



## SATIRE: ON THE ROAD TO CHANGE

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**T**o understand the suasive force which Chinese traditionally have attributed to popular media and to their power to influence social values, we need only note the reason traditionally given for forbidding them to young people: They corrupt the morals. One reason why popular media were believed capable of corrupting morals is that they often depicted social bandits as heroic characters, creating what the modern social psychologist would call positive role models out of people whose behaviour the establishment considered unworthy of emulation. The very idea that good and noble ends could be attained through unorthodox means was anathema to the traditional moralist.

The ruling establishment in China has always recognized the power of the popular media to influence behaviour by producing dramatic examples of good and evil, reward and punishment, success and failure. By guiding characters to success or failure through interaction with other people, the storyteller also makes an indirect comment on the social system within which the characters behave. If the characters can achieve satisfactory ends through established behavioural norms, then the net result is to reinforce the traditional acceptance of those norms. If, on the other hand, the characters are denied satisfaction through the use (or through someone else's misuse) of established behavioural norms, and they have to step outside the normative bounds in order to achieve their just reward, then the effect is perceived as subverting confidence in the social

system. Traditionally, governmental authorities had the right to ban productions considered immoral or subversive, but it was not until very recent times that the government of China actually became involved in the production of popular media.

Popular media in the People's Republic of China are an integral part of the communications network, performing at least three important functions: revealing to the public current developments and changes in official policy as determined by the central authorities in Beijing; publicizing certain models of behaviour for emulation, and satirizing others; and providing good entertainment, sometimes completely free of connection to any immediate social or political goal.

To understand the role models being set up for emulation and satire in China today, one must first remember the developments that led to the sweeping policy changes effected during recent years. Since the late 1950s, but especially during the 10 years from the beginning of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966) to the fall of the "Gang of Four" (1976), the single most important criterion applied to media content was that of ideological purity. No values were promoted through the popular media that did not reinforce belief in the positive, progressive, revolutionary nature of the toiling masses, and in their ability to achieve the most astounding results inspired solely by revolutionary zeal and faith in the correctness of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought.

Viewed through the popular media,

*In Xiangsheng, a popular form of comic routine, a duo (left) uses the classic joker and straight roles to satirize and educate. Fast-paced monologues accompanied by castanets (middle) likewise inform attentive audiences in China on the correct route to modernization.*

nearly every aspect of Chinese life seemed highly politicized: family relations, work, school, even play, were depicted in terms of a political line that seemed to run through everything. Since the right political line received so much emphasis, characters portrayed in the media tended to be black and white: revolutionary heroes were faultless and distinguished as individuals only in their extreme identification with the toiling masses, while counterrevolutionary villains were uniformly "rotten to the core," and deserving of nothing but our utter contempt. "Middle characters" (embodying neither starkly positive nor negative values) were usually avoided or kept in the background for fear of diverting attention away from the primary struggle between good and evil. Positive role models were nearly always of the right background, that is, from worker, peasant or soldier families. It was assumed that those with a background other than poor peasant, lower-middle peasant, or proletariat were, by virtue of their primary loyalties, incapable of selfless devotion to the masses, and therefore unworthy of emulation in any respect.

In fact, anyone who proposed faith in any road to modernization other than the revolutionary mass line was branded a heretic and subjected to varying

degrees of re-education, punishment, and public humiliation. In the popular media, most of these heretics were formerly of the landlord class, or were intellectuals, or people otherwise committed to the disruption of socialist construction by the Chinese masses. Intellectuals were depicted in a particularly unfavourable light because of their individualistic tendencies and their lack of commitment to the mass line.

It is against this background of faith in the power of the revolutionary masses, of "radical left" politics in total command of all public media, and persecution of intellectuals whose first loyalty was not to the party line or to the current campaign, that the most significant recent developments in Chinese popular media must be considered. Among the popular media genres — fast clappertales (stories narrated in verse to the rhythmic accompaniment of bamboo castanets), jokes, allegorical tales, fables, poems, short stories in verse, comic monologues, comic dialogues, picture-stories, etc. — we find vivid, lively, sometimes even subtle and trenchant commentaries on the problems faced by the Chinese on their road to modernization. Each piece is a criticism of irresponsible, counter-productive, or just plain foolish behaviour and the mistaken values that tolerate or encourage such behaviour. Some are very old traditional pieces, rendered into the modern spoken language, that take on new and very specific meanings in light of recent events in China.

