

# *China Candid*

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THE PEOPLE ON  
THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

*Sang Ye*

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## Consuming Habits

### *On the Flood of Fakes*

*On 19 May 1995, the Beijing Municipal Technical Supervision Bureau undertook a quality inspection of Chinese national flags being sold in six stores on Nan Xinhua Street in central Beijing. Of the six different kinds of flags inspected, only 6.2 percent were found to be of acceptable quality.*

*Changsha, Hunan Province*

Changsha's always been chaotic, even from when I was a kid. That was during the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao was the Red, Red Sun who rose out of Hunan Province, and Changsha was the city where he came to "strike the waters" when he was young.<sup>1</sup> He used to go swimming from the Shuilu sandbanks, right here in the city. Little wonder that we were destined for chaos. But that was long before the appearance of the market economy; it was a different type of chaos from the kind we have now. No one needed a Consumer Protection Association then; as long as Chairman Mao was protected, everything else could slide.

There weren't that many people in our extended family, though friends were always coming and going. But that's all changed. Now both time and money are precious commodities. Time is money—who wants to waste it socializing?

My father was born and bred here. He had a bit of schooling before becoming a soldier. After being discharged, he taught primary school. I was

1. This is a reference to the last line of Mao's 1925 poem "Changsha": "Remember still/ How, venturing midstream, we struck the waters/ And waves stayed the speeding boats?" See Mao Tsetung, *Poems* (Beijing: Peking Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p. 2.

one of his pupils. We were constantly subjected to his substandard Mandarin, both at home and at school. He'd never been to a teachers' college, and he never did learn to get his tongue around Mandarin pronunciation. On those grounds alone you could claim he was a bit of a defective product himself.

I suppose you might say I was born in the right place at the right time. As a kid, I was just old enough to be dragged through the Cultural Revolution. My dad was very straight, and apart from *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, all he gave us to read was endless stuff about Lei Feng, so we could "learn from him."<sup>2</sup> He's another famous son of Hunan. Nowadays, when people from other provinces are ripped off or sold inferior-quality goods here in Changsha, they'll act mad and shout: "But Lei Feng came from here! Aren't you ashamed that you're cheating people?" Our shop owners aren't fazed by that. "Don't give me that," they say. "Lei Feng's not from Changsha, he's from Wangcheng County nearby. That's the county where the hicks are hopeful [*wang*] of making it in our city [*cheng*]. Get it?" But even Wangcheng is no law-abiding paradise these days. They're even better at cheating shoppers there than we are in Changsha, and they hide the con behind shop fronts that tout themselves as the "Lei Feng Store" or "Lei Feng Markets."

Naturally, we soon grew tired of reading about Lei Feng and his revolutionary heroism. Our father got us to learn poetry, too. After we'd memorized all of Chairman Mao's poems, he selected some suitably edifying Tang dynasty poems for us as well, politically healthy verse that he believed expressed antifeudal sentiment or gave voice to the suffering masses. The last thing ideologically correct people back in the Tang dynasty would do is sit around writing decent poetry, so again we were given fake and shoddy goods. Any poets who were critical of their times—and acceptable to my father—were invariably people with frustrated bureaucratic careers or who had failed in love. So, apart from mass demonstrations and struggle meetings, we had virtually no entertainment as children at all. Watching all that jumping around, people screaming and shouting, was the most fun we could ever expect.

In fact, the place has always been awash with inferior and second-rate

2. A famous "red Samaritan" Communist martyr. Famed as a loyal student of Mao Zedong Thought, the PLA soldier Lei Feng died in the early 1960s and was made into a national paragon and role model. In 1963 Mao declared that all should "learn from Comrade Lei Feng," and something of a war of civility has been fought in Lei Feng's name intermittently ever since.

products. These days people buy imitation wines with counterfeit money and then come to us to complain. It was the same in the Cultural Revolution. Phony revolutionaries were going around denouncing fake reactionaries—and then, after it was all over, they'd appeal to the Central Committee of the Communist Party to be rehabilitated. Things may appear to have changed, but the same old chicanery continues. China is rife with fakes; it's our social pathology, and it's been that way from long before the Cultural Revolution. My dad's standard Chinese was so bad he couldn't differentiate between the words *fu* [good fortune] and *hu* [lake],<sup>3</sup> but just because he'd helped fight the Americans in the Korean War, they made him a Chinese language and literature teacher. But that's nothing. You can find worse phonies than him throughout our history, past and present. You don't need me to tell you that.

