much to the combined media of stage and television. Both Zhang Yongqing and Ning Yi expressed great confidence in such media power in bringing in "a new outlook to the field of art." Their confidence, however, appeared more in the form of proclamation and prediction than based on solid case studies and analysis. See Zhang Yongqing and Ning Yi.

that he was cheated last year, he is never able to figure out how. With his reverence of “scientific” knowledge and practice intact, the cook once again willingly submits himself to Da Huyou’s experiments. Despite the cook’s intention to expose Da Huyou with facts, he has no chance to succeed because (1) these experiments are carefully calculated and their effects prescribed by Da Huyou and (2) he acquiesces to Da Huyou as the final arbiter of the rules of the game. While the cook is busy proving the soundness of his body, Da Huyou constructs not only the insanity of his mind but also his own belief in it. Constantly adjusting the content of the game to exploit the cook’s established pattern of thought, Da Huyou succeeds again. When the habitual way of thinking results in the prescribed effects the cook is once again convinced of his illness and of his need for a wheelchair for its cure. *Selling a Wheelchair* ends with an exact repetition of last year’s transaction. Only this time a lot more money is involved and Da Huyou looks forward to selling the cook a stretcher—it will be made from the crutches—next year.

A. Da Huyou’s Construction of Desired/Desiring Subject¹⁴

What Da Huyou achieves in *Selling Crutches* is the rearrangement of desire in his victim, the cook. The viewers witness the process by which the cook changes from having no desire for the crutches to wanting them badly. No coercive force is applied and the rearrangement is accomplished through the willing cooperation and collaboration of the cook. Throughout the skit, Da Huyou asserts the validity of his theory based on his “knowledge of science.” *Selling Crutches*’s dramatic presentation of this process discloses the secrets of subject construction.

Da Huyou goes through three steps to complete the process of subjugation. These three steps are diagnosis, physical proof of the diagnosis, and a cure. All three steps are accomplished with the help of “science.” Da Huyou knows his success is predicated upon the interaction between his attempt to convince and the cook’s doubts of and resistance to this attempt. To make the interaction work in his favor, he resorts to “science” and assumes the role of an expert.

Da Huyou’s diagnosis is full of medical jargon. This is how he articulates his absurd theory that the cook’s big face reflects the problems in his leg: “The swelling of

¹⁴ As the first of the three subsections in part one that addresses the issue of subject construction *via* the rearrangement of desire, the current section emphasizes the mechanism of “construction.” The second subsection, “The Absurdity of ‘Unthinking Inertia,’” focuses on the “desired/desiring subject.” The power relationship between the cultivation of desire and the collaboration of the subject is the center of the third subsection, “The Working of Hegemonic Power.”

your face is the result of the pressure generated by the necrosis of nerve endings (in your legs).”¹⁵ Impressed by Da Huyou’s eloquence in appropriating scientific and medical terms, the cook is taken in because, not versed in such jargon, he is intimidated by terms like “necrosis of nerve endings,” “severe mental deficiency,” “quick escalation of viruses,” and is, therefore, convinced of Da Huyou’s knowledge.

Da Huyou, however, is good not only with words. Knowing the power of facts, Da Huyou orders the cook to slam his right foot to the hard ground a number of times. The numbness created becomes not only the “evidence” of the cook’s problem, but also the necessary condition for the crippled walk Da Huyou leads the cook to perform. (In *Selling a Wheelchair*, Da Huyou makes the cook shout at the top of his lungs for so long that the deficit of oxygen in his brain causes him dizziness. This dizziness becomes Da Huyou’s proof of the problem with the cook’s head.) Here, through the appropriation of a pseudo-scientific discourse, Da Huyou manages to make an outcome by intention and design “the material effects of a physical cause” (Petrey 180).

Da Huyou’s successful prescription depends on the appropriation of fear. Upon the cook’s arrival at the scene, Da Huyou throws in his direction a few expert observations. The observations immediately catch the cook’s attention because they are about the cook’s “endangered” health and stir up one of the deep anxieties a person may have—namely one’s health. Further exploiting the cook’s concern for his health, Da Huyou instills even greater fear in the cook’s mind by projecting the consequences of the cook’s condition into the future. “At the beginning stage, the symptom is limping; at the advanced stage, you suffer from femur necrosis; at the terminal stage, you turn into vegetable.” Such a prospect scares the cook and makes him beg for a cure.

To seal the deal, Da Huyou goes for the cook’s heart. He improvises a personal story of similar misery. In so doing, he manages to establish an emotional bond with the cook through bodily experience. “When I first had your problem, an old man discovered it. She (referring to his wife) was too concerned about money to let me seek treatment. This leg ended up damaged.” Da Huyou’s I-know-what-you-are-going-through kind of brotherly gesture fills the cook with genuine gratitude. When the wife thinks this lie is too much to bear and tries to put an end to the deception, it is already too late. The cook interrupts her: “Can’t you stop meddling like this, Elder Sister? Don’t you see this is between patients? We are trying to look into our cases here!” Da Huyou’s

¹⁵ All the texts for both skits are from video recordings of the Chinese New Year Gala Show of 2001 and 2002 respectively, distributed by China International TV Corp. All translations in this article are mine.

“sharing” of personal experience sets the cook up to identify with him, to regard him as one of “us.” When the cook takes his deceiver as his savior, the skit reaches its climax. The cook’s surrender, of both heart and mind, facilitates Da Huyou’s successful creation of a desired customer.¹⁶

Zhao Benshan dramatizes how Da Huyou turns “science” into a means of deception, rationality into a form of control, and knowledge into an instrument of manipulation. It is especially important since it calls to mind the attributes of ideological construction in general: establishing authority on “scientific” or “factual” grounds and constructing “the real” or “truth” by the appropriation of fear and affection. By emphasizing these attributes through Da Huyou’s particular construction of a desired consumer, *Selling Crutches* provokes us to think about the nature of market practice and to question if the market’s manipulation and deception of the mind is any different from that of authoritative indoctrinations in general.¹⁷ By showing us how the appropriation of scientific authority/objectivity for a particular purpose provides a “cure” worse than the “disease,” *Selling Crutches* seems to suggest that we rethink the ongoing modernization frenzy that legitimizes market mechanisms in indisputably positive terms. The character of the cook, however, indicates that many in China are not yet ready for this suggestion.

