

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Lights, Camera, Stop

In the land of state-run, censored media, Shanghai seems a strange venue to discuss television ratings and hawk interactive media technology. But that's what happened this week at the Shanghai Television Festival. And it shows just how conflicted Beijing is about its methods of controlling information.

The Shanghai event, an annual advertising show, this year attracted media luminaries from Los Angeles to Tokyo. From a financial perspective, it's not hard to see why China is wooing them. Elsewhere in the world TV is a big business. But so far foreign investors are spurning the mainland's broadcast media industry while money is pouring in to banking, insurance and manufacturing.

And for good reason. Given the Communist cadres' reluctance to give up control of information, why would the world's media poohbahs turn up in Shanghai at all? As always, it's the promise of China's huge market. And there have been teasers. In 2003, Beijing relaxed regulations on foreign investment in the television industry, to great hurrahs. Companies like Viacom, News Corp. and Time Warner jumped at the opportunity. But as soon as Beijing considered the possibility of creative differences, it stalled on implementing the reforms. News Corp. last week sold part of its stake in Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV to China Mobile in an effort to qualify the network as a domestic media entity and do an end-run around foreign regulations. Good luck.

Encouragingly, domestic companies are chomping at the bit. Local stations increasingly are going after licensing rights

to shows like "Friends" and "Desperate Housewives"—even though Beijing won't let them air the stuff. And it's not just programs from the decadent U.S.; there were reports this week of bans on South Korean dramas as well.

Beijing has encouraged television channels to be more commercial in recent years, despite the strict rules. Consider poor Hunan TV, which produced the wildly successful show "Super Girl," a knockoff of America's "American Idol." Party cadres were so spooked by the show's success that the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television issued new regulations making it difficult for shows to

be broadcast beyond the province of its producer. It also barred judges from "embarrassing or heckling" contestants. Well, that's no fun.

An increased presence of Western media companies in China's broadcast industry could, in theory, yield a freer flow of information on TV. Sadly, this hasn't been the case with Western Internet companies, which are proving to be of little help in combating the repressive methods of the Chinese Communist Party. Would TV be any different?

A better solution may lie in provincial capitals, where local stations are already fighting Beijing's lock on information. Back when only the elite had television sets and state-run CCTV was the sole channel, Beijing had more control over local stations. But today, station owners are more attuned to their viewers than they are to Beijing. If that trend continues, Chinese TV viewers—and China itself—will be the better for it.

Beijing slow to ease restrictions on the media.

'Thought to Have Merit'

By Lionel Shriver

LONDON—Once in a while a news story so speaks for itself that it threatens to put commentators out of a job.

In this year's summer show at London's Royal Academy of Arts, "Exhibit 1201" is a large rectangular tablet of slate with a tiny barbell-shaped bit of boxwood on top. Its creator, David Hensel, must be pleased to have been selected from among some 9,000 applicants for the world's largest open-submission exhibit of contemporary art. Nevertheless, he was bemused to discover that in transit his sculpture had gotten separated from its base. Judging the two components as different submissions, the Royal Academy had rejected his artwork proper—a finely wrought laugh-

ing head in jesmonite—and selected the plinth. "It says something about the state of visual arts today," said Mr. Hensel. He didn't say what. He didn't need to.

Moreover, the Royal Academy denies having made an error, for the plinth and hastily carved wooden support were, according to an official statement, "thought to have merit."

For those who despair that artists these days seem to have lost the skill of fashioning meticulously crafted objects, don't blame Mr. Hensel. While the slate base took only four hours to hack from a mortuary slab, and the little boxwood prop less than an hour, he had

painstakingly carved and polished that laughing head for two months. But alas, the sculpture itself has—*shudder*—emotional content. It was originally christened "One Day Closer to Paradise," a far too expressive title;

Mr. Hensel would have been better off with the portentously enigmatic "Exhibit 1201." His laughing head is not only fatally well rendered, but exudes a sense of joy and hilarity, and the overtly evocative is *declassé*. How much more sophisticated, a stoic square of slate that speaks of—well, ask the viewers.

"The sculpture is a mixture of heavy stone with a light piece of wood on top," the Daily Telegraph quoted a Dane as explicat-



By Lisa Movius

"Shanghai Rumba," the new movie by director Peng Xiaolian, departs from the typical cinematic depiction of go-go Old Shanghai. While many films revisit "Paris of the East, Whore of the Orient" clichés about the city—think bankers, gangsters and courtesans—Ms. Peng hones in on the city's thriving but struggling artistic scene, spinning a love story amid social chaos. It's a typically inventive story line from the independent director, who is as unusual as her films.

Ms. Peng's latest film is a movie-within-a-movie, inspired by the romance between 1940s Shanghai movie star Zhao Dan and starlet Huang Zongying on the set of "Crows and Sparrows" (*Wuya yu Maque*), a 1949 film. The Zhao Dan character (played by Xia Yu) is an intellectual heart-throb—an actor, writer, and director. The film he directs is not far removed from the reality outside the studio, as it shows neighbors in a crowded Shanghai apartment building coping with the upheavals of pre-revolutionary China—civil war and spiraling inflation.