Of course, the sheer scale of fraud these days is unprecedented. We make fakes, we sell fakes, we trade in counterfeit currency, and we buy imitation goods. Everyone is a victim, and everyone is cheating everyone else. The whole society is trapped in a vicious cycle. We're all caught up in an endless revolution of revolutions.

There's always a counterfactual reality about anything and everything in China today. *In fact* has become just a catchphrase for the whole society, because, in fact, things are never what they appear to be. When people say what, in fact, is happening, at least you know you might be getting a little closer to the truth. But what I hate most about the use of the expression *in fact* is the tone of voice people use. It's as though they're leaking you privileged information: I'm treating you with particular respect and letting you in on a secret, the truth. But that's not really the case at all, because there's always sure to be much more going on than they'll ever admit to you when they say *in fact*.

Let's take jasmine tea, for example, a product everyone uses. The average consumer really can't tell the difference between good and bad jasmine tea, although there are nine grades, Grade 1 being premium quality. In fact, however, over and above Grade 1 there is a Special Grade, and that's further divided into three subclasses: Special Number 1, Number 2, and Number 3. Then there's something even better than Special Number 1; it's called Special Superior Grade. Apart from all of that you also have provincial-level premium quality teas, ministry level, national level, expo level, convention

3. In the Hunan dialect the sounds *h* and *f* are not distinguished.

level, and a whole range of other quality varieties to consider like “special selection” tea, “special choice,” “imperial quality,” “national banquet quality” tea, and so on. No matter what kind of tea you buy, they’re all advertised as the best possible quality. In reality, none of them are really top-notch. Even the stuff you buy for a hundred yuan a tin is only special because of the pretty packaging. The quality of what’s inside may be no better than what you get in a ten-yuan pack. And that’s not to mention imitation and inferior-quality teas. That’s when things get really complicated; there’s no end to the skulduggery that goes on. Believe me, you can pick and dry leaves from any old tree and sell them as tea.

Or take the Sichuan hotpot that’s so popular with people in restaurants these days. It’s so good you just have to keep coming back for more. Ever wondered why you get a craving for it when you haven’t had it for a while? It’s because they put opium pods in the soup.

Then there was the case of a Jeep Cherokee that just fell apart at the seams after only a few thousand kilometers. Great, everyone thought, we’ve finally got one over the Americans. But it turns out that they had one over us after all: the car had been assembled in an underground plant here. It was 100 percent “Made in China.”

Counterfeit money is so widespread nowadays that even the hicks with their stalls in the cities have their own ultraviolet-light counterfeit detectors. The only problem is that a lot of the devices are substandard themselves and often can’t detect fake currency.

Lately my daughter’s school has introduced a new regulation making it compulsory for all students to buy new satchels. They’re badly made, but the manufacturer gave the school a special deal so they could offload them. If you don’t buy one, you’ll be banned from school. Now, my daughter has an attitude that she’s inherited from me. She started arguing with her teacher over this scam, but the reply she got was simple: “Don’t give me a hard time about it. Isn’t your mother in the Consumer Protection Association? Lodge a complaint with her. Anyway, I haven’t been paid in ages, so it’s not as though I’d care if the school fires me.”

My husband turned forty this last Spring Festival, so he bought a bottle of Wuliangye grain wine to celebrate.<sup>4</sup> He knew it was fake after the first sip.

4. The spirit of choice among Chinese wine aficionados. From Sichuan Province, Wuliangye, literally “the essence of five grains,” is even more highly prized than Maotai, its famous Guizhou cousin.

Impossible, I said innocently; there's a quality guarantee stamp on it. Anyway, I thought to myself, since he'd never had such good liquor before, he probably couldn't tell the difference. But he was adamant: it was definitely fake, 10 percent proof at most. So I went along to see the manager of the store where he'd bought it, and they said: "Of course it's fake. Since you're from the Consumer Protection Association we'll give you your money back. But, take note: we weren't selling it at the usual market price!"