¹⁶ For those who grew up in Maoist China, this I-know-what-you-are-going-through kind of rhetoric sounds familiar. I cite one example from *Ou-yang Hai zhi ge (The song of O-yang Hai)*, a book in wide circulation at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, to show the affinity between the construction of a desired subject in the revolutionary past and the construction of a desired consumer at present. To convert his new recruit Ou-yang Hai to his line of thinking, a political instructor, Zeng, in the People’s Liberation Army says, in a very casual manner, something that seems totally irrelevant to his intention:

“We call it (referring to Shepherd’s purse, a grass) ‘vegetable food’ in our hometown. When I was little, it was very hard to come by during spring time when food was short.” Zeng took off one leaf and smelled it, “At that time, the wealthy landlord regarded it as some kind of seasonal delicacy to make dumplings with when it was very tender and fresh, they would not have it when it started to grow flowers. We the poor wished to be able to get it all year round.” Ou-yang Hai remembered his own childhood and found himself much closer to the political instructor. (Jin Jingmai 117)

Even before the instructor’s real intention is revealed, he has already halfway achieved his purpose. The way to do it is through the personal and emotional. As the political instructor’s shared experience of the past draws Ou-yang Hai closer to him, Da Huyou’s sharing of his own misery wins the cook’s trust.

¹⁷ Such comparison is especially valid because the market in China is not a total game situation, nor has the practice of authority ever been completely one-way violence. (I don’t mean to say the market situation is devoid of violence. The opposite is true.) I understand the concern that the market functions differently from authoritative directives/indoctrination. This, however, should not hamper our comparison of different hegemonic operations. Our understanding of the similarities between the mechanisms of constructing desired consumers and that of constructing desired subjects is crucial to the cultivation of a critical consciousness constantly on guard against any authoritative promotion of any absolute agenda.

B. The Absurdity of the “Unthinking Inertia”

Da Huyou’s deception alone does not rearrange the cook’s desire in either skit. Rather, the deception works because there exists a fit between Da Huyou’s mode of deception and the cook’s mode of acceptance. From the outset, *Selling Crutches* makes clear the nature of Da Huyou’s commercial endeavor: a deception of a non-coercive nature—“A willing fish will take the bait,” in Da Huyou’s own words. The established patterns of thought and behavior in the cook respond to Da Huyou’s narrative of deception just as Da Huyou anticipates. This acts as a catalyst, propelling the cook into a relationship of complicity.

The predominant pattern of thought that the cook follows is that one should have unconditional faith in authoritative power once this power has proven its validity. It is true that Da Huyou’s calculated guess of the cook’s profession is grounded in material reality (the cook’s stereotypical appearance and the smell of scallion on him). It is, however, just a lucky guess that shows Da Huyou’s street-smart wit. It may have captured some temporary truth; nevertheless, it should not give Da Huyou the right to claim the authority of truth, nor the cook the blind faith in it. The conversation between Da Huyou and the cook indicates otherwise:

THE COOK. Okay, you’ve made a lucky guess.

DA HUYOU. A lucky guess? Are you a cook or not?

THE COOK. Well, suppose I am. What did you mean by “serious problem” and “terminal stage” just now? What is wrong with me?

DA HUYOU. Will you believe what I am going to say?

THE COOK. I will, I will.

Because he has been correct once, Da Huyou demands to be regarded as a voice of authority. The cook buys into this logic. Even before he knows what Da Huyou is going to say, the cook surrenders his faith to its truth claims. The cook’s faith in Da Huyou’s power for truth constructed an imaginary authority in his mind. Da Huyou’s success helps establish his credibility and levels the ground for his later exercise of power and control.

The established pattern of behavior in the cook is almost blown out of proportion to catch the viewers’ attention in *Selling a Wheelchair*. To convince the cook of his need for the wheelchair, Da Huyou constructs another “scientific theory.” According to

this theory, the cook's failure to use the crutches has aggravated the problem of his leg to such an extent that his brain is affected and no longer works properly. Da Huyou puts the cook to an intelligence test to prove his theory. It starts with a deceptively simple question of math:

DA HUYOU. Tell us, in what situation does one plus one equal three?

THE COOK. In no situation does one plus one equal three.

DA HUYOU. Wrong! My dear [wife], you try.

THE WIFE. In miscalculation, one plus one equals three.

DA HUYOU. Correct!

The cook is convinced by such reasoning and thinks he has learned a lesson. Da Huyou later repeats the question to the cook while the cook is sitting in the wheelchair:

DA HUYOU. Tell us, in what situation does one plus one equal three?

THE COOK. In miscalculation, one plus one equals three.

DA HUYOU. Correct, congratulations!

THE COOK. Well, well! What has happened?

DA HUYOU. Because you are in a wheelchair, there is no more pressure to your legs. Without pressure, viruses cannot travel up. Your brain has regained its proper function.

Absurd as Da Huyou's diagnosis may sound, this repetition kills two birds with one stone. First, it reinforces the lesson the cook has learned—"In miscalculation, one plus one equals three"; second, it confuses the cook as to the relationship between the proper function of his brain and the position of his legs. After a few more rounds of questions and answers, it suddenly dawns on the cook that all the correct answers he gives while in the wheelchair are to repeated questions. These answers have been drilled into him. To dismiss the cook's doubt, Da Huyou brings up the question of simple math the third time:

DA HUYOU. Okay, let's try another question with you standing up. It is a very simple question that you have done before.

THE COOK. Very well.

DA HUYOU. It's a question about one plus one equals what.

THE COOK. Let it out.

DA HUYOU. Here it comes—In what situation does one plus one equal two?

THE COOK. In miscalculation one plus one equals two.

DA HUYOU. Wrong!? Equals two!

THE COOK. What? Two? Didn't you say three before?

DA HUYOU. You can't even tell the difference between two and three. You are really muddle-headed.