The Zhao Dan character's delicate flirtations with ingenue actress Wan Yu (played by Yuan Quan) contrast with his hardscrabble life behind the scenes. Few viewers knew at the time that Mr. Zhao, for all his fame, was nearly penniless. Facing the same difficulties as many other artists working in 1940s Shanghai, Mr. Zhao's progressive filmmaking was frustrated under the repressive rule of the Kuomintang.

The most alluring storyline of "Shanghai Rumba," however, lies in the making of the movie (about the making of a movie), and in the director herself. Despite the movie's mainstream appeal—and its wide release throughout China—director Peng Xiaolian produced it independent of a studio. Her achievement, in part, is to have overcome the budgetary constraints and censorship fears that usually relegate Chinese indie films to obscurity. Ms. Peng is the only director in China occupying the territory between mainstream and indie cinema.

In "Shanghai Rumba," Ms. Peng's distinctive storytelling touch comes through. Even while working with a period set, she eschews theatrics and focuses on the gentle unfolding of a personal story. She is a realist trained in documentary filmmaking, but she

avoids the in-your-face grittiness and rambling artsyness of most realist directors in China.

Ms. Peng's current fame rests on her depictions of realistic, ordinary lives set in Shanghai. But she took a roundabout path to return to the city of her birth. Born in Shanghai to an intellectual family, she saw her father—a writer

social stigma and economic change. The second, 2004's "Shanghai Story" (*Meili Shanghai*), depicts four adult children discussing the Cultural Revolution around their mother's sickbed.

"From a Fifth Generation point of view, these works seem somewhat old-fashioned," says Paul Clark, head of the School of



Shooting a movie ... about shooting a movie.

and political dissident—sent to jail, where he died. Her mother, a translator of Russian films, was stigmatized for her husband's political activities, and her work was never credited in the films she worked on.

Like many in her generation, Ms. Peng was "sent down" to the countryside for nine years during the Cultural Revolution. She graduated in 1982 from the prestigious Beijing Film Academy, alongside other now-prominent directors like Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang—a group later dubbed the "Fifth Generation" by critics. Moving abroad, she completed a Masters of Fine Arts at New York University, and afterwards moved to Japan to become a disciple of Japanese master documentarian Shik-suke Ogawa. One of the four books she has written, "Confusion of Idealism," is an homage to Mr. Ogawa.

Since returning to Shanghai in 1996, however, Ms. Peng has turned her artistic attentions almost exclusively to her native city. "Shanghai Rumba" represents the completion of her "Shanghai Trilogy." The trilogy's first movie, 2002's "Shanghai Women" (*Jiazhuang Mei Ganjue*), involves a divorced mother and her teenage daughter navigating

Asian Studies at the University of Auckland. "But her fifth-generation classmates have long abandoned their own early phase and also taken new routes. In most cases these have been commercial, which is not true of Peng. Her literary focus sets her apart from contemporary indies like Luo Ye." Ms. Peng's critics accuse her of being too nostalgic and of misrepresenting modern life in bustling Shanghai. But these critiques don't seem to faze her.

"Shanghai Story" won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress and Best Supporting Actor at 2005's Golden Roosters, China's most prestigious film awards.

Her next project traces a love story of the legendary, recently deceased writer Ba Jin. "I wrote this script almost 20 years ago," she said. "I realized that it was difficult to shoot, because the script talked too directly about the Cultural Revolution, so I changed the way to write about Ba Jin and had to wait." Public discussion of the Cultural Revolution remains taboo in China. Even the mention of it in "Shanghai Story" pushed the envelope.

"I'm ready to go ahead now," said Ms. Peng, "but cautiously."

Ms. Movius is a Shanghai-based writer.

ing last week while admiring the plinth. "I like the total effect. It is a really nice contrast." A Londoner rejoined, "If it was in more of a minimalist show, it would definitely seem more beautiful." Presumably these folks would find an emperor clad in a "minimalist" manner equally stunning.

Me, I just put a brick on my desk. I gaze in wonderment at the contrast in textures—the smooth, unyielding sides of the brick, the rough, almost sexual crumble on its chipped corner, the humbler, more submissive sensuality of the scarred plywood desktop. I marvel at the fierce, affirmative perpendicular of the brick, in firm opposition to the languid, taciturn serenity of the lateral . . . But that's not even funny, is it? Joseph Beuys has piled bricks on a floor of the Guggenheim and called it art. How exasperating, a field so far out in la-la-land that it is impervi-

ous to parody. You see what I mean about being out of a job.

Of course, the Royal Academy's exaltation of that plinth recalls many a misapprehension in galleries, where visitors are wont to coo over the fire hydrants, ventilation grates and trash cans, all of which are more durably and fastidiously crafted than the works on display. For that matter, one gift that contemporary art seems to have given us viewers is a way of seeing every object in our surround—as I look about my study now, the powerful yet precarious piles of paperbacks, the airy, ephemeral flutter of bank statements—as art. But in that event, we not only don't need commentators; we don't need artists, do we?

Or the Royal Academy.

Ms. Shriver's last novel was "We Need to Talk About Kevin" (HarperPerennial, 2004).