I didn't make the grade for university—see, even I'm a fake. I knew I wouldn't make the cut, so after applying to a few technical colleges I ended up going to a business school to do accountancy. After graduating I initially had a job in a department store and then got into an accountancy firm. But I have a problem: I like speaking my mind, and I rub people the wrong way. I'm not cut out to be an accountant in the present age of reform and openness. I know I might have a propensity for talking out of turn, but professionally I'm absolutely straight. In practice that means I can't satisfy people's demands to "be more courageous and take bolder steps."<sup>5</sup> I don't think I was born like this; it probably has more to do with all that antifeudal Tang poetry my dad made me read as a kid. All those lamentations about the uncertain political fate of bureaucrats in imperial China left a deep impression on me.

Anyway, eventually, with a bit of help from my friends, I arranged for what they call a "human resource transfer." That's how in 1991 I ended up in the Consumer Protection Association. I knew that the job called for enthusiasm and a sense of duty, as well as a pretty broad-ranging knowledge of the market and consumer products. I'm actually a bit out of my depth here. But, to be honest, I'm one human resource that I don't think could usefully be transferred anywhere else. I've learned to go with the flow, and I'm satisfied with my lot in life.

Everyone complains about things being shoddily made and says that pirated goods are flooding the market. But all the talk in the world won't make any difference. To make a convincing case, you need statistical evidence. We've carried out a survey of the major shopping centers and manufacturers, and our findings indicate that even though 75 percent of factory output passes quality inspection, about 55 percent of everything on sale is

5. A 1990s slogan referring to the need to speed up economic reform. The interviewee is hinting that she was not prepared to go along with the corruption rife in the business world.



substandard. That 20 percent differential illustrates how many things—and I’m talking about brand-name products—are being churned out by second-rate underground factories.

The most common imitation goods you find in the marketplace are cigarettes, wines, electrical goods, clothing and medicines, and all kinds of drinks and sodas. Shoddy products, on the other hand, are not type-specific; you find them everywhere. No matter what you buy, and it can be as big as a building or as small as a nail, it may well be an inferior and shoddy piece of work. Even the raw materials used to produce it might be fake.

Even though consumers’ rights are subject to such serious and constant threat, there are people in the government who argue that “we’re still in the initial stage of socialism,”<sup>6</sup> so it is unreasonable to be too demanding. People will just have to put up with what they get. The process of economic reform throws up all kinds of inequities, but this situation is preferable to refusing to reform, or allowing people to have money but leaving them with nothing to spend it on.”

Others are more straightforward about our role: “The Consumer Protection Association is duty-bound to support the government’s position and defend the party’s enterprise. You should avoid cheap sensationalism and not complain about the downside of our market economy. You could easily incite consumers, and that may well have a negative effect on our hard-won environment of political stability.”

Of eighteen kinds of soft drink available on the market, sixteen are either fake or of poor quality. Phony Coca-Cola, imitation Seven-Up. Some people collect old bottles at recycling stations and fill them with well or river water, then they foist them on the public as mineral water. They knowingly threaten public health for the sake of a quick profit. For the authorities to tolerate the situation might mean that we can boast of political stability, but I’d argue that it’s a stability achieved at a very high price.

You might have noticed that the sign outside our office reads “Consumer Protection Association,” so you’ll be thinking that we represent and protect consumers. But take a good look around and you’ll find that what, “in fact,” is behind that sign is something entirely different. While we may look like a consumer watchdog, in reality we’re actually a political guardian. For those of us who work here, it’s a living hell. It’s not that we can’t do the job;

6. The “initial stage of socialism” (*shehuizhuyi chujī jieduan*) is a political euphemism for the arrant capitalism of China’s economic reforms.

it's a question of what the job is actually supposed to be. You'd be wrong if you thought it was to protect the interests of consumers. We're just a pressure valve for the government, a safety zone they've provided so consumers can let off steam. Nothing more than that. What I'm saying is that even the Consumer Protection Association is a fake. It has nothing to do with our willingness to serve the public. Whenever there's a conflict of interest between consumers and the government, you know there's no competition. The government and party are going to win every time. As we say here, keep the customers happy, but stay on good terms with the authorities.