While the habitual way of thinking is easily established, the cook is unprepared to adjust to the contingencies in life. It has never occurred to the cook that a more logical way to test whether the performance of his intelligence has anything to do with what his feet touch may be answering a new question sitting down rather than repeating an old question standing up. Nor is he able to find fault with Da Huyou's sudden change of content (from number three to two). Da Huyou's strategic improvisation requires the cook to revise his own strategy constantly. Fenced in by his habitual way of thinking and his trust in authority, the cook is not able to see what is going on or to negotiate his positions accordingly. In his battle with Da Huyou the cook is doomed to lose.

Magnifying the cook's folly to the point of absurdity by way of Da Huyou's trickery, the two skits seem to try shocking the viewers into realizing the danger of established patterns of thinking and blind faith in authority. The necessary repetition of the cook's failure, especially the second time when he goes to Da Huyou with distrust and the intention to expose him, illustrates a vicious circular relationship between one's "unthinking inertia" and one's propensity to believe blindly. This circular relationship is evocative of a contemporary situation in China—the faith in technology and economic power and a single-minded pursuit of both. Could some Chinese have, to some extent, been blinded by the lessons of past humiliations? Could the zealous effort to "catch up" with the West be an expression of "unthinking inertia"? Traditional wisdom has warned us that when one lifts a heavy rock one could hurt oneself.¹⁸ Could the Chinese drive to modernize become such a "rock" in the hands of those in an "unthinking inertia"?

C. The Working of Hegemonic Power

Although in both skits Da Huyou makes it appear as if his persuasive power

¹⁸ The exact Chinese saying goes like this: ban qi shitou za ziji de jiao (搬起石頭砸自己的腳 lift a rock only to drop it on one's own foot).

depends on empirical evidence (the cook's crippled leg in *Selling Crutches* and mental deficiency in *Selling a Wheelchair*), from the outset, both skits spell out that Da Huyou's "scientific" approach is a fraud. In both cases, first when Da Huyou sees the cook as the intended consumer for the crutches and second for the wheelchair, the "truth" about the cook's "illness" has been decided. When Da Huyou approaches the cook "the way it is 'in truth,'" to use a Benjaminian expression, truth is the last thing on his mind. What is it, then, that ensures the successful performance of intention, expression, or preconceived diagnosis when they are supported by neither reality nor truth?

With the wife as the embodied conscience and in unmistakable terms, both *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* constantly remind us that the real is constructed. For example, in *Selling Crutches*, before the potential customer shows up, the wife expresses her anxiety:

THE WIFE. Who will buy them from us? There is not even one crippled person in sight in this crowded street.

DA HUYOU. My dear, to prove to you my ability, today I will choose a person in perfect physical condition and sell him the crutches.

THE WIFE. Won't that be cheating?

The answer, of course, is "Yes." Surprised at discovering himself to be a cripple, the cook cries out:

THE COOK. Oh, no! Why has nobody discovered this before?

THE WIFE. You did not meet him (Da Huyou) before. You would have been crippled long ago if you had.

The wife's words fall on the cook's deaf ears. They nevertheless remind the viewers exactly what is happening—a man has imagined some conditions for another man who has successfully made them "real."

Selling Crutches's attention to the constructed nature of the real brings to mind Sandy Petrey's insightful study of the arbitrariness of the real. For Petrey, when an expression is presented as being decided by experience in social situations, an imaginary reality is being constructed. The truth of the matter is "[i]t is not experience that determines expression but expression that organizes experience" (Petrey 191). In

Allegories of Reading, Paul de Man’s study of the word “men” makes the same point: “the invention of the word men makes it possible for ‘men’ to exist by establishing the equality within inequality, the sameness within differences of civil society [...]. The concept interprets the metaphor of a numerical sameness as if it were a statement of literal fact” (155). Here Paul de Man tells us that words bring “facts” into existence and create illusions or deceptions about “literal fact.” But most important of all, he tells us that words are not innocent but are “inventions” or “motivated distortions” to meet specific needs (155). When words create facts a certain degree of illusion or distortion is inevitable. To understand the nature of these illusions or distortions, we need to look into the needs that motivate the inventions. With simple but brilliant examples, both skits demonstrate that it is not the cook’s physical condition that leads to Da Huyou’s diagnosis, but Da Huyou’s diagnosis that decides the cook’s physical condition. The purpose of the diagnosis is only to realize an a priori intention—to create a cripple for the crutches or the wheelchair already made.

Paul de Man’s discussion of the word “man” also shows how arbitrary power determines meaning through linguistic denomination.¹⁹ The inability to uncouple the real from the distortions of words gives their inventor the opportunity to manipulate the distortion and the power to arbitrate the extent of distortion. Simply put, it is the inventor who makes the word “men” denote an imaginary “sameness within differences” (de Man 155). Albeit in different forms, the appropriation of linguistic denomination in *Selling a Wheelchair* creates the same “motivated distortion” as in the invention of words. A look at them can help us understand what enables Da Huyou to succeed in his creation:

DA HUYOU. Why doesn’t your dog give birth/rise to fleas? [Chinese character 生 (*sheng*) can mean both “give birth to” and “give rise to.”]

THE COOK. Because my dog is very particular about hygiene.

DA HUYOU. Wrong!

THE WIFE. Because dogs can only give birth to dogs, nothing else.

There are multiple possible correct answers to the question posed by Da Huyou. Although the real has necessarily to be couched in misrepresentation, which (mis)-

¹⁹ Here “arbitrary power” may not necessarily be coercive in nature, as the power granted Da Huyou to define the meaning of a word or expression is not. The consequences of such power, however, may not be less violent. Behind what seems to be a fair transaction of the market place in both skits, the cook’s humanity was violated in ways different from under the coercive use of influence.

representation is necessary is an arbitrary human decision. The denominative power to decide which is correct is in Da Huyou's hands. What this example shows is that the difference between Da Huyou's answer and the cook's answer is not a difference between right or wrong, truth or error. What is right or true is determined by the one in possession of the denominative power; it is simply the consequences of exercising this power. *Selling a Wheelchair* gives us many examples of such power. Using the multiple denominative possibilities of the same denominator as examples, *Selling a Wheelchair* gets across the idea of arbitrary exercise of power in the representation of the real.

