Chinese television between propaganda and entertainment: socialist traditions, marketisation and popular TV dramas, 1992–2017

Chinese Television between Propaganda and Entertainment:

Socialist Traditions, Marketisation and Popular TV Dramas,

1992-2017

by

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Abstract

The ‘reform and opening’ policy initiated since 1978 has profoundly changed the operation and function of Chinese television. Following the accelerated market reforms from 1992, the production of Chinese TV programmes has become increasingly driven by ratings and oriented towards popular entertainment. Within this context, this project aims to examine how Chinese television has evolved over recent decades in response to wider political, economic and cultural changes in China, with a focus on prime-time television dramas broadcast between 1992 and 2017. It situates the analysis of TV dramas within the spectrum of two poles – propaganda and entertainment, aiming to explore how these TV programmes have continued to serve the propaganda imperatives of the Party-state, while at the same time responding to audience demands regarding entertainment.

In order to map the changes and continuities exemplified by Chinese TV dramas, this project has adopted a mixed-method approach. This approach includes a systematic quantitative analysis to delineate long-term trends, and four qualitative case studies to establish a more thorough understanding of the detailed transformation in Chinese television. The thesis demonstrates that while Chinese television has become increasingly driven by commercial values that prioritise audience interests and popular elements, television entertainment in China still needs to align with official ideological lines. In the meantime, varying degrees of political supervision have been identified from different levels of TV stations, and the Party-state has actively engaged in promoting its own agenda through Chinese television entertainment. These have shown an increasingly complex picture of socialist television in the new era.

In these ways, this project sheds light on the interplay between political propaganda and commercial trends within the Chinese television system over the past two decades and a half. It is intended to contribute to existing studies on the relationship between propaganda and popular entertainment, and to the analyses of propaganda in television drama. It would also facilitate a systematic understanding of socialist television contexts, bridging the east-west divide on the perceptions of contemporary socialist television culture.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Chinese Television, State Control and Market Reforms

In late April 2017, when the broadcast of *In the Name of the People* (*Renmin de mingyi*), a Chinese anti-corruption TV drama (*fanfuju*), was approaching its end, its audience reception percentage had allegedly reached the highest over the last decade, making this drama one the most popular TV productions since the new millennium (Zeng, 2017). Quite unlike other contemporary hit dramas that mostly revolve around urban romance or ancient legends, *In the Name of the People* depicts China's current anti-corruption campaign, featuring a dashing young prosecutor who fearlessly challenges authority and exposes the corrupt dealings of high-ranking Party cadres. Some viewers were surprised to see such an official propaganda production win over the market by transforming politics into entertainment. Others, including Zhou Meisen, screenwriter of the drama, expressed surprise that censorship officials strongly supported this drama, even though it revealed the negative side of Chinese politics (BBC News, 2017). This debate shows that this drama embodied a successful collaboration between popular entertainment and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) propagandistic agenda. It also reflected the multiple factors involved in the content production of contemporary Chinese television, including censorship, the audience's pursuit of entertainment, producers' professional objectives, and fundamentally, the state's political control as well as market forces.

Television technology arrived in mainland China in 1958 as part of the project of socialist modernisation (Guo, 2005). According to media scholars (Zhao, 1999: 292; Sun, 2007:188), the first Chinese television, Beijing Television (renamed China Central Television in May 1978), was created as the 'throat and tongue' (*houshe*) of the Party, placed within a tight system of state propaganda and used for mobilising the population in the building of socialist modernity. Hence people often associate Chinese television with heavy political control and think of it as a propaganda mouthpiece. Yet, the engagement of Chinese television with economic reforms over the last four decades offers an opportunity to reconsider its propaganda role and instrumentalisation by the Party-state. Since the 'reform and opening' (*gaige kaifang*) policy was implemented in 1978, Chinese television has experienced unprecedented changes amidst the economic, political and cultural transformations of Chinese society. Watching television has since then gradually become a crucial part of people's life and an indispensable means of entertainment. The official establishment of a market economy in 1992 further accelerated the marketisation of the television system. Since the state began to withdraw from providing subsidies in the early 1990s, the production of TV content has become increasingly reliant on advertising revenue, driven by ratings and consumption, and oriented towards satisfying audience expectations. In this situation, the economic independence obtained

through market reforms somehow loosens the connection between Chinese television and the state, allowing the television to wholeheartedly embrace the market logic and pursue creative autonomy.

1.1 Chinese television in a 'tug of war' between state power and market forces

Overall, the market reform has indeed affected the Party's monopoly of television broadcasting. Yet to what extent the market forces can subvert the Party's intervention into content production and further alter the propaganda role of Chinese television remains a matter of debate. The existing literature on the transformation of Chinese media system in general and television in particular has invariably noted the tension between continued ideological control and rapid marketisation, and tends to create a binary opposition between state power and market forces. On the one hand, researchers who emphasise the liberating force of the market believe that market-oriented content productions promote diversity, allowing different social groups to project their will onto the production process, which in turn weakens the Party's ideological hegemony over the media system. For instance, in his analysis of Shanghai Television's Documentary Channel, Chris Berry (2009) argues that the launch of this channel signified a symbolic shift in Chinese television from being a pedagogical tool of the Party-state apparatus, to engaging with market competition and public participation, which involves audience preferences, the autonomy of media practitioners, and the interests of advertisers in cultural production. He also notes that so long as television stations do not openly challenge the Party line, they can exist in a grey area in which state control of information is loosened.

On the other hand, more scholars (He, 2000; Bai, 2005; Lee, He and Huang, 2006; Brady and Wang, 2009; Chang and Ren, 2016) have expressed a different view, contending that the liberating effects of the market are fundamentally subject to the Party's control. According to their argument, it is the Party-state that has initiated market reforms and subsequent media restructuring process in the first place (Bai, 2005). Even though the media system, including television, has been granted a certain extent of freedom, its role has only shifted from being the Party mouthpiece to becoming its commercially operated 'publicity Inc.', with the propaganda function remaining intact (Lee, He and Huang, 2006). After decades of marketisation and media commercialisation, state power has been strengthened rather than weakened because the Party-state has been consciously upgrading its propaganda strategies through the media system (Brady and Wang, 2009). For researchers who hold a binary perspective, the situation of Chinese television is best described as a 'tug-of-war' between the state and the market (He, 2000).

There are also researchers who pick neither the side of the state nor that of the market, and instead cultivate 'a dual recognition' by suggesting that neither the state nor the market is

external to each other (Ma, 2000; Wang, 2001; Winfield and Peng, 2005). This strand of research shows that Chinese television is leading a double life, not only continuing to serve the Party's propaganda work, but also seeking to please the audiences by exploring various popular formats (Zhao, 1999; Sun, 2007; Li, 2013). In their analysis, state and market forces are not incompatible in the television sector. Rather, it becomes increasingly obvious that the Party-state is taking advantage of the benefits brought by market reforms, and the television industry has become prosperous and profitable with the support of government policies. As discussed in detail in chapter 3, this structural coexistence is evidenced by recent attempts of state-sponsored film and television productions which have repackaged propaganda by including popular elements (e.g. Hollywood narrative strategies) and have achieved both commercial success and public acceptance of current policies (Veg, 2012; Ma, 2014). It suggests that once the Party realised that market forces would not necessarily undermine its rule or social stability, the Party-state ceased to oppose utilising market resources to support official propaganda (Zhao, 1999). As Li (2013: 915) notes, the state and the market are 'certainly not antagonistic' in the field of mass communication. In line with this view, the old domination/resistance model which assumes that the state has limited the autonomy of the media in following market logics, and that the liberating effect of the market has threatened the cultural dominance of the Party state, becomes no longer appropriate to understand the state-market complex in which Chinese television resides.

As a result, scholars have increasingly called for the need to go beyond the state-market dichotomy, and to integrate other cultural and historical experiences to analyse the socio-political transformation of Chinese media and television. Xueping Zhong (2010) argues that between the state and the market, there lie different historical, cultural and ideological legacies, real socio-economic problems and tensions which also inform and influence television production and consumption. Zhao (1998; 2008) suggests exploring the constructive relationship between the state and market with reference to China's revolutionary legacies, class structure and social conflicts. By focusing on how the Party legitimises its rule with the help of the Chinese media system, Zhao (2008) highlights a 'collusive relationship' between the state and media organisations. On the one hand, media practitioners exercise their freedom to address social concerns within the boundaries set by the Party-state, and frame social issues in popular ways in order to attract the audience. On the other hand, the Party-state tolerates media organisations' practice of pursuing professional objectives and profits, under the conditions that they adhere to the official line and that their broadcast is helpful to maintaining social stability. In this way, both the Party's will and media organisations' commercial interests are realised. However, what is neglected from discussions of this 'collusive relationship' is the media power that stems from the editorial freedom and professional norms held by media practitioners.

Recent studies that transcends the dichotomised state-market framework have actually recognised this issue while stressing the growing importance of media power in contemporary Chinese television industry (Zhang, 2011; Bai, 2012; Xu, 2015). It has been acknowledged that it is the media professionals who undertake the task of negotiating between multiple cultural needs and political demands, and therefore their mediating role cannot be ignored (Bai, 2012). Zhang (2011) maintains that television journalists have been bargaining with the state for more autonomy, which plays a significant role in the transformation of Chinese media. In Xu's (2015: 375) view, the increasingly privatised Chinese television and the Party's political power tend to cooperate with each other; however, this does not always lead to 'a rigid and invariable promotion of political ideology'. In fact, producers have been probing the tolerance of the Party towards sensitive issues. Apart from the state and market forces in shaping the transformation of Chinese television, there is thus still a middle ground for media practitioners to manoeuvre between multiple constraints.

So far, existing scholarship has been mostly aware of the depth and pervasiveness of market reforms in Chinese television, the continuing impact of state control over television broadcasting, as well as the collaboration between the two forces. Since media professionals need to serve two masters – the state and the market – how do their practices lead to changes in television content? As Eric Ma (2000: 29) has noted, media producers tend to stretch ideological limits between different media texts: for instance, there are discrepancies in textual meanings between Party mouthpieces and the regional media not heavily restricted by the central government. Besides, 'there are also ideological gaps between media texts of big factual news and soft infotainment.' In these regards, the competing imperatives in content production have translated themselves into 'hybridised media texts', which display strong 'polysemic tendencies'. While these studies provide a rich theoretical perspective to dive into the study of Chinese television, they seldom offer a systematic micro-analysis of the nuanced change in television content; nor do they incorporate a historical and global perspective that would allow us to link contemporary transformations to not only past socialist traditions but also a global socialist media culture.