In some of the best pieces of popular performed art, we see one consistent message: Practice and common sense are the only reliable bases for problem solving. Slogans, the written word, even past practice which once was found successful under different conditions — none of these can replace actual practice and common sense in dealing with reality today.

"Old Zheng shops for shoes," adapted into the form of a modern *Shu-mao*, or short story in verse, is a classic example of the Chinese practice of "making the past serve the present" (*gu wei jin yong*). The original allegory comes from the classical text *Han Fei Zi*, and has been known to every Chinese with the slightest education for 2000 years. Yet, within a modern sociopolitical context, the old tale takes on new life and new allegorical significance for the masses of Chinese who enjoy its performance in the vernacular language today, and who cannot fail to grasp its moral in terms of their recent experience: "People in the old days were strange, you say? I saw someone just like him only yesterday." What we need today, the storyteller is saying, is more confidence in actual practice and performance, as opposed to doctrinaire prescriptions, as valid criteria for determining the course of action.

The story of Old Zheng shopping for shoes is a fine example of the selective

rendering of classical literature, that is both entertaining and relevant to modern life, into a vernacular idiom that becomes accessible even to semi-literate and illiterate audiences through its performance all over China. Ballads and storyteller texts published in journals are studied, memorized, rehearsed and performed by thousands of ballad and storytelling troupes, professional and spare-time, in theatres, in factories and schools, on radio and television programs, even on ping-pong tables in remote villages without a proper stage.

In this way, hundreds of millions of Chinese are being encouraged to accept the new approach to modernization, the new emphasis upon practice and experience. Through mass media, the most isolated peasant in the remotest parts of the country is kept aware of the latest developments in national construction policy, including most recently the implementation of the system of working under contract.

The question most often asked in the popular media is: How relevant are the revolutionary experiences that worked in the past to the technological challenges of modernizing China today? Clearly, the implied answer is: We must not blindly apply methods that worked years ago to the new challenges and changed circumstances of today.

The messages of such tales are

related to the most important and crucial campaign being carried out through the popular media in China today, the most important goal of the so-called "New Hundred Flowers," that is, the liberation of the mind (*jiefang sixiang*) from the fetters of doctrinaire thinking. For if China is to modernize, it must be through the process of creative problem solving: Problems must be solved by thinking people, and people's thinking may be influenced through the popular media.

Perhaps this brief survey should close by acknowledging a difficulty, a challenge not yet mentioned, but whose solution is important to China's modernization. In view of past experiences with campaigns and movements to liberate the mind, with disastrous consequences for serious participants who dared criticize past mistakes of the government, it is not hard to understand why many intellectuals still hesitate to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the "modernization" effort today, and remain cynical about the prospects of success, or even survival, in another liberalization campaign. □

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## OLD ZHENG SHOPS FOR SHOES

*In the land of Zheng lives Genius Zheng  
But everyone calls him Zheng Dum-dum.  
He's stubborn and his temper's not very sweet,  
He won't even try on a shoe unless he's measured his feet!  
Now, one day he's going to buy some shoes,  
But he takes out the measure before he goes.  
He measures the height of the top of his feet,  
Then the arch, and the width, and the length to his toes,  
And carefully he writes 9.876 inches down on a sheet —  
He always buys his shoes by the size.  
Then he puts his note on the table top  
And steps outside, and locks the lock.  
He walks ten miles on his own two feet  
And comes to town on East Main Street.  
They're selling shoes in the market place  
And old Zheng heads over there, making haste.  
Pairs and pairs of brand new shoes,  
He picks out a pair that he can use.  
Then old Zheng reaches in his pocket only to realize,  
"Oh no! I forgot to bring the size.  
Without a size, I can't buy shoes,  
I'd really feel just like a twit  
If I bought 'em and they didn't fit."  
So he hurries on back out of town,  
Going home for the size that's written down.  
He's all worn out and wet with sweat and gasping, he is really beat,  
He's walked so hard that blisters have popped up under his feet.  
When he left, the sun was at high noon,  
When he returned, you could already see the moon.  
He walks up, and looks around, and the shoe market's already closed down!  
Old Genius Zheng can only stand and stare at the empty market square.  
Someone says: "Old Zheng, your temperament's hard to beat —  
Why didn't you just try the shoes on your own two feet?"  
"But how can you buy if you don't have the size?"  
Just having feet isn't good enough," Old Zheng replies.  
People in the old days were strange, you say?  
I saw someone just like him only yesterday.*