We're not a popular, nongovernment organization. We're an official body set up to mollify the masses. Any group that isn't strictly illegal has to fit into the system one way or the other. They don't want any renegade groups out there engaged in guerrilla warfare with the people's government. So, monks are on a par with department heads for salary and conditions; *qigong* masters are the equivalent of army captains; even the chairperson of the Private Entrepreneurs' Association has the official rank of section head.

Our boss, for example, is a vice bureau-level official. Everything works in his favor, and he knows how to play the system, how to put the right spin on things. So what if the quality of our products is so appalling? He'll argue: "Even America doesn't produce one hundred percent quality goods. It's ninety-eight point something percent at most. Now listen here, comrades, America leads the First World, while China is the head of the Third World. If the disparity between the First and Third Worlds is only some forty percentage points, then I'd say we're doing pretty well. So, if you're ever approached by any journalists, that's the line I want you to take. We have to encourage the media to explain things to the consumer."

Then there's the times he suddenly gets all conscientious. I don't know who's been after him, but he'll come rushing in all flustered and demand: "Have there been any complaints directed against Sony or Matsushita? Get everything you have on them—TVs, fridges, sound systems, the lot. We need all the evidence we can muster because the focus is on the Japs at the moment, and we have to give it to them good."

Minor scams are as numerous as flies, you can never swat them all. The big ones are like tigers, though; not only can they maul you, they're even a protected species. But consumers aren't idiots. Even though they know what we're really all about, they still have a bit of confidence in us. Everyone wants a hero who will respond to the needs of the society, someone who will come along and set things right. That's how come Wang Hai became such

a popular figure. “Wang Hai attacks the fakes!” He got on TV and radio and then in all the papers; he became a nationally recognized figure. He sure made life hard for corrupt businesspeople, and for a time there his name was on everyone’s lips.

Wang Hai had it all worked out. He went around buying up shoddy and poor-quality goods, and the moment he got a receipt for the transaction he’d turn on the vendor and exclaim: “You’ve sold me an inferior product. I want to see the manager!” But he was a bit of a fake himself, ’cause he’d work out which shops to hit, carefully avoiding the actual manufacturers, the tigers.

Anyway, the minute the manager turned up, Wang would say: “You can compensate me or I’ll see you in court. It’s your call. But let me warn you, there’s nothing I like more than a good fight.” Shop managers aren’t stupid. They know you’d have to be insane to take on a person like Wang Hai, because he’s the kind of fellow who wouldn’t hesitate to make your life hell. Who could be bothered to play his game, either timewise or in terms of your reputation? “Stability above all,” as the saying goes. So invariably they’d give in, admit liability, and pay up. But the moment Wang got his compensation, he had proof positive of malfeasance, and he wouldn’t let go. He’d squirrel away all these mini-scams until he had enough under his belt to make a real splash in the media. But after a few headlines, that was the end of it. Even someone like Wang, who appeared to be a hero flying in the face of our chaotic society, proved to be nothing more than a phony himself.

If we lived in a slightly more normal environment, a scam artist like Wang Hai would never be able to get away with it—let alone become a national celebrity. Nor, for that matter, would people make a national celebrity out of him. He’s been in the right place at the right time, so he’s been able to make a name for himself.

What more can I say? It’d all be a waste of breath . . .

# The Computer Bug

## The Software Pirate

Diannao chong (*computer bug*) is the name for everyone from computer geeks and hackers to software pirates and specialists. That's what they're called in Thieves' Alley in Beijing. Thieves' Alley is in China's Silicon Valley in Zhongguan Cun, part of the university district in the northwest suburbs of the capital. Colloquially, people refer to it as Electronics Street (Dianzi yitiao jie), but for the pros it's just Thieves' Alley (Pianzi yitiao jie).