1.2 Breaking the dichotomy: Socialist TV, continuities and global relevance

In this thesis, I regard the state and the market not as two mutually exclusive forces but as intrinsically constructive elements for both the Party's propaganda work and the marketisation of Chinese television. In this sense, my argument follows the works that go beyond the state-market dichotomy to consider Chinese television as an arena of contradictions, negotiations and cooperation between different parties, including state and non-state actors. Moreover, I focus on television content, and take into account various forces that shape the transformation of Chinese television, not limiting myself to those stemming from the state and the market.

As noted earlier, studies on the transformation of Chinese television in the post-1978 reform era largely focus on either the political economy of the television industry or the evolution of media practices – i.e. the macro-level of institutional and operational changes in the television sector. They have paid comparatively little attention to changes in television content that people watch extensively in their living room or other environments, let alone a systematic account of these. Yet, content change is also of great importance to the study of Chinese television in transition. As Garnham (2000: 138) has noted, 'no study of the media can bypass the complex and difficult questions posed by their content, by the symbolic forms they create and circulate.' Donald and Keane (2002: 11) further argue that the viability of media industries is contingent on the creation and distribution of film, video, music, and information services, delivered through multiple platforms and formats. In other words, content industries nowadays have become the basis of economic exchange, the incubator of ideas and training sites for creative personnel. However, in the Chinese context, Donald and Keane go on to argue that the exchange value of television content remains subject to its social and/or political benefits, due to the continuing state control of TV broadcasting. In this sense, the content of Chinese television programmes embodies the negotiations of meaning in the process of symbolic exchange.

In recent years, scholars have become more interested in the content of Chinese TV in their approach to understanding the social, political and cultural changes in contemporary China. Relevant studies roughly fall into two categories: one focusing on television dramas, the other on a variety of entertainment TV shows. Some of the monographs on Chinese TV dramas focus on a particular subject or social phenomenon, such as divorce (Xiao, 2014), corruption (Bai, 2014), Confucian politics (Zhu, 2008), and use analyses of themed TV dramas to verify the authors' views of the chosen subject. Other monographs seek to explore the role of TV dramas in assisting political communication in China (Schneider, 2012) and in reflecting recent changes, conflicts, concerns and interests within contemporary Chinese society (Cai, 2016a). There are also edited books on Chinese TV dramas, dedicated to the exploration of different themes, styles, and socio-political significance of popular dramas produced in the last two decades (for instance, Zhu, Keane and Bai, 2008a). Apart from the works on TV dramas, a considerable amount of research is concerned with the political implications of entertainment TV shows. For instance, in *Entertainment and Politics in Contemporary China* (2017), Jingsi Wu examines how Chinese entertainment TV (e.g. girls' singing contests) facilitates the creation of a public sphere that is still underdeveloped in China. In *Tele-modernities* (2016), Lewis, Martin and Sun offer insights into popular lifestyle TV programmes and their promotion of individual identities and capitalist modernities from a comparative perspective. In addition, the edited book, *Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century* (Bai and Song, 2014) treats entertainment TV shows, educational programmes and TV dramas as sites of recent

ideological contestations and formations. Shenshen Cai (2016b) also looks at how China's various entertainment media, including films, documentaries, TV variety shows and serial dramas, have been used for the state's propagandistic agendas, elucidating the recent evolution of official propaganda mechanisms that have become more softened and commercialised. Among this literature, we find that recent studies of Chinese television have experienced a paradigm shift from theoretical exploration of the big picture to empirical investigation of nuanced dynamics. There is also a strong tendency within these studies to explore the political significance of Chinese entertainment TV.

Based on these works, this project takes an important 'next step' for the study of Chinese television by providing a systematic, empirical account of the nuanced temporal changes in TV programmes. Specifically, it considers the making of television content as the process and result of various negotiations among political, economic, cultural and ideological forces, and situates the analysis of television programmes in the spectrum of two poles: propaganda and entertainment. The goal of this project is to explore, in the broad context of market reforms, how Chinese television programmes have attuned to and further facilitated the propaganda imperatives of the Party-state, while at the same time responding to audience demands of entertainment. In order to demonstrate the subtle processes of conflict and reconciliation, I do not focus on news programmes that are heavily bounded with political purposes but investigate an entertainment genre – TV drama – that is popular with audiences and hence has potentially political significance (Zhu, 2008; Schneider, 2012). Particularly, I look at fictional TV dramas because these dramatic forms generally have greater popularity and are more 'open' and polysemic than actuality genres. As Xueping Zhong (2010: 12) has noted, Chinese TV fictions have been functioning as 'a cultural site where contemporary socio-economic issues are addressed, and different cultural legacies and ideological views transmitted and contested'. In this sense, they can be deemed important cultural indicators of wider political, social and economic changes in China. Therefore, in this project, my focus is on developing a temporary comparison of Chinese TV dramas that charts change and continuities over a lengthy period, and mapping how their narrative content and forms have evolved in response to the transformations in China.

The distinctive contribution of this project is fourfold. First, while existing studies provide large bodies of qualitative case studies, their methods of selecting TV programmes, despite serving their own analytical purposes, are not systematic enough to shed light on the long-term patterns in Chinese television programming. This project addresses this gap by employing quantitative content analysis, so as to provide insights into the long-term changes in the content production of TV dramas. The findings from the quantitative analysis are then carried further by detailed case studies of how specific TV dramas – selected on the basis of

the quantitative findings – interact with not only institutional constraints, but also a range of political, commercial and cultural considerations.

Secondly, while it has been widely noticed that Chinese television has undergone a set of transformations in the reform era, existing studies seem overwhelmingly preoccupied with the exploration of various recent changes and pay little attention to continuities, particularly those deriving from China's history and the traditions of its socialist revolution. These studies therefore tend to exaggerate the impact of a capitalist market on the Chinese society, while at the same time downplaying the enduring character of socialism, or simplify the socialist traditions to 'state and/or Party control'. This project contests this stance by demonstrating the continued relevance of China's socialist revolution and its traditions, not only through the mechanisms of Party-state control, but more extensively existing through the cultural form of contemporary television entertainment.

Thirdly, by looking at how Chinese television has evolved in response to the Party's imperatives of political propaganda and to audiences' entertainment needs, this research offers insights into the relationship between propaganda and popular entertainment in the Chinese media landscape. Rather than treating television viewing as a process of political indoctrination, or as an escapist pastime, I start this research on television by focusing on the intersection between propaganda and entertainment. It is hoped that this project will contribute to revaluating the role of entertainment TV and the development of propaganda techniques under new socio-political conditions.

Last, existing studies tend to regard Chinese television as operating within a self-contained national system, explaining the cause of Chinese television's transformation primarily with reference to domestic developments, while paying comparatively less attention to transnational and international influences. Several works (Hong, 1998; Zhu, 2008; Keane, 2015) have noted this issue and sought to integrate both external factors (e.g. new technological advancement, global capital flows and competition, Western formats and programming strategies) and internal factors to conceptualise the changes in Chinese television. However, they associate the external factors with influences mostly from developed capitalist countries, notably the US, Western Europe, as well as Japan and South Korea, while disregarding transnational influences from state television in other (former) socialist countries. This project builds on these studies and extends them by connecting studies of Chinese television to a global socialist media culture. Drawing on existing research on socialist media in Central and Eastern Europe, I situate my approach to Chinese television within a broader framework of de-Westernising media studies, and highlight both the regional uniqueness of Chinese television and its transnational similarities with the socialist television in other contexts.

1.3 Structure of this thesis

This thesis is organised into ten chapters. Chapter 1 serves as a general introduction and reviews existing studies on the subject of Chinese television. The research goal, questions, and potential contribution of this project are also outlined in this section. Following this brief introduction, Chapter 2, entitled 'Socialist Television between Propaganda and Entertainment', provides theoretical perspectives on socialist television, propaganda and entertainment. It starts from a de-Westernised approach, seeking to map general assumptions about socialist media and television, whilst attending to the specificities of socialist television in their own historical and regional contexts. I find that socialist television is far from being a pure propaganda tool, but like television in liberal democracies, or anywhere else, has both a political and cultural dimension, both propaganda functions and entertainment values. I consider propaganda a universal phenomenon that is not particularly tied to socialist regimes, and see entertainment as a politically important genre having the ability to shape public opinions. In this sense, this chapter puts forward the argument that television propaganda and entertainment are in many ways intertwined with each other.

Chapter 3, 'The Changing Landscape of Chinese Television in the Reform Era', provides a historical account of the development of Chinese television. Specifically, I attempt to contextualise television within the broader political, economic and cultural transformation taking place in the post-1978 reform era, whilst noting the key factors that have shaped this development, such as the shifting focus of the Party's propaganda work towards economic growth, the restructuring of media institutions, and the emergence of China's popular entertainment culture. The chapter outlines how under these conditions, the production of TV programmes in China has changed from a top-down model to a multilateral system that involves negotiations between political and commercial interests. Even so, I emphasise the fact that all transformations were initiated and guided by the Party-state as part of its socio-political agenda of promoting nationalism, collectivism and socialism.

After outlining the general features of socialist television and the historical and institutional specificities of Chinese television, I provide a methodological and analytical framework to investigate the dynamics in Chinese television programming in Chapter 4. I begin by justifying of the choice of studying TV dramas, an entertainment but also politically important genre. The chapter then introduces the mixed methods adopted in this project, which include a quantitative content analysis to delineate long-term trends of TV dramas, and qualitative case studies to establish an in-depth understanding of specific TV programmes. The selection of dramas spans two decades and a half, starting in 1992 when the socialist market economy was officially established in China. The dramas were drawn from two different sources: CCTV-1, the official mouthpiece of the Party-state, and Hunan Satellite TV, the first and most important entertainment-oriented national broadcaster (hereafter referred to as Hunan TV).

After a presentation of the data collection procedures, the chapter discusses the use of statistical analysis software and narrative theories to analyse the data. It concludes with a brief reflection on the strength and limitation of mixed research methods.

Following the discussion of the theoretical, historical and methodological basis of this project, Chapters 5 to 9 present empirical findings of the quantitative and qualitative studies. Chapter 5 displays the results of the quantitative content analysis, delineating and comparing the main themes of prime-time dramas on the two TV channels. It shows how the propagandistic agenda of the Party-state and the entertainment pursuits of TV viewers have been juxtaposed in television programming in the last twenty-six years: while CCTV-1 has abided by its political mission by broadcasting large amounts of revolution-themed TV dramas, there is also a clear trend showing a steady increase in both the number and proportion of romantic themes on this TV channel. Conversely, while the TV dramas on Hunan TV have primarily focused on romantic love – an audience-favoured theme, the broadcaster has also shown allegiance to the Party's propaganda work by promoting nationalist themes during politically important commemorative periods.