In the end, it is the cook's inability to identify the exercise of this power that leads to the repetition of his previous mistake. When the audience is able to laugh at his inability and stupidity, the real object of ridicule is the appropriation of this arbitrary power. Through the comic exaggeration of the nonidentity between the expressions of the real and the real, Zhao Benshan's skits lead the audience to the constructed nature of things. By throwing the motivations behind such constructions into the audience's face, the skits lay bare the working of arbitrary power in representation. In the audience's understanding of this power is the hope for them to contemplate issues in life in a different light when "facts" are again presented to them as eyewitness truth, when a simulacrum of the real is portrayed as the way things are, and when a particular development program is depicted as responding to their needs. Such contemplation may lead to the audience's participation in the definition of words and their needs, their demand for the revisions of existing expressions, and new forms of representation. In these possibilities lies the critical potential of Zhao Benshan's two skits.

II. Understanding *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* in a Chinese Context

How is deception accomplished in both skits? The answer has to include: establishing authority on "scientific" grounds, exploiting the "unthinking inertia," and exercising denominative power. The list of things being ridiculed in both skits must include how the market ideology manipulates and deceives the mind, how it claims a corre-

spondence between the expression of the real and the real, as well as people's blind faith in authoritative knowledge and power. To sustain the claim that Zhao Benshan's work has critical potential, we need evidence of critical understanding like this from China. If neither Zhao's Chinese critics nor defenders manifest a similar critical consciousness, where should we turn for justification of Zhao Benshan's critical implications? This is a very complicated question that involves not only the issue of where to look but also the issue of how to look for evidence. My effort to approach an answer will start with a critical look at contemporary China, that is, the historical and discursive contexts in which the skits were produced and interpreted. An understanding of what is at the core of the inadequacy of the critical readings in China may open the door to the appreciation of Zhao Benshan's importance from the audience's participation in and reception of the two skits.

A. The Historical Context

Peng Li and other opponents of Zhao Benshan have criticized his work for lack of social responsibility and aesthetic taste. Acting as the guardians of virtues and beauty, they revamped the outdated revolutionary tradition that required artists to enlighten and save the nation. Allies of the state bureaucracy, the defenders of Zhao Benshan, also lacked the necessary critical consciousness to do Zhao's skits justice. Their defense of the skits' anti-corruption subject and appropriate art form is ultimately for the defense of the current mainstream market ideology and developmental policies. For them, Zhao was popular because his skits echoed the state's effort to crack down on corruption and reaffirmed the state-advocated and hegemonic "good" business practices. The response to the "Zhao Benshan phenomenon" from Chinese intellectual communities, both Zhao's accusers and defenders included, clearly indicates that they still use the vocabulary of the past to confront contemporary popular cultural phenomenon and that entrenched patterns of thought still organize their thinking and experience. To understand the inadequacy of their critique of Zhao Benshan it is, therefore, necessary that we grasp contemporary Chinese experience in its relation to a revolutionary and socialist modernity.

In the past two centuries, China has experienced traumatic humiliation at the hands of global imperialism. In his article "Implication of the Rise of 'Confucian' East Asia," Tu Weiming interprets China's recent past in terms of its exercise of instrumental rationality: "As the international rules of the game, defined in terms of wealth and power, were superimposed on China by gunboat diplomacy" (201), many Chinese

intellectuals deliberately chose to embark on a materialist path. This path was believed to be the shortcut to modernization. Through wholesale Westernization, they hoped to save the nation: “The demand for effective action and demonstrable results was so compelling that there was little room for reflection, let alone meditative thinking” (Tu 202). The consequences of such a deliberate choice were disastrous: “The anticipated ‘short-cut’ became a tortuous road to revolutionary romanticism and populist scientism and, for several generations of intellectuals, serfdom” (Tu 202).

When Maoism, as an alternative to Western modernization, failed and the Maoist era ended, the effort to explore the “short-cut” to modernization continued. Despite the extreme swing of the pendulum in China’s economic policies, the dominant mentality and established patterns of thinking remained unchanged. Past legacies were reconfigured but only to incorporate China into a global capitalist economy. The humiliating experience of the past, the sense of urgency, and the anxious psychology in contemporary China are fully manifest in the rational choice of four modernizations by way of a capitalist market and commodification—the largest ticket item the central state power is selling to Chinese people and the world. If we take the stage of *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* as China in miniature, we can see that the state’s promotional efforts, similar to that of Da Huyou’s, have given rise to what Tu calls “the most negative aspects of Western modernism: exploitation, mercantilism, consumerism, materialism, greed, egoism, and brutal competitiveness” (207). Wang Ban puts it another way, “it is arguable that socialist modernization has its own matrix of ‘capital’ whose alienating effects on human subjectivity and sensibility are comparable to those in capitalist modernity” (672). Tu warns, “[i]f the PRC immerses herself in the ‘four modernizations’ at all costs,” the modernity it achieves could also be a nightmare (208).

Tu is not blind to the changes China has undertaken; however, he perceives these changes in a different light. Tu is happy to see that for the past 20 years China has been “[a] most vibrant economy” and, as a developing state, has been reinventing itself everyday (208). He is, however, apprehensive about “the difficulty” that “lies in the ambiguity of the Enlightenment legacy” (203). Seeing the rapid rise of a distorted consumer society where residual socialism lends itself to the unrelenting forces of capital and the market becomes indispensable to the utopian end of the state, Tu worries about the consequence of “modernization as homogenization” (198).

Such worry, however, did not prevent Tu from uncritically embracing the “salient” Confucian features that will, according to him, offer the “plurality of modern forms” (208). These features include the “necessary” and “desirable” government

leadership and “organic solidarity” as a basis for social stability (205). Granted that Tu’s article is more concerned with the “transformative potential of Confucian tradition” in the global context, it is all the more the reason to provide details about how a “soft authoritarianism” can lead to the “organic solidarity” of a society and to show the contemporary local significance of these Confucian ideals (203). Such details are missing in Tu’s study. Instead of the Confucian ideals Tu wishes for, China is now permeated by “a narrow, utilitarian mentality” where “the primary goal in life was to improve one’s material welfare” (Wang Xiaoming 595). The “collaboration between officialdom and the business community,” what Tu perceives as a common East Asian practice (210), has led to an alarming situation where “those who control domestic capital are in fact the same as those who control political power” (Huters 26).

