

Indecent exposure



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The Year of the Rat kicked off with scandals that affected China's film and online video industries

By **Jeremy Goldkorn** and **Maya Alexandri**

For Hong Kong's entertainment industry, the Year of the Rat began with a sex scandal. For more than two weeks at the beginning of February, the front pages of Hong Kong's newspapers were devoted to a single story: Edison Chen and his insatiable appetite for photography. The Canadian-born singer and actor had taken his computer for repair with a cache of homemade pornography on his hard drive and, in late January, pictures of him and a variety of starlets began surfacing on the Internet.

While "Sexy Photo-gate," as the scandal has been dubbed on China's internet, may seem a little Paris Hilton-like, the fall-out both in Hong Kong and on the mainland has been wide-ranging, and the ripple effect appears to be continuing in unexpected ways, affecting the mainland online media industry.

One of the predictable ramifications of the scandal was that, unlike Paris Hilton, the starlets caught on film cavorting with Edison have suffered career setbacks. Gillian Chung, who'd been slated to sing at the opening ceremony of the Olympics, was replaced with another act. And mainland viewers complained about the appearance of Cecilia Cheung in a television advertisement, claiming that she was a bad influence on children.

Then, in early March, actress Tang Wei was apparently placed on a blacklist by State Administration of Radio, Television and Film (SARFT). While Tang Wei did take her clothes off on film, she didn't do so at Edison Chen's behest. Rather, she and Tony Leung shared some intimate moments in Ang Lee's film, *Lust, Caution*. As a result, SARFT issued an order forbidding the broadcast of content featuring Tang Wei, including a pricey

new Pond's skin cream advertisement, for which she'd been paid RMB6 million (€540,000, US\$850,000) by Unilever, which owns the Pond's brand.

The forbidden fruit

SARFT reportedly gave no reason for the ban on Tang Wei (and seems, subsequently, to have both affirmed and denied having issued it); and the ban on the actress seems an unusual response to any offence that *Lust, Caution* might have offered. As SARFT film-review committee member Zheng Dongtian has said: "When punishing a film, we'll never punish the actors."

Clues to the reason for the apparent ban on Tang Wei may be found in the announcement that SARFT released contemporaneously called "Reassertion of Censorship Guidelines". The announcement signalled a fresh focus on SARFT's existing prohibitions on "lewd and pornographic content".

While this renewed attention to strictures on racy content could be independent of Sexy Photo-gate, it might also be related. After all, Gillian Chung, Cecilia Cheung and Tang Wei all engaged in sexually explicit conduct on film. If Cheung's television ad is giving viewers fits, and Chung is banned from the Olympics, SARFT may be concerned that perhaps Tang Wei's ad will provoke a similar response from viewers and warrants a corresponding ban.

Actresses aren't the only losers in the reinvigorated vice clampdown that Edison Chen may have inspired. Mainland China's internet is roiling as well. Initially, the Sexy Photo-gate images were available on mainland web portals like NetEase, and the prominent forum site Tianya.cn had a lively discussion about the scandal on the Entertainment Gossip section of its site.



Performing in *Lust*, Caution may have cost Tang Wei millions in endorsements

But in mid-February, the photos became harder to find on mainland sites. A discussion page on Tianya was deleted, and the search engine Baidu was censured for disseminating information about the scandal. Then, in early March, SARFT ordered Tudou.com – probably China’s most popular online video site – to cease operations, allegedly because of pornography available on the site and lack of compliance with new rules governing internet video that went into force on February 1.

Hot potato

Whether the shutdown was intended to be permanent or temporary, or whether Tudou was simply being ordered to eliminate the offending material while maintaining operations, remains unclear. As of this writing, Tudou is still working, after a one-day shutdown which the company said was to move servers, and unconnected with its problems with SARFT. An Olympics-related deal among Tudou, CCTV and MySpace China, however, appears to have tanked as a result of the SARFT order, although such a high-profile cooperation with CCTV, which in theory is subordinate to SARFT, may have actually been the real cause of the move against Tudou.com in the first place.

“Nobody knows anything,” said William Goldman of Hollywood, and the dictum applies equally to the analysis that SARFT-watchers can offer

about Tudou’s situation. Nonetheless, it seems likely that any pornography-related explanation for Tudou’s woes is spurious. Tudou is perhaps the most conscientious of China’s many online video services on the issue of lewd and indecent content. If SARFT genuinely cared about removing pornography from online video sites, Tudou would be a singularly inapt target for reprimand.

The fact that Tudou is still in operation is also an indicator of how much leeway there can be because of lack of coordination amongst Chinese media regulators. While SARFT in theory has the power to regulate online video, it would take the Ministry of Information Industry (soon to be part of a larger, similarly named “super-ministry”, the Ministry of Industry and Information), which regulates the internet, a flip of the switch to shut Tudou down. This has not happened.

Maybe SARFT’s use of “pornography” as a rationale for its order against Tudou.com is independent of the Edison Chen scandal, or perhaps it’s related. Sexy Photo-gate would logically put “pornography” on the tip of SARFT’s tongue, making it a convenient and timely excuse for whatever is actually motivating the action against Tudou. Though we’ll almost certainly never know the answer, one thing is clear from SARFT’s recent actions: It may be seeing red, but the rest of us are seeing red herrings.



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