Based on the findings from the quantitative analysis, Chapters 6 to 9 present case studies of four sets of TV dramas revolving around the two prominent themes of revolution and love. Chapters 6 and 7 offer in-depth analyses of two sets of revolution-themed TV dramas, respectively selected from CCTV-1 (Chapter 6) and Hunan TV (Chapter 7). The revolutionary dramas represent a crucially important propaganda genre for the Party-state because of their depiction of the revolutionary history of the Party. The two chapters provide a closer scrutiny of the production context, narrative strategies and commercial considerations in reproducing the collective narrative of the revolutionary movement. Chapter 6, entitled 'Patriotism, Nationalism and Historical Figures', discusses three propaganda TV dramas aired on CCTV-1 in 1999, 2005 and 2015. I demonstrate in this chapter that under the pressure from market-oriented productions, the central television has increasingly drawn inspiration from popular narrative strategies to portray the human side of Communist heroes and Party leaders, aiming to foster a national identity on the one hand and consolidate the Party's legitimate rule on the other.

Chapter 7, 'Omnipotent Heroes and Sexy Spies', provides a comparison to the findings from Chapter 6 by focusing on two TV fictions broadcast on Hunan TV in 2005 and 2015. In this chapter, I show that Hunan TV has made more concessions to audience tastes by broadcasting dramas that incorporate bolder imaginations of revolutionaries' emotional experiences, more complexity regarding the identity of Communist soldiers, more suspense and abundant excitement in the representation of the revolutionary past. While there is evident development in narrative techniques, informed by the contextual changes over time, the two chapters also display a certain degree of similarity and continuity in the revolutionary dramas,

with regard to the greatness of the Communist heroes (including political leaders) and the sacrifices they have made in achieving the revolutionary goals.

Analysing from a different angle, Chapters 8 and 9 focus on love-themed TV dramas. This genre is not explicitly political, but well-received among the audience because of its depictions of personal issues, such as family life and emotional relationships that immediately appeal to the viewers. Chapter 8, entitled 'Soap Operas for Social Education and Political Propaganda', looks at three dramas aired on CCTV-1 during different periods and examines how the popular agendas of love, romance and family have been integrated into the socio-political framework of Party propaganda and social education. I find that even though these dramas centre on the affective dimension of people's domestic life, their emotional and familial experiences are intertwined with wider social, economic and political changes, recording and embodying dominant ideologies at different times.

As a comparison, Chapter 9, 'Soap Operas for Entertainment', focusing on three romantic TV dramas aired on Hunan TV in 2000, 2010 and 2016, examines the unique traits of popular narrative forms provided by Hunan TV in telling love stories, and delineates their evolvement over time. In this chapter I demonstrate that the love-themed dramas on Hunan TV show more traits of melodrama and are aimed for providing fantasies for the audiences, while making less commitment to reflecting socio-political changes. These melodramatic narrative formulas have also been subject to increasing influence from South Korean and Taiwanese popular culture. Apart from the differences between the two TV channels, the findings from Chapters 8 and 9 show considerable similarities and continuities regarding the narratives of domestic life. They both show people's yearning for and satisfaction with stability and prosperity, which implicitly validates what the Party has achieved through its economic experiments in recent decades. Besides, all the romantic dramas retain a remarkably conformity to a traditional patriarchal hierarchy, hence continuing to contribute to the reinforcement of existing power relations.

Chapter 10 is the concluding chapter where I summarise the findings from the quantitative and qualitative studies, and link the results to the research goal and questions set in this introductory chapter. I show that whilst Chinese television has become increasingly driven by commercial values that ostensibly prioritise audience interests and popular elements, television entertainment, albeit in varying degrees, still aligns itself with official political lines. Nonetheless, within the politically sanctioned discourses, television entertainment enjoys a great extent of creative freedom and is expected to contribute to social stability, economic development and the legitimisation of the Party's rule over China. I also highlight the limitations and major contributions of this thesis in this chapter.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework: Socialist Television between Propaganda and Entertainment

In the early years, the development of Chinese television was heavily influenced by other (former) socialist countries and modelled on the Soviet media systems. The launch of television in China was partly for engaging in a competition with capitalist broadcasting systems, and to serve as a propaganda weapon, while also providing education and entertainment for the people (Guo, 2005; Zhao and Guo, 2005). In many aspects, Chinese television culture shared the traits of television cultures elsewhere in the socialist world at the time, attuning television broadcasting to political agendas, prioritising information and education over entertainment, as well as aiming to ensure that personal conduct aligned with collective and state interest through mediated communication (Mihelj and Huxtable, 2018: 296-297). At first glance, these characteristics of socialist media culture are vastly different from those of the media systems in Western liberal contexts. Hence, they often lead to an impression that socialist media are generally static and operate in a uniform manner, act as handmaidens of the government for ideological indoctrination, are subordinate to party politics as well as devoid of entertainment, and finally are powerful enough to manipulate audience perceptions (cf. Sparks, 2000: 37; Mihelj, 2014: 9). It is certainly true that socialist media systems operate under different rules and hence exhibit distinctive features, particularly with regard to their subordination to political control and their limited editorial freedom. However, alongside the transformations taking place in socialist states from the late twentieth century onwards, many scholars (Sparks, 1998; 2000; Curran and Park, 2000; Pertierra and Turner, 2012; Mihelj, 2014; Imre, 2016) began looking into the changing structure and practice of media systems in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. Through these approaches, they have called for a more balanced account of socialist media systems that takes into account the regional and historical specificities of a media system from a de-Westernised approach.

In this chapter, I build on these theoretical efforts to develop a conceptual framework for understanding socialist media, television propaganda and entertainment. The first section starts with a reflection on Colin Sparks's arguments about the nature and function of socialist media systems. In the second section, I show how socialist television intrinsically bears much resemblance to Western public-service broadcasting, but has been shaped by competing forces both from within and outside of socialist states. This is followed by a discussion of propaganda and television, in which I highlight the characteristics of communist propaganda and its application and adaptation to new socio-political and technological contexts. In the remaining two parts, I turn to the political significance of entertainment media, and then

delineate how entertainment has historically been involved in political propaganda.

2.1 De-westernising socialist media studies

In the early attempts of classifying world media systems, socialist (or communist) media have often been subsumed under a model of authoritarianism by Western theorists, a model that places government control as the central force shaping any form of mass communications, and emphasises the instrumental usage of media systems. These works include the well-known book *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1976), which placed the 'libertarian' media model deriving from the US and Britain at one end of the freedom spectrum, and the authoritarian and communist model at the other (Donald and Keane, 2002: 7). Communist media systems, represented here by Soviet media, are characterised as political tools for mobilising the proletarian revolution, disseminating Soviet official ideologies and achieving the unity of the state (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1976: 121-122). In this theorisation of the communist media, the content of and materials in mass communication appear to be solely determined by political considerations and subordinate to the instrumental ends (Sparks, 1998: 54). Given that this model was developed against the Cold War background, with the aim of highlighting the superiority of Western liberal conceptions of the press against Soviet communist ones (Nerone, 1995; Hallin and Mancini, 2008), it comes as little surprise that socialist media systems were portrayed as an integral part of the party apparatus and thus the opposite of press freedom.

As for the communist regimes themselves, the ruling groups' perceptions and organising principles of the media system were to a large extent informed by Leninist theory of socialist press, or the mass media in a broader sense (Sparks, 1998: 45). Lenin's most famous articulation of the function of media is indicated in the following paragraph:

> The role of a newspaper […] is not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser (Lenin, 1977: 22).

As Sparks (1998: 46) argues, this is clearly a theory of the socio-political function of the media, put forward by Lenin during the period of the Russian revolution. Evidently, Lenin's assertion highlights the propagandist and agitational role of the press, ostensibly establishing a Soviet model for other socialist countries' building their media systems. This model thus seems applicable to describe Chinese media system under the rule of Chinese Communist Party. It is generally believed that the CCP inherited this tradition shortly after its foundation in 1921: the media, including newspaper, pamphlets, radio and at a later stage, television, have since then been used to mobilise Chinese people for revolution prior to 1949, and to publicise Party policies and direct people toward the socialist cause from 1949 until the post-reform era (Hong,

1998: 42). However, as Sparks (1998: 46-47) argues, 'this idea of the organising and partisan nature of the working-class press was neither original nor unique to Lenin'; such a model of party-press integration or coordination can also be found in the reformist strands of the political Left – for instance, in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) at the turn of the twentieth century, and even in Western liberal democracies, particularly in the US – even though the latter's media practices involved more commercial incentives rather than political movement. Moreover, the seemingly socialist tradition is in fact identifiable in wider socio-political contexts, including non-communist regimes in East Asia. For example, the ruling party of the Republic of China, the *Kuomintang* (hereafter KMT, also known as Chinese Nationalist Party), also used broadcast media for wartime propaganda and education between 1928 and 1948 (Guo, 2005: 231). In fact, as maintained by Daniel Lynch (1999: 20), 'the KMT consciously borrowed from fascist and Leninist models to try to contain and channel China's socio-political mobilisation.' When they retreated to Taiwan from 1949, following their defeat in the Chinese civil war, and established a totalitarian regime there, the media system remained in tight control of the KMT regime until the mid-1980s, serving the party's political principle of anti-communism and cultural dominance (Lewis, Martin and Sun, 2016: 13). These examples suggest that the propagandistic use of media system cannot be solely associated with communist regimes.

Moreover, Sparks (1998; 2000) contends that the 'Leninist theory of the press' was more fragmented, derived from his scattered writings from specific historical situations, so that it can hardly be treated as a systematic theory applicable to other socialist states. Hence, it would be inaccurate to speculate the practical features of a media system purely based on the ideas held about them by the leading figures, or on the characteristic of the political system they reside in. Sparks continued to stress that Schramm's categorisation of communist media in *Four Theories of the Press* has likewise demonstrated this ideological bias, in which people take it for granted that media systems in socialist countries, are of necessity subservient to politics, have no commercial practices or editorial freedom, and hence constitute the opposite of the Western libertarian model. Since in media and communication studies, there is often 'a gap between actors' accounts of a situation or process and the features that present themselves to outside observers' (Sparks, 1998: 53), it becomes the researcher's job to identify and explore such a gap within any media system.