Recent scholarly reflections on Chinese modernity, especially those from China, have shown a growing concern about the consequences of May Fourth’s iconoclastic attack on tradition, the pursuit of the material path to save the nation, and the national sentiment that overshadows any deeper reflection about the market. Wang Hui’s new book, *China’s New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, shares Tu’s understanding of the Enlightenment mentality in China—its emphasis on human subjectivity, freedom and liberation is not sufficient to deal with the social crisis that capitalist marketization and modernization have created. Like Tu, Wang vehemently objected to Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis and the assumption that the perceived success of one social system should be the model for all (Huters 30). Wang Xiaoming recently confesses that he truly felt “ashamed” for “the enthusiastic clamor of intellectuals in the 1980s” that championed “Efficiency is money” and “The market economy is modernization” (590). With his article “China on the Brink of a ‘Momentous Era,’” he has started to question the logic that informed such enthusiasm, that is, “a new ‘thought’” that indicates that “other than immediate material gains all else is useless” (601). What is happening in China has compelled critical intellectual responses to go beyond Tu Weiming. They have started to look into “the political aspect of political economy” (Huters 29), to consider why a specific government economic policy was adopted and how the “autocratic power” wanted it to work, and to question the arbitrary exercise of power that defines reality and prescribes policy for its own legitimacy and perpetuation.

B. The Discursive Context: The Theory of “Three Represents”²⁰

While critical minds are asking: should economic development at all costs be embraced as the only road to ensure China's survival, the answer from the Party-state of post-Mao-Deng China seems to be a definitive “Yes.” At the Communist Party of China's (CPC) 80th anniversary celebration on July 1, 2001, the then Party general secretary Jiang Zeming made his arguably most important speech. In the speech, he expounded his theory of “Three Represents” (*sange daibiao*). His narrative of recent Chinese history provides legitimacy for his “new” theoretical adventure:

Every struggle that the Chinese people fought during the one hundred years from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century was for the sake of achieving independence of our country and liberation of our nation and putting an end to the history of national humiliation once and for all. This great historic cause has already been accomplished. All endeavors by the Chinese people for the one hundred years from the mid-20th to the mid-21st century are for the purpose of making our motherland strong, the people prosperous and the nation immensely rejuvenated. (Jiang IV)

Time and again, Jiang reiterated in the speech that “China has entered a new development stage of building a well-to-do society in the whole country” and that “accelerating the socialist modernization drive” is a must for the next half century (IV). For ordinary people, their path in life for the next 50 years has been set. Despite all the changes in Chinese politics over the past 20 years, one thing remains the same—the Party-state is in possession of the grand narrative of the past, the present, and the future.

To ensure the success of its modernization program, the Party-state set for itself the task of “three represents.” This newest version of mainstream rhetoric acknowledges the necessity to improve, readjust, and change in order to stay on the right course to “faithfully represent the development trend of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture as well as the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people” (Jiang IV). It, however, does not query into what these things are and the Party's capacity to represent them. Acutely aware of the problems that market forces are forever generating, the Party-state sincerely wanted to address them to ensure the smooth running of the market mechanism. Its sincerity,

²⁰ There is a disregard in this translation for the fact that “represent” in English is a verb. It is used here because it has become the official translation in China and a widely accepted translation outside China.

however, does not offset its faith in itself as the only authority to “serve as the leadership core” providing necessary regulatory leverage: “All comrades in the Party [...] should check and review their work regularly to see whether it conforms to the requirements of the development of advanced productive forces. If it does, hold on to it without wavering. If it does not, correct it where necessary” (Jiang IV). Here the Chairman’s directive relegates the discrepancy between the state policies and the reality to the ever-changing historical circumstances, portraying the Party as an active, competent, and responsible agent of change. And at the same time, it also secures itself an escape hatch should the need for shedding responsibility arise—if a program fails, it is always because of the changing circumstances. The Party-state’s intention, legitimacy, and capacity for good are not in question.

What is lacking in this “three represents” theory? The logic and thought pattern that the two skits expose can provide us with some answers. In the “three represents” theory, “the requirements of the development of advanced productive forces,” “the orientation of China’s advanced culture,” “the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people,” and the Party’s ability to represent them all are unproblematic and predetermined—exactly as in Da Huyou’s diagnosis. Although the necessity for regular “check and review” clearly indicates an awareness of the inevitable discrepancy between perception and reality, the Party’s ability to discern problems and correct itself to “conform” to the “requirements” is taken for granted. In this theory, the political mode of conceptualization shares the same paradigm of power with Da Huyou’s commercial pattern of deception—the one in possession of discursive power is in possession of reality and truth. To admit the contingency of history and to be willing to change with it is one thing; to imagine and to present oneself as the infallible leadership is another. It is hard for democratic instincts to grow when the latter is practiced. The same as Da Huyou’s diagnoses, this theory hides from us (1) the impossibility of “conformity” with the “requirements” of history and (2) the arbitrary exercise of power to predetermine the “requirements” and their “representations.” In so doing, the Party-state keeps the myth of an identity between perception and reality intact and the legitimacy of its leadership and authority unchallenged. Such a conception of political authority explains, to some extent, why in China today, “[t]he supreme discursive power that strives to maintain social and ideological homogeneity [...] is still controlled by the central political authority” (Yang 392). Within this discursive context, questioning or negotiating with mainstream discourse presents great challenges.

The comparison between Da Huyou’s mode of deception and the Party-state’s

mode of conceptualizing authority should not obfuscate the distinction between them. The former is clearly a case of deliberate misuse of power; the latter, to give the Party-state the full benefit of doubt, may be genuinely limited by its cognitive capacity. If this is true, the Party-state comes closer to the image of the cook, whose “unthinking inertia” has proven to be just as destructive as Da Huyou’s deceptive manipulation. Whichever is the case, to avoid destructive consequences, the place to start is to acknowledge the impossibility of truth, to recognize one’s own fallibility, and to engage the collective wisdom of the people in deciding what is best for them. These, however, do not present promising prospects for the eternal legitimacy of authority. I agree with Yang Xiaobin that there is a correlation between Mao and post-Mao eras: they share “the same *totalistic and teleological discourse of modernity* [...] that bars any discourse in conflict to it” (393).