Thieves' Alley is one of the homes of the massive Chinese pirating industry, and this is an interview with one of the early masters of the trade. He's called one of the Four Heavenly Kings of Pirating (papan jiemi sida tianwang zhiyi), and he has an attitude and ego that goes with his title.<sup>1</sup>

He's in his early twenties, and if you met him you'd think he was just another typical Westernized Asian businessman. In gray suit pants, Adidas shoes, and a bomber jacket, he's wearing the uniform of the young business toughs of Beijing. This computer bug is no nerd: he doesn't wear glasses, and he sports a crew cut favored by the I-mean-business young men of North China. A handsome young man with a sharp tongue and biting wit, he's always poised to answer his mobile phone.

What type of computer do you use? And what about software? Don't take it personally, it's just that if I'm dealing with a computer illiterate I need to know, so I can work out how much information you can handle.

1. The Four Heavenly Kings (*sida tianwang*) are the door guardians traditionally placed at the entrance to a Buddhist temple, although in contemporary parlance the expression refers to a foursome of Canto-pop singers: Aaron Kwok (Guo Fucheng), Leon Lai (Li Ming), Andy Lau (Liu Dehua), and Jackey Cheung (Zhang Xueyou).

Lately I've been working on a CD-ROM version of *The Story of the Stone*.<sup>2</sup> Mostly for fun, really, because I don't expect to make any money out of it. In that novel there's a character called Jiao Da, who realizes that apart from the two stone lions placed at the entrance of the Jia family mansion, nothing and nobody in the place is innocent. It's the same here on Thieves' Alley. No one's clean, we're all in the muck; the only difference is some people can play the game and some people can't. And among those who can play a good hand, you have to know who's a true winner and who are the losers. Everyone pirates software, and people are into putting together phony hardware, too. If you're really good, you do serial numbers and all.

I studied at Tsinghua University,<sup>3</sup> specializing in computer databases. It was boring as hell, and I barely managed to avoid turning into a machine myself. DBP, DBA—it's all about data-based machines. That wasn't for me, so I dumped it after graduation, and I hooked up with a small company to get some money together. If you specialize, you just end up in some government research job or working for a big company. It might sound all right, but at best you can only make a few hundred a month. It's chicken feed, and you end up sitting in front of a machine all day long doing what people tell you. You've got to be kidding!

At my present company, or rather at our company, I'm the development manager. That means I manage my own development. I'm really nothing more than a glorified wage slave, an employee. There are only ten people in this company; one boss, eight managers, and that secretary sitting outside. She's called the office manager. We've all got fancy titles. It's good for business, and our main business is selling hardware. Small companies like ours can only push software by selling hardware. Although I've got a reputation as a pirate, that's what I do after hours.

I've been with this company for more than a year. The pay is okay, a steady two grand a month. But there's not always stuff around to pirate—not stuff that'll make a profit. A decent interior-design application like CCHD 6.0 contains more than a thousand ready-made 3-D images of interiors. A licensed copy sells for 2,700 yuan. But I can strip it down in a little over an hour and make as many copies as I want. Actually, I was working on that a few days ago. I was doing it for a friend, so I charged only six thousand yuan, less than my normal fee.

2. A popular traditional novel written by Cao Xueqin in the eighteenth century.

3. China's self-styled MIT, near Zhongguan Cun in the university district of Haidian.

It was cheap at the price. My friend can sell my pirated version for ages and make back what he spent on me many times over. To employ me for an hour costs about a hundred yuan; the rest went to buy my skill. Someone else might not have been able to break the program code in ten thousand hours. Anyway, I didn't learn what I know for free. I have to make back the money I invested in going to university.

The way I see it, pirating software is no big deal. The Four Little Dragons<sup>4</sup> created all their wealth and prosperity by pirating. Tell me what those little shits in Hong Kong have ever invented? Nothing. They're just a bunch of pseudo-foreign devils who started out as tailors and cobblers. Everything they know about computers comes from having learned how to pirate stuff.

PCs are made up of parts from everywhere. Open up any machine, and you'll find components manufactured in a pile of different countries. Plus there are always a few things without any labels made by guerrilla outfits. It's the same for software. I rip you off, then you rip me off. Popular software products—regardless of who developed them—all contain some fishy things. Everyone's got a bit of everyone else in them. So much intermarriage has gone on over the years that nowadays everyone's related.