In terms of how to recognise the varied socialist media systems, Sparks further examines Central and Eastern European media systems in late socialist period and contends that there was no fixed and static Soviet media model in these socialist countries (ibid.: 56-62; 1997: 99). Indeed, in his empirical studies of media systems in the Soviet Bloc, we see that although the Soviet model was allegedly implemented in these former socialist states, different degrees of deviation were also evident. This included loosened state control in some satellite states and, consequently, more entertainment content and openness to Western programmes, as well of

preliminary adaptation to the market system and advertising activities. Furthermore, within the media system there had already started a process of market-oriented structural and operational reform in some socialist states, such as Poland, which was primarily driven by an economic crisis rather than political reasons. In this regard, diverse small narratives were simultaneously taking place within the media systems of Central and Eastern Europe, albeit under the premise of a seemingly unified Soviet model. These findings are also echoed by other scholars specialising in media studies of former state-socialist countries (for instance, Bren, 2010; Imre, 2016; Mihelj and Huxtable, 2018).

If we look at elsewhere in the world at the time, for instance, China in the Mao era (1949-1976), the influence of the Soviet model is also worth a second thought. Although the founding of the CCP's broadcasting system dates back to the revolutionary time, was modelled on the Soviet media system and later received support from other socialist countries, especially in terms of TV programme exchange, existing sources suggest that China's broadcasting system in the Mao era was relatively insulated from both Western and Soviet influences: following the Sino-Soviet split[1] in the 1960s, Chinese television turned to Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea for cooperation. Meanwhile, due to Mao's policy of 'self-reliance', which was aimed at protecting national sovereignty and cultural identity, Chinese political authorities remained alert to potential negative impact from both the Soviet Union and Western imports (Hong, 1993: 6). Detailed information regarding the Chinese media system will be discussed further in the next chapter. Here, it is important to note that media systems in socialist states, whilst being an alternative to Western media models, are by no means uniform replicas of Leninist visions of agitation and propaganda.

Sparks (1997; 1998) further compares communist media systems with those in democratic-capitalist states and finds that political intervention is evident on both sides. The difference is that communist regimes normally exercise more direct control over media systems than their Western counterparts. This was largely due to the established principle of political intervention in the day-to-day running of socialist mass media, as well as the reliance of the media on a central command economy. Despite the comparatively more political control, different levels of commercial operation and liberalisation can also be found in socialist countries. This suggests that socialist media systems are adjustable amid shifting socio-political conditions. Based on these variations and changes within the media systems, Sparks concludes that socialist media in some countries were far from tightly controlled, propagandistically organised

[1] The Sino-Soviet split refers to the breaking of a series of political, diplomatic and military relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from the late 1950s to late 1960s. It is believed that the Sino-Soviet split was caused primarily by ideological disagreement over the method of establishing a socialist society domestically and over the direction of the joint policy of the socialist camp toward the capitalist world. See Lüthi (2008: 1).

systems, but sometimes surprisingly open with histories of substantial change, which requires the researcher to further investigate the nuances, looking at the conflict between economic and political forces rather than the centrally imposed value system (2000: 38-40). Sparks also offers theoretical perspectives on the media systems of these states after their transition from socialism to capitalism. Whilst much has changed, the fundamental structural and organising features of the media, and television in particular, remained the same. Following this observation, we thus should pay particular attention to the continuities, e.g. the linkages between political and economic power, the alignment of business and political interests, and other competing forces in the media as the public arena (ibid.:45-46; 1998).

Sparks's theories of socialist media have of course received some criticism in terms of his heavy attack on the 'four theories' and lack of alternative systematic accounts of (post) socialist media (see, for instance, Mwakikoti, 1999). Nevertheless, his theories provide a valuable framework for analysing Chinese media system, particularly in the complexity of political and economic powers, as well as newly emerged forces that shape the realities of media. This is a useful starting point for understanding Chinese media in a period when China has just experienced a transition from centralised socialism to market socialism – and for this reason, is somehow viewed as embarking on a capitalist path (Dirlik, 1989). Regardless of the various formulations by which China's reform has been characterised – be it post-socialism or state capitalism, the process of marketisation has obviously initiated a redistribution of power and interests among different agents in the media sector, which thus deserves closer attention. There are also media scholars (e.g. Donald and Keane, 2002) attempting to explain the transitional character of Chinese media within the framework of 'authoritarian liberalism', a model frequently seen in Asian states, such as Singapore and Malaysia. It entails the combination of liberalised economic practices with the authoritarian rule of the state, wherein the media are still expected to play an instrumental role to advance the state's modernisation project. This approach can also be termed an 'authoritarian market model' which examines the changing nature and function of Chinese media in two dimensions: political authoritarianism and the liberating role of the market (Winfield and Peng, 2005). These theoretical approaches have invariably pointed in the same direction, which is the entangled economic and political powers in Chinese media system.

Instead of investigating the mass media as a whole, this project focuses on Chinese television. Based on the experience from Central and East European media systems, changes in television have tended to be a more considered and regulated business; and television has responded to new economic, political and social conditions in more consistent ways, as compared to swift evolutions of the press and radio broadcasting (Sparks and Reading,1994: 244). Undoubtedly, television has its own magic that is able to link political goals, economic interests, media elites and audience expectations. Before venturing into the evolution of

Chinese television, it is worth noting several theoretical approaches to understanding socialist television.

2.2 Understanding socialist television

Compared with press and radio broadcasting, the emergence of television happened much later, and yet television quickly acquired considerable cultural, economic and political significance. There have been different approaches to theorising television since half a century ago. After television had gained prominence worldwide in the 1950s, McLuhan (1964) has noted the revolutionary implications of this new technology and highlighted the influence of this medium on society. Raymond Williams (1990) has also recognised the advancement of television as a ground-breaking technology, but unlike McLuhan's technological determinism, Williams's account of television is thoroughly historical, social and more critical, positioning television as a mode of communication responding to specific political and commercial situations and intentions (Corner, 1999: 9). Specifically, Williams maintains that television as a technology tends to be neutral, but it can be used for different political and economic purposes and thereby generates social and cultural impact. After television had become accessible to the general public, theorists began to explore both its political and cultural function. As an information supplier that mediates public and private spaces, television tended to be viewed as both enabling public participation and distorting political culture and processes. Other scholars approached television from a cultural perspective, and treated it as a cultural form that disseminates meanings and pleasures for viewers' relaxation, entertainment and consumption, which has interwoven television into the dynamics of everyday life (Morley, 1986; Silverstone, 1994; Fiske, 2011).

In recent decades, the emergence and rapid popularisation of new media (i.e. the computer and the Internet) have profoundly changed the way in which television programmes are delivered and watched. The new technological innovations associated with TV viewing, such as commercial-pay TV, smart TV with integrated Internet services, smart phones and various portable devices with access to TV programmes, have cultivated various niche markets with diverse but specific viewing tastes. These developments have led to what Buonanno (2008: 23) calls 'a transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting' – indicating the diffusion of television content to smaller sections of the public. In line with these changes, scholars (Turner and Tay, 2009; Pertierra and Turner, 2013) have started to review the relationship between television, sociocultural practices and everyday life, with an attendant recognition of the contingency of television's formation in regional and historical specificities. We see that in all these approaches, television has been treated as a technological advance having the potential to change society, but the innate institutional character of television means that its production, distribution and reception are confined by a series of technological, economic, political and

cultural factors. Furthermore, as some scholars (Corner, 1999; Pertierra and Turner, 2013) have noted, there are clear national variations in the nature, practice and function of television.

Knowing the characteristics of television and a range of research approaches, how do we understand socialist TV, a form of television that is specifically tied to a political system and ideology? To answer this question, the institutional character of television should first be mentioned. In terms of funding models and organisational forms, television can roughly be classified as: 1) commercial television – based on advertising and sponsorship (e.g. American TV networks); 2) public-service broadcasting – reliant on a license fee (e.g. BBC); 3) state television – sanctioned, funded and operated by a central government (e.g. the Korean Central Television of North Korea); and 4) a combination of state-owned television stations and commercial operation (e.g. China Central Television since 1992). Socialist television certainly falls into the category of state television because it is state-owned and subservient to the communist authorities. Hence, it is tempting to think that, as discussed earlier in this chapter, socialist TV is immediately tied to the political and ideological goals of the party-state, serving as a propaganda machine and a cultural form devoid of entertainment.

However, these assumptions of socialist TV tend to simplify the problem that television faces within a multi-dimensional sociocultural context. As Corner (1999: 18) points out, the extent to which the output of television can be predicted from its funding base is still open to debate. This suggests that there exist complexities in the practical operation of television, such as technology and institutions, so that political, economic and cultural factors all take a part in shaping the output of television. This point can be illuminated by Corner's (ibid.) account of the BBC: although public television is regulated for the purpose of providing public service and education, its programming has been unprecedentedly affected by privatisation and deregulation amid the forceful expansion of a free market in the 1990s. As a result, producers have needed to exercise their creativity, drawing on experiences from commercial TV and audience demand to increase viewership, committed to the development of popular television, thereby fulfilling public service responsibilities. From the example of the BBC, we see that our knowledge of a television system cannot be solely dependent on its institutional character or any ideological stereotypes around it. Moreover, operation and practice within a television system do not just take place in a top-down fashion, but also need to integrate viewers' expectations in a bottom-up way. More academic scrutiny thus should be given to the interplay of the forces shaping television as a medium and to the political and commercial imperatives informing its applications.

Among the diverse approaches to television in the socialist sphere, Anikó Imre (2016) offers a conceptual framework to shed light on the complex entanglements of television, culture and society from the socialist to post-socialist periods. She first introduces three underestimated aspects of socialist TV, based on her experience with Hungarian television and beyond. The

first is concerned with the ambivalent role of television: the communist authorities sought to mould television to suit their own political purposes, whereas viewers identified television primarily as a medium of leisure – a contradictory situation causing confusion to TV professionals as well. The second overlooked aspect is socialist audiences, who were far from being supposedly passive subjects, easy to be brain-washed, but were actually actively expressing their preference for entertaining programmes. The last aspect is the transnational character of socialist television, embodied by not only its openness to Western TV formats, by the exchange of TV programmes and technological expertise within the socialist camp and with the West, but also by a shared ethos and practice of public service broadcasting. The latter two aspects resonated particularly well with arguments of other scholars in this field. As Mihelj (2013) shows, socialist audiences in Yugoslavia in the 1960s also engaged in public discussions when issues such as unemployment or income disparities were represented by TV serials. In *Understanding Socialist TV* (2014), Mihelj also emphasises the transnational characteristics of socialist TV and puts forward the need to avoid methodological nationalism – an analytical tendency to explain developments found in a nation-state primarily with reference to national factors and regardless of transnational influences. If explanations are confined within the frame of a national history, they limit our ability to distinguish between 'national specificities, shared features of socialist television, or characteristics of television as a global phenomenon' (ibid.:8). It should be noted that the transnational dimensions of socialist TV are by no means found only in Central and Eastern Europe, but are also evident in socialist countries across the Atlantic. In Yeidy Rivero's (2015) research on Cuban television from the 1950s to the early 1960s, she shows how Cuban television was heavily penetrated by popular programmes from the US, which in turn helped constitute and spread Fidel Castro's vision of a communist modernity. Similarly, the development of Chinese entertainment television since the 1990s was informed by the popular culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and later South Korea, which I will elaborate further in chapters 8 and 9.