There are many sides to the arbitrary exercise of power. Whether it results from historical experience, political conceptualization, moral corruption or adulation, or the limits of cognitive faculty, the consequences are detrimental to the cultivation of alternative systems of thoughts and the articulation of different voices. The inadequacy in the critical reading of Zhao Benshan in China points to the limits of the historical and discursive contexts from which the Chinese critics operate. When it could be unwise to take an anti-war stance publicly during late March and early April of 2003 in a democracy like the United States, it may, therefore, be too much to expect the kind of critical reading expounded in this article to appear in mainstream discourse and discussion in China, even if alternative critiques may not be entirely absent from critical thinking. An example from *Selling Crutches* may help prove my point.

Selling Crutches did not pass the censorship the first time around for its politically incorrect use of two words “*gaogan*” (高幹 high-ranking official) in the sentence, “Big head, thick neck, if he is not a high-ranking official, he is a cook” (腦袋大脖子粗，不是高幹就是伙夫 *naodai da bozi cu, bushi gaogan jiushi huofu*). Zhao Benshan and his writers happily fixed the problem by replacing “*gaogan*” with two other Chinese characters “*dakuan*” (大款 a person with a lot of money). The staging of the skit in 2001’s New Year Gala Show was smooth sailing thereafter.²¹ In China, artists still need to appropriate the art of indirection. Luckily, China today also offers favorable situations for the effective function of this art.

²¹ Please go to <http://linye.vip.sina.com/ZF047.HTM> for more information. Ten days after China’s 2001 New Year Gala Show, there was a debate about the success of the show on sina.com. In the debate, Miao Li, who represented those who applauded the show, released the above information.

C. The Plurality of Meaning

China is in a state of flux. In addition to deceptive business practices in exchange relations, the freer market also makes possible that “the private useful labor of each producer ranks on an equality with that of all others” (Marx 84). This is to say that the market situation is also favorable to the cultivation of the sense of equality and individuality. With their increasing sense of self and subjectivity under the new social and economic conditions, the Chinese people are no longer the easy prey of ideological manipulation. Despite the fact that the overall market environment in China today is a product of the state, the liberating potential of the market has created a new cultural space, wherein the plurality of meaning makes it impossible for authority to encapsulate it within a single interpretation. Anchored in this real world of flux, language and words are also, despite their arbitrary denomination, invested with infinite possibilities. Walter Benjamin commented years ago, “[e]ven words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” (73). This is exactly what Zhao Benshan and his writers have done to the set expressions of *gaogan* and *dakuan*.

Although the censoring authority have decided that “*gaogan*” and “*dakuan*” are two entirely different categories, the former representing the Party-state power, the latter the nouveau riche, for Zhao Benshan and his writers, they are interchangeable. Products and beneficiaries of the state power and policy, both “*gaogan*” and “*dakuan*” embody the “success” of the state’s hegemonic and developmental ideologies. The exchange of words is but a shift from one object of popular resentment to another. Although Zhao Benshan did not say as much in words, the interchangeability speaks of “an active force of life as the symbolized thing itself” (Benjamin 79). The symbolized thing that resides in the interchangeability is no other than an awareness of the similarity and complicity between the state power and market forces and a critical attitude towards the new absolute promotion of the market.

The same awareness and critical attitude can be found in the audience’s reaction too. Before *Selling Crutches* was performed, the hostess of the New Year Gala Show made an attempt to channel the audience’s response to it: “The comic skit you are going to see tells us that it is very important to promote science to do away with superstition in our life. Otherwise, many good and honest people will fall easy victim of deception.” In this official interpretation, the cook represents “good and honest people” and Da Huyou a victimizer who practices deception through superstition. The complexity of issues in Da Huyou’s deception is watered down to the single fault of

superstition. Appearing as the champion for science and good business practices, the official interpretation tries to divert attention from alternative readings. Much at odds with the state-prescribed interpretation, the audience's reception of Zhao Benshan signifies increasing maturity—they decided to enjoy Zhao's work on their own terms.²²

As much as the official interpretation paints Da Huyou as an evil swindler and the cook as an innocent victim, the audience sees in both multiple possibilities. Da Huyou as a nickname indicates that its bearer may care more about his persuasive power than about his ability to maximize the exchange value of his labor in the market. As soon as the skit opens, the audience is informed that Da Huyou is a product of the current market and is enjoying a hell of a ride in it—"When someone buys a horse, he sells him a saddle; when someone buys a motorcycle, he sells him a safety helmet; when someone suffers from insomnia, he sells him sleeping pills [...]." What Frank W. Abagnale, the protagonist of Steven Spielberg's recent film *Catch Me If You Can*, said to a reporter might as well apply to Da Huyou: "I was an opportunist, so when I saw an opening I asked myself, 'Could I get away with that?' Then there was the satisfaction of actually getting away with it" ("A True Fake" 69). With the satisfaction from pulling off a trick and the desire for the sense of superiority as the engine driving the plot, *Selling Crutches* puts a spin on the complexity of Da Huyou and makes him a character with whom the audience can partially identify. As Frank W. Abagnale is not an out-and-out villain for the American audience, nor is Da Huyou for the Chinese audience. Street-smart and with a strong desire to make money, Da Huyou also embodies contemporary traits that many understand. In tune with the contemporary market ethos, Da Huyou and his desire represent for the audience more of an overkill of the market mentality than superstitious beliefs.

