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### **I Watch Therefore I Am: Advertising and the Class Issue in China**

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, class distinction has never been so prominent in Chinese society as it is today, yet the issue of class has never been more irrelevant in everyday life and the discussion of it receives more resistance among ordinary citizens and intellectuals alike. The present study takes television advertising as a cutting point to approach the class issue and the political nature of the economic reform in China. Based on reflections in the area of political economy of communication, the exploitative mechanism of advertising is explored. It is argued that the commodification of the audience and its watching time creates a unique "working class" – as advertisers would call them – when the act of television viewing is transformed into labor that produces surplus value for both television networks and advertisers. This "working class" should be called "watching class," which is distinctive from the working class in its strict sense, i.e., factory workers. The investigation of this "watching class" highlights how commercial institutions and discourses have functioned to displace a political problem – the conditions of the working class – into the realm of economy and how the intense class distinction in contemporary China has achieved its practical invisibility.