Starting from these underestimated aspects of socialist television, Imre's work particularly explores how television, as a mass medium and an effective communication conduit, can be used to address various social, economic and political issues. At the same time, she demonstrates how TV producers negotiated between viewers' wishes to watch entertainment programmes, and the broadcasters' mission to inform and educate whilst promoting nationalism – a difficult situation generally shared by public-service broadcasting in Western contexts. Huxtable (2018: 94) attributes these practices and output of socialist television to the influence of 'the core values of socialism – equality, humanism and education for all'. At least among the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, it is obviously vital to link the formation of their television with cultural norms proclaimed by the socialist regimes. However, to what extent these values have their origins in socialism rather than other contexts remains

to be explored. Nevertheless, these findings provide illuminating insights into the interplay of influences from different social agents, including political authorities, media professionals, audiences and even advertising companies, inside or outside of the socialist countries. Despite specific variations in the Chinese context, the findings also serve as a springboard to zooming in on the dynamics of Chinese television, particularly in its engagement with Party propaganda and popular entertainment. It seems apparent that one of the myths associated with socialist television is its exclusively propagandistic function. Now it is worth delving further into this terminology to develop a deeper understanding of what propaganda means and brings to socialist television.

2.3 Communist propaganda and television

As Jowett and O'Donnell (2006:2-3) point out, the meaning of the word 'propaganda' in the last few centuries has evolved from a neutral sense of promoting or disseminating particular ideas, to its current negative connotations of deception and brainwashing. They contend that in order to analyse propaganda, one needs to identify its characteristics first. In their approach to propaganda, they see it as a form of communication and define propaganda focusing on its presence in the communication process:

> Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (ibid.:7).

In this definition, Jowett and O'Donnell emphasise both the intentional and systematic nature of propaganda, meaning that propaganda, as a technique of communication, involves careful consideration ahead of time and is carried out in a well-organised manner. Particularly, they mention that propaganda is not limited to government activities but can be employed by other social organisations as well, including corporations, as long as these organisations have a clear objective that could help maintain the power of the propagandist. As Jowett and O'Connell go on to the argue, propaganda involves a series of carefully designed techniques aimed at shaping the perceptions and directing the behaviours of certain audiences. In this sense, propaganda is often concerned with varying degrees of disinformation. As noted by them, 'the means may vary from a mild slanting of information to outright deception, but the ends are always predetermined to favour the propagandist (2006: 26).' Following these attempts, what is crucial to propaganda is its achieving desirable attitudes and behaviours from a certain audience from which the propagandist can benefit. Whether or not the propaganda process is effective depends on whether the propagandist's goals are achieved.

In order to better explain the meaning of propaganda, Jowett and O'Donnell distinguish it from persuasion. Specifically, they regard persuasion as a process of informative and interactive communication which values mutual understanding and satisfaction. In contrast to

persuasion, propaganda only fulfils the needs of the propagandist, which is not necessarily in the interest of the audience. Propaganda thus tends to be a one-way communicative process: even though a propagandist has to gather information about the intended audience in order to formulate their favoured beliefs, values and behaviour, this attempt only serves the purpose or promotes the specific ideology of the propagandist, and is by no means based on reciprocal interests. This suggests that there is unbalanced power distribution on the two sides involved in the communication, and that the interests of propogandists exceed those of the audience.

Jowett and O'Connell's explanation of propaganda provides a generic definition for this term. This is certainly valid in Western societies, and the examples they used, ranging from wartime propaganda, political elections to advertising campaigns, are absolutely helpful in broadening our knowledge of the procedures involved in propaganda. Yet this analytical model is not automatically applicable to approach propaganda in a different socio-political context, namely the socialist (communist) context. Although propaganda in communist regimes in many aspects overlaps with the process of propagandistic communication as defined by Jowett and O'Connell, communist propaganda nevertheless displays a unique set of intentions, methods, and tactics.

As William Griffith (1980) observes, communist propaganda derived from Marx's emphasis on educating the masses by communist revolutionaries who had achieved consciousness themselves, and from Lenin's elitist practice of 'coercive persuasion', which entails relying on a centralised propaganda apparatus to lead public opinion and thereby impose the communists' revolutionary consciousness on the masses. Griffith shows that in different situations and contexts, the function of communist propaganda might vary. For instance, in underdeveloped countries, propaganda has played a major role in advancing political and economic development and in mass mobilisation for these purposes (ibid.: 240). Its function has been to create the prerequisite conditions for the creation of a nation, including a common language, modern transportation and communication systems, as well as mass literacy (cf. Liu, 1971). In the case of communist leaders who have become dictators, propaganda is used to 'develop an overwhelming cult of personality and thus to create or strengthen a charismatic leader' (Griffith, 1980: 243). However, despite its specific applications, propaganda in Marxist-Leninist settings is generally used to maintain unanimity among communist elites, as well as to secure the power and political legitimacy of the propagandist while at the same time giving ideological education to the masses. To these ends, the organisational strategy and tactics of communist propaganda have been navigated largely centring on the Leninist tradition, which requires all means of elite and mass communication, as well as various cultural activities ranging from history and social science to art, music and literature, to facilitate the implementation of the communist party line, and suppress any expression of views or intellectual output contrary to the party line (ibid.: 243-244). In this sense, propaganda has

been incorporated as an integral part of the communist movement and a form of ritual indoctrination that surpasses space and time. In other words, communist propaganda seems to be an innate and long-term mission of communists, which has been blatantly written into the party line. This is particularly evident in the Chinese political context, where propaganda (*xuanchuan,* literally meaning to publicise, promote or disseminate) is being described as the 'life blood' (*shengmingxian*) of the Party-state (Brady, 2006; 2008). As David Shambaugh (2007, 2015) has noted, propaganda in China is not a derogatory term but more of a means to manage and control information. Moreover, scholars tend to use 'communist propaganda', 'education' and 'mass persuasion' interchangeably (see Griffith, 1980; Brady, 2009); because in the socialist context, they all denote the manipulation of the consciousness of the masses.

This is not to suggest that communist propaganda has no specific purpose or propagandistic campaign. For example, Shambaugh (2007: 26-27) has identified a series of 'thought control' techniques adopted by Mao Zedong in socialist China. To name a few, these included the creation of study groups for imparting Marxist-Leninist doctrines, the construction of 'models' to be emulated by the masses and the use of propaganda teams to indoctrinate specific segments of the population. Besides, Griffith (1980) has also distinguished different phases of China's propaganda campaigns in the Mao era. He maintains that Chinese Communist propaganda has been 'a mixture of the Marxist-Leninist propaganda tradition with the influence of a specific history and culture', which has been and is still profoundly influenced by the personality of Mao, notably in terms of his dedication to anti-intellectualism, conflict, social manipulation etc. (ibid.: 249). Following this, he goes on to stress two phases of Chinese propaganda: 'thought reform' as the moderate and coercive persuasion as the radical phase. The latter in particular involved violent denunciation of internal enemies by means of big character posters (*dazibao*), radio broadcasting and public trials.

It should be noted that Griffith's account of communist propaganda invariably draws on examples from socialist Cuba, China and the Soviet Union before the mid-1970s. By the time when he was writing this article, drastic changes in the socialist world, notably the demise of communism in Central and Eastern Europe had not occurred yet, let alone the progress of globalisation and worldwide commercialisation. However, he predicted that the future appeals of communist propaganda will become 'more nationalistic, more concerned with power, science, and technology – in short, with power and modernisation' (1980: 256-257). Propaganda has proved to be a long-established tradition of communist parties worldwide and will remain a major part of their rule, but its foci, goals and organising strategies will be subject to change in the new economic, political, cultural and technological context.

Griffith's prediction seems to have been verified by more recent research on propaganda in communist regimes. Take China's propaganda reform as an example: scholars (Lynch, 1999; Lee, 1990; 2000) claim that the power and effectiveness of China's propaganda system in the

post-1978 reform era has considerably declined; and commercialisation has been a significant driving force behind this change (Shambaugh, 2007). Others, however (notably Brady, 2006; 2008; 2009), insist that China's modern-day propaganda has deliberately absorbed the methodology of political public relations, modern communication and persuasion techniques seen in Western democracies, to revitalise itself, so as to maintain the CCP's political legitimacy. More details about Chinese propaganda system will be discussed in the next chapter. Here, it is important to note the distinctiveness of communist propaganda, particularly in terms of its continuity over a lengthy period and adaptability to new conditions and needs. We may wish to understand communist propaganda as a specific subtype of propaganda which shares many characteristics with other socio-political contexts, while at the same time keeping its own set of principles influenced by Marxist-Leninist doctrines.

Among the various means of communication, television offers an excellent platform for propaganda. As discussed earlier in this chapter, television is an institutionalised medium of public communication with multi-channel capacity and attractive audio-visual forms. It mediates audiences' perceptions of and their everyday experience with the outside world. Hence, television is considered a medium with far-reaching social and political impact, making it a natural propaganda conduit. As Jowett and O'Connell (2006:140) have shown, television has 'a major propaganda function in the area of news reporting'. The representation of news items often involves different degrees of distortion, misinformation or even biases against certain issues, which might serve the particular agendas of the agency producing the news. This kind of news content is able to shape the attitude of audiences on a variety of issues, thereby achieving the desired result of propaganda.