When laughing at the cook's acceptance of Da Huyou's logic, heart-felt thanks, and repetitive mistakes, the audience does not seem to respect him as a "good and honest" man. Their sense of superiority to the cook derives from the realization that the cook was not able to achieve: the construction in the buyer of an illusion of unfulfilled dreams and in the product of an image of indispensable use values. Well-groomed by the practice of the advertising industry in contemporary society, the audience was quick to associate the process of *maiguai* with their daily existence and frustration. No

²² This is not to idealize the audience as a distinct entity with entirely "their own" agendas and preferences. What I think important and commendable is that the audience, however contaminated they may have been by larger social and political influences, are learning to take their own positions and express their own feelings.

wonder then that soon after the performance of *Selling Crutches* a shout of “*mai le*” (賣了 sell) in a crowded street in China would trigger off an echo of “*guai le*” (拐了 turn or abduct).²³ For the audience, degenerative business ethics blur the line between “*maiguai*” (賣拐 sell crutches) and “*guaimai*” (拐賣 engagement in human trade through deception). The expression “*maiguai*” has become a synonym of deception. It is no coincidence that Zhao’s skits about the abusive use of words’ multi-denominative power start with a demonstration of the contingency of meaning in words. When Da Huyou’s wife stammered out “*guai le*,” “*mai le*,” “*guai, mai le*,” at the beginning of *Selling Crutches*, it is much more than a few Freudian slips. The intended meaning of “selling crutches” is understood, by the audience, as a call to attend to both the complexity of selling and the multiplicity of meaning. They adopt the phrase *maiguai* as an everyday expression, reminding themselves of the ever-ongoing manipulation of “science” and “reason.”

Although conditioned by radically different experiences, memories, and imaginations, diverse groups of Chinese audience recognize *maiguai* as a condition of contemporary life, “where production engenders consumption, and where consumption is manipulated by producers” (Lefebvre 9). According to Shen Lijun, a reporter for *Computer World Weekly*, people in information technology have come to associate *maiguai* with an often indispensable promotional strategy—to make a person want what he may not need: “For marketing personnel under enormous sales pressure, rational consideration of a fit between a product and customers’ need cannot be their priority” (par. 7). Some of the audience members are prepared to deal with this condition of life—patients in hospitals are having second thoughts about “expert opinions” and business entrepreneurs are thinking hard about how to avoid *maiguai* situations in adopting modern and foreign ideas and technology (Ding). In the popular and spontaneous association of the practice of marketing with the practice of deception lies the power of Zhao Benshan’s work—in addition to proving the state’s dysfunctional interpretative authority, it gives expression to the deeply felt frustrations of contemporary life and helps cultivate the consciousness to question what one is told.

²³ The word “*guai*” (拐) in Chinese has multiple meanings; “crutch” is only one of them. Used as a verb, “*guai*” means to “make a turn.” When collocated with “*mai*” (賣 to sell), its meaning depends on its position in the combination. In “*maiguai*,” meaning “selling crutches,” “*guai*” takes on the meaning of “crutches.” In “*guaimai*,” meaning to “abduct” and “sell,” “*guai*” refers to the engagement in human trade through deception. The skit *Selling Crutches* starts with the wife’s ambiguously phrased/positioned sales pitch, “*guai le, mai le*,” “*guai, mai le!*” Her words could be understood as “Freudian slips,” indicating the nature of “abduction” in the “selling.” The Chinese audience loved the punning effect of these expressions and their multi-implications.

D. The Position of the Audience

The critical power of *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* also depends on how we look for it. It does not just manifest itself in the “unconscious” of the audience. The audience’s implicit critical engagement with the state is also a result of the skits’ conscious effort to cultivate their critical sensibility, especially through the formal incorporation of the audience into the skits.

Certainly the audience laughs because they feel superior when observing the cook’s inability to see through Da Huyou’s twisted logic. But Zhao Benshan’s skits have added layers of complexity that go beyond making the audience feel good. Since at the beginning of both skits the audience is informed, by Da Huyou himself, of his scheme, they are positioned to experience the unfolding and working of the scheme from Da Huyou’s perspective. For obvious reasons the audience will not buy into Da Huyou’s logic, yet they are actively involved in the game—who would not want to find out how a “mission impossible” gets accomplished? This positioning of the audience in the skits necessitates their focus on the process of the deception—on how both sides make it happen—in order to accomplish their own mission.

The audience’s position also complicates the nature of their laughs. To laugh at the cook is now also to laugh with Da Huyou at him, for Da Huyou is the one who is trying to fool him. It is hard to deny that the audience may have been amused by some of Da Huyou’s triumph and joy; some of their sense of superiority may have come from sharing that sense of triumph and joy. After all, the mechanisms that ensure the success of Da Huyou’s absurd logic are not Da Huyou’s privilege. For many years Chinese people have been told what is best for them and what the best way is to achieve it. For too long, they have been conditioned not to think for themselves. The continuous functioning of such directives shows that many have become accustomed to such practice and accepted it as a normal part of their life. Members in the audience are no exception.

Yet, as much as they may have acquiesced to the “authority principle,” to borrow Doug Gentile’s expression,²⁴ most people in the audience are not Da Huyou in that they are not appropriating that authority at others’ expense and that they disapprove its manipulation. This causes the comic exaggeration of Da Huyou’s logic to “defamilia-

²⁴ Doug Gentile, Professor of Psychology at Iowa State University, named “the authority principle” and “the identity principle” as the two most important “tricks” that advertisers use. By the former he meant the presentation and representation of authority in advertising, and by the latter the construction of identity among individual consumers through emotional manipulation. See Gentile. Gentile has also worked with David Walsh. For more detail, see Walsh and Gentile.

rise.” What amuses them shocks them at the same time. Its absurdity and success invite them to question the principles and the mechanisms at work. The audience’s laughter about the cook is, therefore, not simply their rejection of his “unthinking inertia,” but also their own. The brilliance and profundity of Zhao Benshan’s skits lie in their ability to engage the audience to look for, in the process of laughing, the absurdity of their own life. They capture critical attentions through their aesthetic mechanisms of deception.

Yet, in discussing the critical potential of Zhao Benshan’s comic skits, we must not forget the fact that they are commercialized cultural products and are being incorporated into CCTV’s (China Central Television) cultural hegemony everyday. Their increasingly commercial concerns threaten their critical power. What happened to Zhao’s skit at the 2003 New Year Gala Show is a warning. When pleasing audiences became the number one concern and inducing a laugh from them every five seconds a quantified imperative from the censoring authority (Peng Qingyuan par. 4), Zhao Benshan’s work failed to find resonance in the audience.²⁵ The possibility of Zhao Benshan’s work becoming incorporated by the state and the market is constantly present. Such is the complexity and difficulty, as well as the beauty and excitement, of popular cultural practice in China.