It's ridiculous for these stinking foreigners to pick on China like they do. We're just following the general trend by pirating some of their stuff. And they're up in arms, carrying on about intellectual property infringement and making a fucking stink about us all over the world.

Those foreign devils are just plain unreasonable. Actually, they've been ripping off us Chinese for ages. What's all this stuff about intellectual property? Whose ancestors got everything going in the first place? I don't think there are any cut-and-dried answers, but just ask yourself: What's the basic element of computing? Binary notation! Zero and one, positive and negative, open and closed. That's the theory of yin and yang. Everything in the universe is made up of yin and yang, and of course it was us Chinese who discovered that. And, not only did we get the idea first, we were the first to apply it. In printing we invented movable type, a concept that's based on being able to disassemble a matrix of text and put it together again in a different order. They've just learned how to do that recently.

But let's forget the hardware aspect of all of this. What about electricity and magnetic fields? Who discovered magnetism? Pardon me, it was the Chinese! If we hadn't discovered that, then what would you do with your

4. Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore.

data? How would you record it? And while we're at it, let's talk about hard copy. Obviously, you need paper for that—and where did that come from? If it weren't for Bi Sheng,<sup>5</sup> those foreigners would still be writing on parchment. Can you cut parchment into A4 size and print on it? I don't think so! Those fucking foreigners simply haven't figured out how much they owe us in copyright fees, and they make a fuss about *us* infringing copyright. When China was advanced, they were free to rip us off left, right, and center. Now that they've managed to get ahead of us a little, it's a different story! As soon as they strike it rich, they begin lording it over everyone else. Where's the sense in that? Well, I'm going to go right on copying whatever comes my way.

They can hit China with as many sanctions as they want. Anyway they're only punishing the state; it can't touch any of us. At least the foreign devils got that right—the Chinese government is the one to go after. Boy, do they make a heap from pirating! You can make a packet if you pirate really clever software. But only the government can get away with it. I couldn't copy programs for heavy-duty machines, even if I wanted to. I don't have any originals to work with; we don't have the know-how either, or equipment, or access to a market. There's no alternative—we just have to sit back and watch the government making the real killing.

The authorities raided us a few days ago just to give the Yanks some face during the latest round of Sino-U.S. intellectual property talks. Go for it! All they got was a few disks. We still have software coming out our ears. Our cops were just putting on a show for the Yankee devils. If they really wanted to enforce a ban, they'd go hit on the National Defense Science and Industry Commission or the Academy of Sciences. All we get are their leftovers, a few kindergarten-level PC disks. The government has been breaking the same laws we have. If they don't give a damn, why should we be scared? Besides, if they really got me, I'd play dumb. I'd say I was just ripping off the foreign devils to help the Communist Party and the people save some money on advanced technology from abroad!

In the case of more professional software like CCHD 6.0, for example, the market is limited, so you can't sell a pirated copy for more than a third of its retail price. But if a state organization or company buys it, you're looking at helping them update their system or establish one from scratch. We're not just talking one-third anymore. They need the works, and we

5. The legendary inventor of paper.

charge them an arm and a leg. And why not? State-run companies aren't worried about money. As long as their middlemen get their commission, you can do what you want. Small private companies are more uptight about the bottom line, but that's no problem; they're computer-illiterate, so you can tell them they need a whole pile of software, and they'll believe you.

Once there was this company that got a 386SX clone and thought they'd be real cool by running Windows. But obviously, Windows can't do much all by itself. They reckoned their outfit was an international trading venture, so they came crying to us that they needed top-of-the-line English software. I was at a bit of a loose end at the time, so I helped our retail people do them over. I talked them into buying the full package: WordPerfect, Word, ClarisWorks, Lotus Notes, Excel, as well as the Chinese systems WPS and WPS-NT. Who cared if there was a lot of overlap? They all had different icons, so they looked pretty convincing.