Compared to the more blatant propaganda model in news reporting, propaganda by means of entertainment television appears more covert but still deliberate. As mentioned previously, audiences are inclined to use television mainly as a medium for entertainment and leisure. Such attractiveness with the audience provides television with another opportunity to propagandise in the guise of entertainment. Jowett and O'Connell (ibid.: 143) have listed examples of using TV soap operas to disseminate pro-social messages for issues such as breast-feeding and birth control in India and Mexico. They maintain that these seemingly regular TV soaps have been carefully crafted by script writers working with social scientists to ensure these 'positive' propagandistic messages smoothly integrated with the plot. Similar cases of using TV soap dramas for positive propaganda and social education are also evident in Eastern Europe in the late socialist period, as well as in contemporary China. Through her analysis of domestic drama serials produced in Eastern European socialist states by the 1970s, Imre (2016: 19) shows that dramatic programming, with less didactic and more entertaining elements, proved to be a much more effective means than news programmes for working through various social issues and affirming the regimes' cultural and political directives. In

China, TV drama is the most widely watched form of entertainment; because of its popularity, the political authorities consider it an important channel with great political significance (Zha, 1995; Yin, 2002). As I demonstrate in the subsequent empirical chapters, Chinese TV dramas, particularly state-sponsored ones, not only contribute to the legitimation of CCP rule, as well as the discursive construction of nationalism and patriotism, but also work towards explaining government initiatives, addressing social concerns, and giving advice to the public.

So far, we see that television propaganda uses the widely-popular entertainment genres to facilitate the acceptance of a message or an ideology. In the next section, I look further into the concept of entertainment, exploring its relations to television, and in particular, the political significance of entertainment television. In so doing, I wish to shed light on the relationships between entertainment media and politics.

2.4 Entertainment, television and politics

From ancient times to the present day, entertainment has played a significant part in human life with respect to the pursuit of enjoyment and pleasure. Particularly in recent decades, entertainment activities have been made viable by various electronic technologies and become increasingly interwoven into modern life. Based on these observations, Zillmann (2000: 18) asserts that 'entertainment will define, more than ever before, the civilisations to come'. Despite its rising importance in modern societies, entertainment still tends to be placed in an inferior position to work and family. In academic approaches to defining entertainment, there often comes up rigid distinctions between mass entertainment and art, between popular culture and elite culture, between pleasure and work. Among such constructions, entertainment is treated as escapist enjoyment, a pastime devoid of seriousness or meaning, and hence secondary to more 'meaningful' claims, such as morality, politics and aesthetics (Dyer, 1992: 2). Yet, when the form and content of entertainment have been increasingly bound up with modern communication technologies since the prevalence of radio, television, and most recently, broadband Internet, theorists began to further explore the multiple functions and meanings of entertainment.

It is true that entertainment experiences are primarily associated with the pursuit of pleasure. For instance, Zillmann and Bryant (1994: 438) define entertainment as 'any activity designed to delight and, to a smaller degree, enlighten through the exhibition of fortunes and misfortunes of others, but also through the display of special skills by others and/or self'. From a psychological point of view, they explain that in entertaining communications, audiences' affective dispositions towards their liked characters in the media narratives would generate positive feelings for them (ibid.; Zillmann and Cantor, 1977; Zillmann, 2003: 554). As noted by Vorderer (2001: 251), this affective-disposition theory helps to understand people's entertainment-seeking behaviours, which are largely driven by the 'desire to have a good time'.

However, there is more than delight in the experience of entertainment; media users also encounter suspense and even suffering in their consumption of media products – this usually happens when the story of beloved characters does not unfold as the audience hoped for (Vorderer, 2001; 2003).

To account for how these different experiences relate to the enjoyment that entertainment usually provides, Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld (2004) conceptualise media entertainment as a complex and dynamic experience that includes not only affective but also physiological and cognitive affects. They identify enjoyment as the core of entertainment experiences, but insist that such enjoyment is also shaped by media users' motivation of being entertained, their emotionality at certain times, as well as by the technology, aesthetic feature and content of the given media product. Eventually, what the media user experiences is not only short-term transfer of excitation from a negative to a positive condition, but could also include profound comprehension and learning (ibid.: 402-403). For instance, a reader who is seeking entertainment in a thriller has to go through phases of suspense and relief before she can enjoy the moment of her hero's final triumph; a TV viewer is able to learn about the real-life dilemmas in an emergency room through empathising with the characters portrayed in a medical drama (ibid.: 404). Bartsch and Schneider (2014) characterise the latter experience as eudaimonic gratification that derives from insight, meaning, and self-development. Unlike the hedonic pleasure that rests on fast and immediate change of mood, the enjoyment of seeking truth and meaning requires more elaborate forms of cognitive information processing. They claim that in this effortful cognitive processing, entertainment activities have the potential to engage audiences with realistic and politically relevant issues.

The above exploration of entertainment falls largely into the realm of individual experience of being entertained. If we situate entertainment in a broader social context, we immediately find that 'entertainment producers, distributors and consumers operate in a web of relationships with government and other cultural institutions, too' (Bates and Ferri, 2010: 11). For Zillmann (2000), the technology of recording and transmitting sound and imagery has effectively transformed every home into an entertainment venue. People no longer need to go where the live-action events take place but can still enjoy a theatrical play or movie at home. This is not to say live-action entertainment is out-of-date, but rather that modern means of mass communications offer a broad range of entertainment opportunities, which further encourages entertainment-seeking behaviours. As a result, the entertainment industries have sought to predict what type of entertainment genre the audiences are most likely to be fond of, and to tailor programmes as they would prefer (Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld, 2004). This process could also be used by governments to promote certain agendas. As maintained by Bates and Ferri (2010: 11), government propaganda offices during war time worked closely with producers to ensure that 'film and other entertainment media stayed on message'. In

these cases, entertainment clearly has a socio-political dimension if its function was not limited to providing individual enjoyment.

Among the many forms of entertainment, entertainment TV makes an indispensable part of providing fun and enjoyment for people. Between the 1960s and 1970s, much of the leisure time of Americans was spent on viewing television (Robinson, 1981). Although television is used by some viewers as a source of information, most people watch TV for pleasure seeking. Television entertainment offers a wide range of choices, through its programmes made with entertainment as the primary goal, such as soap operas, situation comedies, game and variety shows. The attractiveness of these entertainment TV programmes is readily demonstrated by its easiness to use. As Jerome Singer (1980: 47) maintains, 'television removes the effort that the less well-educated or indeed that almost anybody has to put into the reading process by presenting its packaged diversion and fantasy'. It attracts the audience by 'movement, by conversation and music', by presenting the most powerful stimuli in the environment, the human face, as well as by the imitation of human lives. This is in stark contrast to reading a novel, where the reader needs to take the effort of 'generating visual and auditory images' (ibid.: 48-49). Compared with movies and theatre plays, the advantage of entertainment TV is more revealingly reflected in its provision of a safe and comfortable viewing environment. It has the ability to intrigue the audience without threat, and to arouse interest but will not lead to 'extremes of affect' as a thriller film does to audiences (ibid.). That is to say, entertainment TV provides the easiest, most nondemanding and flexible resource for relaxation and enjoyment. Despite the introduction of the Internet and wireless connectivity that has largely changed people's television-viewing habits nowadays, 'television remains a central mode of information and entertainment in our present-day global culture, and it appears that it will continue to do so for many years to come' (Spigel, 2004: 1). As discussed in previous sections, television has kept revitalising itself in the last few decades, adapting itself to the new digital environment by enhancing interactivity with audiences. It is reasonable to speculate that television-based entertainment will remain a big part in human life, and that entertainment TV will persist as an important category providing amusement to viewers.

The popularity of entertainment TV, or entertainment media as a whole, has attracted enormous scholarly attention. Apart from exploring the psychological mechanism behind the enjoyment experience in TV viewing, a considerable portion of attention has been placed at theorising the socio-political function of entertainment TV. Theorists generally believe that entertainment TV can do more than entertaining people. While entertainment TV delivers humour and excitement to the audience, it disseminates information, ideas and knowledge at the same time, which could be used for education and personal enrichment (Gray, 2008). Hence it has been noticed that the entertainment and educational functions of television are increasingly integrated (McGhee, 1980). In addition to this integration, the political function of

entertainment TV has also become a hot topic in the field of political communications over recent decades.

Delli Carpini (2012) has identified three strands of competing views among existing studies that measure the political impact of entertainment media, particularly entertainment TV shows and dramas. The first strand sees entertainment media 'as particularly effective genres in reinforcing deep-seated, semi-conscious and hegemonic values' (ibid.: 10). It assumes that the content of entertainment media is largely homogeneous, so that the socio-political worldviews of heavy media users will be cultivated by this content. However, this approach, especially its emphasis on the hegemonic power of media content, has become increasingly at odds with the more complex and diverse mediated world of the new century. In the new context, active audiences are no longer docile receivers of mediated messages, but often take an active role in constructing meaning from the media they consume.

The second strand of research considers entertainment media as a distraction from politics or as a major source of decreasing democratic engagement. This line of research has attempted to make causal inferences between the increasing use of television and Internet (especially among younger generations) and the loss of interest in civic engagement or decline in social participation. Key proponents of this view include Robert Putnam (2000), who argues that the decline in social participation results from a combination of various factors, including television's usurpation of time that could otherwise use for more civic-minded activities, the psychological effects of television that inhibit social participation, and the specific content of television that undermines civic motivations (Delli Carpini, 2012: 12). Neil Postman (1986: 78) also worried about the power of television entertainment to sway public opinion, for that he thinks all public understanding of politics, news, education and religion 'is shaped by the biases of television'. It thus becomes possible that the recreational and entertainment use of television might contribute to the displacement of public attention from the complexities of politics, and hence to the decline in public involvement.

The third and very recent strand of research has brought closer scrutiny to the effects of specific entertainment genres. They tend to view entertainment TV as an alternative source of political engagement, particularly for people who have no interest in traditional news outlets. Scholars find that under the right conditions and for the right people, politically relevant entertainment content can affect audiences' attitudes, opinions, and behaviours in the same way as traditional news and public affairs media have been found to do (Delli Carpini, 2012: 13). The programmes under research include not only reality-based programming such as soft news, daytime and evening talk shows, but also fictional content in forms of situation comedies and crime dramas. Even though audiences attend to these programmes mainly for their entertainment value, their political opinions and positions are still likely to be shaped and changed by the part of the entertainment content that addresses political topics.

All the three lines of argument lead to the conclusion that entertainment TV has the potential to create political impact on viewers' attitudes and beliefs of politics. It proves that television entertainment is able to provide an all-encompassing package of information, amusement and political participation. In this regard, entertainment TV can be considered 'integral parts of a society's political culture' (Street, 2011). The third line of research above also draws us into more nuanced investigations of a particular entertainment genre. As Delli Carpini (2012: 15) has noted, the political influence of entertainment media varies significantly depending on the form and content of the medium, specific genres of programmes, as well as a set of demographic, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of media users. In the next section, I turn to investigate how entertainment TV genres can be integrated with political agendas.