III. The Critical Significance of Two of Zhao Benshan’s Comic Skits

The difference of opinions over the “Zhao Benshan phenomenon” mirrors a larger divide in the appreciation of contemporary Chinese popular culture. In January 2003, with the publication of Wang Xianpei and Xu Min’s article “Wei Dazhong wenyi jian fu” (Please reduce the burden for popular culture) in *Wenyibao*, a theoretical dialogue about the function of popular culture in contemporary China started. The critical orientation of art and literature in a consumer society has been a big concern.²⁶ While the side represented by Wang Xianpei and Xu Min is in favor of entertainment value over the depth of content, Gai Sheng and Ouyang Youquan from the other side worry about popular culture’s negative impacts, especially the loss of social and aesthetic dimensions in the pursuit of consumption (Bai 8). While the former group tends

²⁵ Zhao Benshan’s 2003 skit *Heart Problem* did not win the first prize by popular vote.

²⁶ For a summary of the progress of the dialogue, see Bai.

toward an uncritical embrace of commodified cultural practices, the latter bends toward a moralistic rejection of them. My discussion in this article follows a different trajectory of investigation. What I found out, by way of Zhao Benshan's comic skits, is that popular culture products do not have to give up the depth of content for entertainment value and that consumer culture can be aesthetically appealing and socially responsible at the same time.²⁷

Embedding his humor in a non-political, everyday practice from contemporary Chinese life, Zhao Benshan appeared on stage, donning a Mao suit and a Qian Guang hat,²⁸ ready to entertain. But the skits' enactment of the process of deception achieved much more than pleasing the audience—it also prodded them to think. The position of the audience and the exposure of the minute details of the deceptive processes show that these skits were not concerned with what if Da Huyou had been a more moral person or the cook a smarter guy. The allegorical implications of Da Huyou and the cook led the audience to search for the causes of falsity: (1) the inevitability of deception in promotional efforts; (2) the disaster-inviting “unthinking inertia”; and (3) the hidden but arbitrary exercise of power in the representation of the real. The two skits, by way of exposing the manipulation of market, point to the practice of hegemony in general. They also pose a forceful critique of any promotion of absolute concept or mode of life.

Although the discourse of deconstruction has been circulating among Chinese intellectuals since the 1980s, issues of linguistic contingency and indeterminacy and their relationship to the nature of reality and truth have not been seriously considered. Gloria Davies was insightful in her critique: “One of the striking differences between Euro-American and Chinese theoretical approaches is the overall disinterest of the latter in deconstructive self-reflexive thinking about language” (308). Highlighting how the two skits illustrate the fictional nature of reality and language's manipulation of it, the analysis of the skits uncovers the complicit relationship between the assumed transparency of language and the legitimacy of power.

The critical implication of Zhao's skits can also enlighten our understanding of the debates over them. There is a closer connection between these debates and Zhao's critical thrust than we may have imagined—it is also directed against the cultural elites who, by relegating Zhao's work to the domain of the vulgar, are protecting their own

²⁷ The innovative German playwright Bertolt Brecht made the similar point in 1936.

²⁸ Qian Guang is a peasant character in a 1960 Chinese film *Pine Ridge* (青松嶺 qingsong ling), notorious for his desire to get rich.

orthodox of aesthetic evaluation. For Pierre Bourdieu, aesthetic taste about what deserves representation and the right way to represent it is, after all, a political decision. It allows the dominant power to impose the vision of the real and the worthy (101-02). While the consecrated elites are trying to defend their right to legislate aesthetic legitimacy, Zhao's skits point to the constructed nature of their judgment and evaluation.

As much as it may have become "conventional wisdom" in Western academic life, the awareness of reality as constructed and the realization that discursive power determines what is created at the level of popular consciousness are very important in the contemporary Chinese context. Chinese postmodernism of the 1990s broke up some rigid paradigms, canons, hierarchies and reifications, but it did little more than to "revolt against the modernist and modernization ideology of the New Era (1979-1989)" (Zhang Xudong 400) and to generate a dynamic tension/paradox of continuation through subversion. As Zhao's skits have shown us, there is no lack of self-reflexive thinking in the lived experience and popular cultural expression. In their theoretical contemplation, Chinese intellectuals need to shake their own epistemological foundations to catch up.

In a society where the Party-state still possesses reality and truth, at a time when market-based existence is presented as natural and reflecting people's desire and interests, Zhao Benshan's skits "let those things be heard which ideology conceals" (Adorno 214). There can be no democratic dialogue or negotiation when ordinary people are conditioned to trust authority as the cook is. Society is better served when the public is constantly on guard against deceptions and is capable of offering contending arguments. *Selling Crutches* and *Selling a Wheelchair* contributed to the cultivation of such a public.

Zhao Benshan's China is, by no means, the only place where the public needs to assert their freedom of thought and expression. The art and science of influence are more pervasive than ever in the world, suffocating critical thinking and threatening the (re)creation of democracy. In *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*, John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton demonstrate that "a single public relations professional with access to media, a basic understanding of mass psychology and a fistful of dollars can unleash in society forces that make permanent winners out of otherwise-evident losers—whether they be products, politicians, corporations or ideas" (4). How different in function is Da Huyou from such a professional? How can a regular customer within range of the public relations industry be much different from the cook? And most important of all, what can we do under such conditions to cultivate critical minds and to keep alive the

process of “creative democracy”?²⁹ Two thousand and three hundred years ago, Aristotle recommended education in the art of rhetoric as a measure against its misuse (Stauber and Rampton 15). Ultimately, Zhao Benshan’s detailed enactment of deception functions as such an education. It teaches the audience the skills necessary to recognize manipulation and deception, as well as the necessity to contest them. In their own way, these two comic skits reiterate a familiar lesson—the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

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²⁹ I borrowed the phrase “creative democracy” from John Dewey’s article “Creative Democracy—The Task before Us.” The article was written in 1939 when “the creation of democracy” was an issue “as urgent as it was a hundred and fifty years ago [...]”; for Dewey, “our democracy” is not “something that perpetuated itself automatically” and the task of continuously creating democracy “can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity” (224-25).

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