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The Viral Life of An Alternative Public Sphere

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

China, the nation with the world's largest audience, is also the one experiencing one of the strictest film censorships. Hundreds of Chinese independent films were produced every year without governmental permits and never got into theaters. However, these underground films can still reach Chinese audience through a shadow distribution circuit --- *piracy*. For years in China, digital media piracy --- pirated DVDs or Internet file-sharing --- constituted a powerful *viral infrastructure* for information circulation, which has successfully evaded state censorship and cultural control. Surrounding such a viral circulation system of piracy, there developed an influential underground cinema culture in China, which not only nurtured an active creative circle of internationally claimed filmmakers, but also created a dynamic and far-reaching cineaste community that is largely organized through collective practice of p2p file sharing and piracy consumption. By closely examining the development of such a piracy-nurtured cinematic culture in China, what I'm trying to investigate is the possibility of emerging *an alternative cinematic public sphere* in the cyber age, when the platform of film consumption has increasingly transformed from public gathering in movie theaters to p2p networks on the Internet. If the shift of cinematic spectatorship, according to Miriam Hansen, often marked transformation of a public sphere,¹ then would it be possible to imagine an alternative public sphere constructed by the viral infrastructure of a shadow spectator community on the cyber space? And in China's case, particularly, would such an alternative public sphere be able to disturb, or even subvert, the exiting power structure and status quos in a tightly controlled socio-cultural landscape?

¹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Harvard University Press, 1994).