2.5 Entertainment as propaganda: From wartime film to socialist TV drama

Following the previous section which explores the theoretical possibility of entertainment for political communication, this section offers empirical examples of how entertainment-oriented media forms have historically been used for political purposes. In these examples, we will see that modern means of mass entertainment such as films and TV shows, have had a long history of serving propaganda purposes for the government in both the socialist and capitalist states.

The most prominent example is propaganda films during wartime periods. In the First World War, the British government commissioned film production as part of the effort to cultivate patriotic sentiments, so as to maintain a high level of popular commitment to the war. This was of course enabled by the growing popularity of the cinema as a mass form of entertainment among the working classes (Taylor, 2003: 194). Similar strategies were also adopted by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Newsreels and feature films were favoured by Hitler and his associates to present German victories or to denounce the enemies. Most of the films were self-congratulatory in nature, offering a full package of sound, image and music to attract the audiences (ibid.: 244). It is worth noting that the main theme of Nazi propaganda films had shifted over time, from promoting the supremacy of the German military in the early years of the war to glorifying the sacrifices necessary in the late stages. This change served the practical ends of running propaganda campaigns at different times.

The role that films had played in wartime propaganda campaigns extended well into the post-war era. Influenced by the atmosphere of the Cold War, Hollywood movies of the early 1950s became extensively involved in the anti-communist campaign in the American society (ibid.: 260-261). Compared with previous wartime propaganda films, these Hollywood productions contained more dramatic imaginations but not necessarily less propagandistic messages. For instance, in the science fiction films of this time, alien threats were portrayed as reflections of what the Americans thought communists would do to them; spy movies also

gave clues on how Russian spies had undermined the US military power. Even after the Cold War, Hollywood films have still been seen as a useful conduit to provide pro-government information, such as justifying the US military operations and the actions of their soldiers (Soules, 2015: 134).

In addition to popular films, entertainment TV has also shown to be a ready-to-use medium for presenting various political issues. For instance, British TV soaps have been found to deliver the messages desired by political parties; furthermore, politicians have embraced soap celebrities as useful instruments for their campaigns (van Zoonen, 2003). Faced with diverse entertainment content and genres on TV, Holbert (2005) offers a nine-part typology to firstly predict and differentiate the potential political relevance of different entertainment programmes. Specifically, this typology is constructed respectively from audience- and content-based enquiries, addressing the questions 1) to what extent can audiences expect politically relevant issues to be raised in a specific piece of entertainment content and 2) whether the political messages being provided in a specific piece of entertainment content are explicit or implicit. In his visualisation, Holbert arranges the three levels to which audience can expect political messages more or less vertically, and polarity of explicit versus implicit political messages

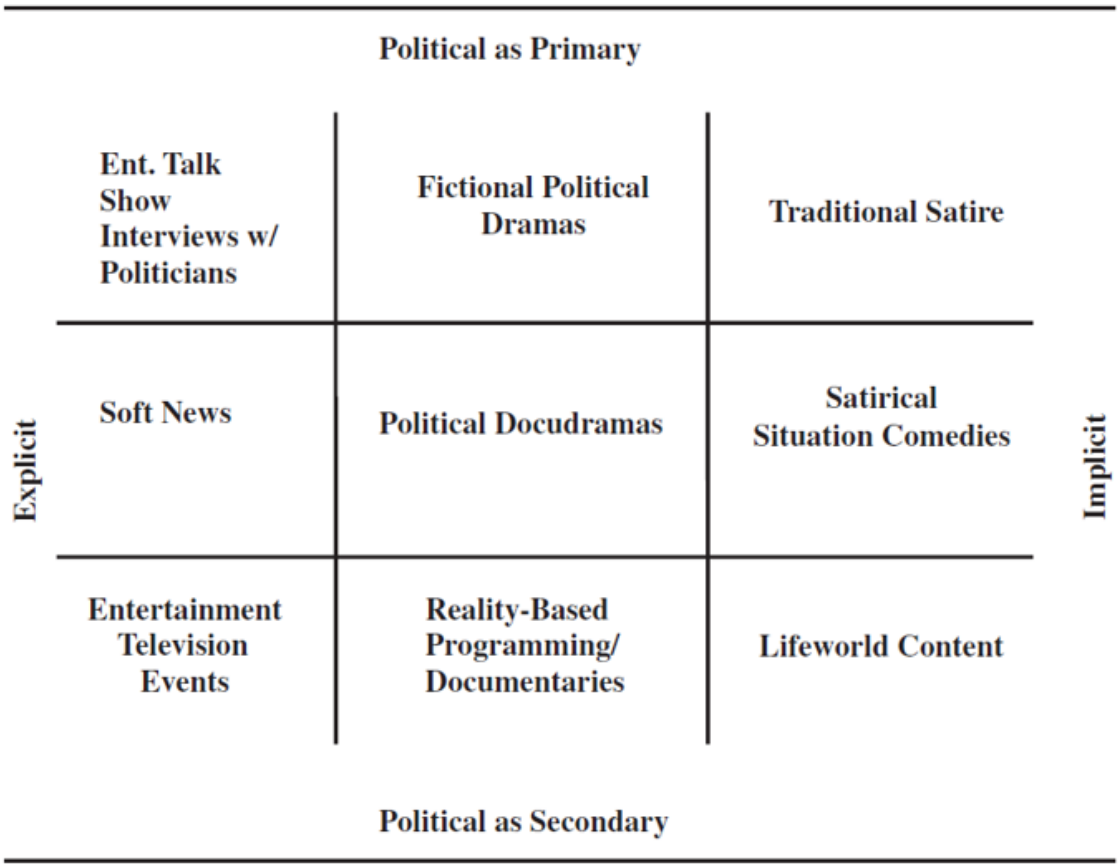

Figure 2.1: Holbert's typology for the study of entertainment TV and politics

(Source: Holbert, 2005: 445)

horizontally (see Figure 2.1). We see that from this classification, 'fictional political dramas' (e.g. *The West Wing,*1999-2006) has been put into a section to which the audience can expect to see a large portion of political messages, but these messages are represented in a combination of explicit and implicit methods. On the contrary, 'lifeworld content' (see Gamson, 1999) that reflects entertainment-based content (dramatic or comic) and normally portrays individuals dealing with job loss, balancing family and work, etc. has been placed in the bottom-right corner. This classification of lifeworld content indicates that these TV programmes do not attempt to present an explicitly political agenda, and audiences do not watch these programmes primarily for political information. However, as noted by Holbert (2005: 445), existing research has increasingly pointed to popular forms of prime-time entertainment programmes providing audiences with socio-political information, and has shown lifeworld content as having the potential to influence public opinion concerning a wide range of issues. This suggests that some TV genres might seem apolitical at first sight but have clear socio-political implications on closer inspection.

This typology forms a crucial first step in evaluating the political influence of entertainment TV. It also highlights the political importance of seemingly apolitical, entertainment-oriented content. The idea of expanding our notions of politically relevant content is particularly important for understanding socialist television. If a television system is partially designed to serve the propagandandistic and educational agenda of communist parties by all possible means, we need to be attentive to the political potential of various genres and forms, including those created for entertainment purposes. This is not to say that media content in the socialist context is *per se* highly politicised. Rather, as discussed in previous sections, there are various competing forces and strategies of negotiation taking place among different agencies within socialist media systems. Even the seemingly simple task of propaganda requires careful considerations of audience interest in order to formulate desirable results of the propagandist. Hence, the different degrees of negotiation between propaganda and entertainment, between commercial interest and political agendas – demonstrated through media content – deserve our particular attention.

Even though Holbert's research has been conducted in the US and Western European contexts, drawing on examples from Western TV programming, some conclusions are applicable to socialist television systems, particularly with regard to TV programmes featuring 'lifeworld content'. For instance, Imre's (2016: 199-224) discussion of socialist domestic serial dramas shows how this genre has been used for political agenda setting. These programmes revolve around midlife crisis, extramarital affairs, quitting smoking, hair loss, etc. – showing no explicitly political content at first glance, but in the storyline, they have disseminated an educational and didactic message that socialist citizens should take care of each other, and that this duty should fall to women. Specifically, by portraying central female characters who

act as problem-solvers between the private and public worlds, these domestic dramas have in fact showcased an ideal socialist lifestyle that all socialist citizens are expected to aspire and model on. Similar cases with notable political implications can also be found among contemporary Chinese 'lifestyle advice' TV programmes. As Lewis, Martin and Sun (2016: 63) observe, these programmes aim at giving practical consumer information concerning food, clothes and other goods to TV viewers. In doing so, they simultaneously contribute to the formation of a normative idea of consumer citizenship, because 'in China, a good citizen is not only loyal to the Party and the nation, but equally importantly, also does his or her bit to spend money and engage in consumption, which is crucial to the sustained economic growth of the nation'. By studying these cases, we find that the political potential of ostensibly apolitical TV genres is manifest. Although political content is not treated as priority in lifeworld content, their underlying socio-political messages nevertheless echo the political context in which the programmes are produced, and further influence audiences' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in implicit ways.

But it would be misleading to assume that Holbert's typology can be applied to other contexts without any problems. For instance, in China, it is not common to see fictional political dramas that reflect or comment on the current political system, due to tight state control over politically relevant content. Instead, there are reality-based political-historical dramas which specifically serve the Party's propaganda initiative. This genre will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6, where we will see the integration of explicitly political content within an entertaining and dramatic genre – TV serial drama. If subsumed under Holbert's typology, this reality-based political drama would be easily placed in the upper left corner, where audiences expect to see a large amount of explicitly political messages. As noted by Imre (2016: 29), socialist television has a different set of programming strategies that are fundamentally designed to support the overarching educational aim of teaching viewers how to be good socialist citizens. While Holbert's observation is useful in raising the importance of thinking about different degrees of political relevance in entertainment television, we need also to consider the specificities of any media outlets when using this typology to reflect on socialist entertainment television.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, drawing on theories of de-westernising media studies and political communication, I have mapped out a theoretical framework for understanding socialist media and television, which provides a starting point to examine Chinese media systems in general and television in particular. We have seen from above that socialist television is far from a pure propaganda tool but, like television in liberal democracies, has both a political and cultural

dimension, both propagandistic functions and entertainment value, which are informed by the changing economic and political environment, technological advancement and audience's consumption patterns. Hence it is necessary to break the paradigmatic dichotomy between the West and East, and acknowledge that 'the key point to emphasise is that media systems are shaped not merely by national cultural regulatory regimes and national audience preferences, but by a complex ensemble of social relations that have taken place in national contexts' (Curran and Park, 2000:12). However, for understanding socialist television, this is still not adequate to see the whole picture. We need to avoid methodological nationalism and broaden our vision to be attentive to those cultural influences coming from beyond the national context.