Of course, we'd pirated the whole suite. But the place is oozing with that type of cheap shit, so you can't even get a third of the original price for it. We sell it for 10 percent of the retail price, or even less. We just have to sell more to make a profit. In fact, if you want a new version of Windows and you bring your own disks, our company will charge only ten yuan. Bet you can't buy Windows where you come from for a dollar and a quarter! Really, that's what we sell it for. It's one of our favorites—once customers get hooked, they have to come back for more software. If you're lucky, they want more hardware, too. Windows is a real money-spinner—everyone who gets it comes back for more.

Software companies do their level best to foil us. But they're people just like us computer bugs. I can unlock anything they care to come up with; it's just a matter of the degree of difficulty, and of course whether it's worth my while. . . .

My first job wasn't on Thieves' Alley, it was with an advertising company in Beijing's Eastern District. That was back in 1992, while I was working my way through my third year of university. At the time, my dad was only making two to three hundred yuan a month, and when he saw me make a few grand for one night's work, it blew him away. He said to me, "You never know when you're going to make that much again, so you'd better not let your girlfriend spend it all." But he could tell I could make that kind of money easily, and he hated my guts for it. He always reckoned he was better than me, but that he simply hadn't had my opportunities. The old prick hasn't got anywhere in life, and here was his sperm really making it.



And I sure am making it. I'm making a killing, and I've got a bit of a reputation for what I do. They call me one of the Four Heavenly Kings of Pirating here in Beijing. My old man just can't believe it.

He was one of those "radio nerds" when he was a kid. The way he tells it, he could have got into Tsinghua University if it hadn't been for the Cultural Revolution. But the most amazing thing he ever managed to do was to assemble a six-valve superhet that actually came out with some sound. He's kept the thing, too. For him it was a milestone, whether he ever got any noise out of it or not. According to him, back in the sixties this was cutting-edge stuff. A four-valve regenerative detector was a middling achievement, but that was only a reflex receiver. There weren't even any IF amplifiers then. A six-PNP crystal valve, add a voltage-doubler rectifier, that gives you fourteen PNs. All I have to do is use the bits and pieces of a CPU and I can leave him for dead.

Before I went to college, I didn't take much notice of people in my dad's generation. You can forgive them for not knowing anything about computers, but I never spoke a common language with them. At the time of the June Fourth Incident back in 1989, I was in my last year of middle school. I went out to muck around in Tiananmen Square for a few days, but I didn't burn any military vehicles, let alone kill any of our blood brothers in the People's Liberation Army. Besides, only a moron would ever admit to taking part in the riots, unless of course they'd been caught by the authorities. That's when I realized they were a completely different generation from me. They were geriatrics; they're past it.

My parents were freaking out because they were afraid I'd get into trouble in the square. "Politics is really complex," they said, "You don't understand. Whatever you do, don't get involved." Fuck that for a joke. They didn't even stop to consider whether I was actually into politics or not. Those kids who got mixed up with politics were idiots or plain fools. I just went along for the ride.

My parents were old Red Guards. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, they were just finishing middle school. Then they were sent off to work in the countryside and didn't come back to Beijing until I was in primary school. But my mom and dad don't see things the same way. My mom is a teacher and is the timid-housewife type. My dad was a small-time gang leader in the Red Guard movement. He's still a bit of a leader, but now he's in local government. He's not so timid, but he reckons he takes the long view, sees the big picture. He said if the protesters in 1989 were too extreme

they'd be asking for trouble, and that no good ever comes of rebellion. Anyway, my parents weren't happy with the lives they had, and they didn't know how to give me a meaningful life either. Pretty pathetic.

When I started university, the leftists were back in favor. They made all college students do military training. We lived in army barracks for months. But the more training we got, the worse we became. Geez, the government is full of idiots. They're always talking about trying to reform the way people think. Well, that's pretty dumb, if you ask me. The way you think is already all programmed in your head, like a big mess of documents. You might be working with a fucked-up application, but it's got its own internal logic. You have to pick out what you can use so it can give you what you want when you want it. It's impractical to try and change it according to some master plan, document by document. It's more labor-intensive than starting all over again.

If I started acting like our shit-for-brains government and spent all my time trying to change things, then everything would always be going wrong. I'd always be crashing. Then I'd make some more changes and crash again.

My approach is just to copy, without changing anything. I'll leave your mistakes where they are. I won't even touch the trademark. It's not worth changing things. I'll sell whatever the market wants. I just have to make sure I can outsell everyone else.

Generally speaking, I've been in the right place at the right time. After my third year at university in 1992, I was pretty much free to do what I wanted. I had a chance to exploit my talents to the full. Didn't have to worry about a scholarship or finding a job. You have to rely on yourself, and that's just what I've been doing. That's why I'm completely different from my parents: I don't owe the Communist Party anything, and the party doesn't owe me. The party makes money its way; I make mine my way. It's all money after all. We've just got a different approach.

My parents' generation lost out because they had some sense of duty to the state and the people. Even if there hadn't been a Cultural Revolution and my dad had been able to go to Tsinghua, he'd have been useless. They spent their lives creating a Buddha they could worship. They were stupid enough to do that, and now they've ended up totally passive. It serves them damn well right.

I'm only responsible for myself. It's not my duty to save the nation or save the people. I couldn't do it even if I wanted to. I'm clean and serene. All that propaganda about "the people sending me to university," "serving the peo-

ple”—it’s a load of old crap. I couldn’t even be bothered to ignore it. I got into university because I passed the entrance exams. For me it was an investment, pure and simple. Once I graduated, I didn’t have to pay anyone back. You think you can rip me off because you’re the state and claim to represent the “people”? Forget it! No way!

We’re not living in a moral society, and sure as hell not a moral age. As the saying goes, “Only when you have enough to eat and wear do you think of frugality and shame.” We’re at the stage of accumulating capital. We’re going through a baptism of blood and fire. It’s much too early to start going on about morals. Anyway, I’m sick of being poor. When my parents were sent to the countryside, they handed me over to my grandmother. They didn’t give me a cent for seven, eight years. At best they’d come back to see me once a year. Then, when they moved back, we didn’t even have a real home, and we were dirt-poor. This society’s never given me anything. I don’t care what they say now. Sorry—it’s too late.

Sure, sometimes I have a bit of a conscience. Once I heard a talk by Wang Yongmin, a famous designer of Chinese-language programs. He told us that when he started out, he didn’t even have a computer of his own. He had to get people to write out the programs in longhand. Then he finally got some people in a state organization to let him use their equipment after hours. It really was pretty moving stuff. All the people in the room were experts, so we knew what it meant for someone to build up a sophisticated Chinese-language program from nothing. If you had to do it all in longhand, it’d take the equivalent of thirty people-years! But I got over being impressed and thought to myself, hell, now this guy’s a millionaire. If the opportunity comes my way, I’ll rip off his software, too.

I’m more clued-in than your average computer bug. I like reading and going to karaoke bars when I have the time. I’ve even read some Freud! But those brain-dead characters who waste their time in research institutes or big companies are satisfied just to interface with machines all day long. If the authorities really wanted to carry out a campaign against pornography, then they should go after those computer dweebs. They love reading porn and watching skin flicks. All they know how to do is write programs. They have difficulty relating to people. They have pathetic lives. So they spend their leisure time reading about people screwing each other. Even in their free time, they pirate other people’s lives.

I’d prefer not to go into much detail about my income. My salary’s about twenty to thirty thousand yuan a year. Then there’s my “gray” income on

top of that. I don't do too badly. I can afford to buy a car, but I can't buy an apartment yet—that's the income group I'm in. Luckily my girlfriend has a place of her own. Her dad works in the government housing administration, and he got it for her. We all have to live off what we've been given, and what her family can get is housing. Her dad can rip off housing, cars, and villas from the state. It's easy to do, and completely legal. That's what they mean by the saying, "The dog that barks doesn't bite; the dog that doesn't does."

Here, I'll give you a disk, you can use it as evidence against me. You're into IBMs, so I'll give you an IBM disk, though of course I've got a shitload of Apple ones, too.

You really think I'm stupid enough to let you use my real name? If my name appears in print, I'll sue you for defamation.

Take a good look. These CDs are all pretty crude. All that stuff printed on the case is crap. But don't worry: you won't find the name of the real producer anywhere. In fact, you won't even find the words "Made in China."