From the perspective of political communication, we also see that propaganda, as a form of communication, can be adopted in any socio-political context. Even though propaganda has been viewed as a long-established tradition among communist regimes, its specific task, goals and strategies also need to be progressed in order to suit the new social, political and technological conditions. Notably, propaganda via television sometimes has been integrated with entertainment genres and programmes. At the same time, entertainment TV, often perceived as an escapist pastime, has also proved to have great political potential that can shape and influence viewers' political opinions and behaviours. But as long as we cannot explore the exact political impact on audiences, Holbert's typology concerning the political relevance of entertainment television provides a conceptual framework for us to better understand the political potential of different TV programmes.

Based on these theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, we find that propaganda and entertainment are actually two intertwined processes in TV programmes and in many cases not standing alone. Even though the development of Chinese television contrasts with the situation of the West in various degrees, the characteristics of the Chinese case are commensurate with Western media theories (Ma, 2000: 32). This project thus aims to understand Chinese television as a hybridised political and cultural form, a site of contestation shaped by different national and transnational influences. In the next chapter, I will turn to the institutional and historical specificities of Chinese television, with reference to the changing political, economic and cultural contexts.

Chapter 3

Research Context: The Changing Landscape of Chinese Television in the Reform Era

In the previous chapter, we have seen the dynamics of television communication between propaganda and entertainment in socialist contexts, informed by a set of social, political and economic factors from within or outside of the socialist states. While socialist television has demonstrated unique organising principles, it has also displayed similarities to Western TV formats and programming. In this chapter, I turn to the historical and regional specificities of Chinese television. Specifically, I attempt to contextualise Chinese television within the broader political, economic and cultural transformations taking place in the post-1978 reform era. As mentioned at the outset of the last chapter, the launch of Chinese television in 1958 was partially for the purpose of engaging in an ideological competition between the socialist and capitalist camps, which also echoed the world-wide development of television technology and infrastructure. Yet, as we shall find in this chapter, Chinese television during its first two decades, either as a propaganda-education tool or an entertainment medium, had very limited reach and impact. This situation did not change drastically until the implementation of China's economic reform starting from 1978. Chinese television has since then experienced a large-scale transformation and reconfiguration. Such rapid development also led to the rise of popular entertainment culture in the 1990s, which gradually affected the role of television as a propaganda instrument, turning it also into a primary means of mass entertainment. This chapter offers an overview of the contextual changes that have shaped the Chinese television landscape, considering both national and transnational factors. I shall first examine the political context, focusing on the shifting foci in CCP propaganda and 'thought work' alongside the economic reforms, and their influence on the television sector. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the previously highly politicised sector of television has been transformed into a market-oriented industry, so as to align itself with the newly introduced market economy. In the third part, I will look at the changes in the socio-cultural sphere, where entertainment-oriented television consumption became the mainstream among the audience, and urban consumers' cultural tastes tended to shape content production. As a preliminary conclusion, this chapter highlights the paradoxical process Chinese television has experienced amidst the wider political, economic and social transformations.

3.1 The shifting foci of Party propaganda and Chinese television

The CCP's propaganda and thought work (*xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo*), also known as 'educational propaganda', 'political propaganda' and 'propaganda work', originated in the

revolutionary years of the early 1920s, when the newly founded party attempted to mobilise and persuade the Chinese people to take part in its revolutionary movement (Li and Yu, 2012). Since then, it has been characterised as a regular mission of the CCP which has aimed to publicise the Party line and policies, raise awareness of the people and mobilise them towards the goal of national emancipation and prosperity in different historical periods (Liu, 1993). The Chinese Communist propaganda *system*, however, is considered to have originated during the Yan'an Rectification Movement – an ideological campaign carried out between 1942 and 1944 to unify various power bases within the CCP in support of Mao Zedong. As a result, the propaganda system became a key mechanism for Mao's and the Party's subsequent efforts to transform Chinese society after 1949 (Shambaugh, 2007: 26).

According to Shambaugh (ibid.: 26-27), the Chinese Communist propaganda system has not only been modelled on the Soviet Union but has also incorporated the experiences of Nazi Germany and other totalitarian states' propaganda systems, as well as of the Imperial and Nationalist Chinese governments. At the same time, this system represented the quintessential Leninist 'transmission belt' for indoctrination and mass mobilisation, and its scope covers every medium concerned with the transmission of information, ranging from print and electronic media to various educational institutions, cultural facilities, products and activities. Essentially, the CCP Propaganda Department[2] has the capacity to censor and crack down on content that is believed to run counter to the official ideological line. Apart from this active intervention, the Propaganda Department also exercises passive control in the form of self-censorship – meaning that individuals engaged with creative activities know the bottom line of the Party-state and try to avoid crossing the 'red line'. More regularly, it adopts proactive or positive propaganda strategies – i.e. using propaganda as a proactive tool in educating the masses and shaping society (Shambaugh, 2007: 29). It is thus obvious that propaganda work in socialist China takes various forms and does not necessarily carry negative connotations in the Chinese context. Most importantly, it has been normalised as long-term activity of the CCP, given that political and thought work is treated as the 'life-blood' of all the other work of the Party, including economic development.[3] Yet this does not suggest that the foci and effectiveness of the Party's propaganda work have remained the same all the time.

[2] The full name is Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee (*Zhonggong Zhongyang Xuanchuanbu,* abbreviated as *Zhongxuanbu in* Chinese and the Central Publicity/Propaganda Department in English, see Shambaugh (2007: 33). In order to minimise the negative connotations associated with the English word 'propaganda', it is now named the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee in official CCP English-language documents.

[3] This sentence is from the works of the former CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin (2006: 74). The original wording in Chinese is '*Sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo shi jingji gongzuo he qita yiqie gongzuo de shengmingxian'*.

3.1.1 Class struggle in the pre-reform era

Throughout the post-1949 era, different foci of propaganda work have existed to suit different historical and political realities, which were also characterised by the leadership of different political leaders. In the Mao era (1949-1976), the goal of constructing a socialist industrial country was established as the primary focus of propaganda and thought work; this was laid down by the Central Propaganda Department in December 1953 (*Zhonggong Dangshiwang*, 2016). In this period, the CCP based its legitimacy to rule, in the terminology of Marxism-Leninism, on the dictatorship of the proletariat; the ensuing political campaigns served to indoctrinate the populace and search for class enemies of the state (Brady, 2008:3).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), however, the propaganda system essentially became a weapon of Mao and his close associates, used for attacking Mao's ideological enemies (Brady 2008: 37-38). The propaganda system at the time was also tasked with promoting the personality cult of Chairman Mao (Griffith, 1980). In this political environment, media systems either ceased to operate or operated at reduced levels, often limiting themselves to exaggerated accounts of the achievements of the Cultural Revolution (Brady, 2008:38). Cultural production was focused on the eight 'revolutionary model plays'[4] promoted by Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife. Major provincial television stations were either suspended or became an instrument of factional political struggles; news and cultural programming was subject to the vicissitudes of political necessity (Zhao and Guo, 2005: 523). As mentioned in chapter 2, Chinese television shut its door to both the Western world and the Soviet Union between the 1960s and 1970s, maintaining limited level of cooperation with Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam. It is therefore reasonable to say that the propaganda campaigns of this period, while perhaps successful in winnowing out Mao's ideological enemies, greatly deviated from the original trajectory of socialist modernisation. Television programmes were filled with political slogans, serving as ideological weapons of political and class struggle.

3.1.2 Short-term relaxation of control in the 1980s

It was not until 1978 that the economic construction of a socialist modernity was back on the track. In December 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress initiated China's economic reform and opening to the West. At this milestone conference, the CCP decided to withdraw from class struggle and shift its focus to boosting national economic development. Following this reorientation of the Party line, the newly appointed political leaders, notably Zhao Ziyang, tended to loosen ideological control whilst focusing on economic reform, which sent the signal that the leaders of the 1980s were generally tolerating debate

[4] The eight 'revolutionary model plays' (*geming yangbanxi*) were the eight most famous theatrical plays and musical pieces spreading revolutionary ideology during the Cultural Revolution. They include five Peking operas, two ballets and one symphony.

and criticism (both within the Party and within society) for the sake of encouraging the development of a modern economy (Brady, 2008: 41). The relaxation of ideological control to certain extents had allowed for a temporary period of cultural and political liberalisation, in which Western liberal democratic thoughts began flocking to the public sphere of China – but it should be noted that political campaigns against spiritual pollution from the West and against bourgeois liberalism (1983) also occurred during the same period. Nevertheless, the economic reforms had brought in new forms of art, literature, and pop music, which resulted in the evolution in the cultural field and simultaneously pushed for the debate on the Party's policies of literature and art (*wenyi zhengce*) between 1978 and 1980. As a result of the debate, the Central Committee of the CCP released a new ideological guideline that 'literature and art serve the people and socialism'[5], which replaced Mao Zedong's old assertion that 'literature and art are subordinate to politics'[6] (Xu, 2004).

Following these changes in propaganda work and in the fields of literature and art, television gradually became a powerful forum for promoting the liberal ideas favoured by an increasing number of reform-minded intellectual elites. These people attempted to explore television as a serious medium of political communication (Zhao and Guo, 2005: 525). This era of cultural fermentation was best exemplified by the six-part documentary *River Elegy* (*Heshang*, 1988), which harshly criticised China's conservative, river-based, agricultural civilisation while eagerly advocating Western democratic civilisation and China's further integration with global capitalism (ibid.). All these aspects of ideological relaxation eventually led to demands for political change, and hence the confrontation between government hardliners and the country's progressive forces came to a head at Tiananmen Square in 1989. It is worth noting that during this period, the government did not completely control even the most mainstream media. Chinese journalists and television producers enjoyed their highest degrees of freedom ever, their coverage of the demonstrations increasingly showing sympathy and support for the student movement. In turn, students and demonstrators began to use the domestic media, especially television, to their advantage (Lull, 1991: 188-189).

3.1.3 Advancing the market economy and nationalism in the 1990s

From this political turmoil, the CCP leadership drew the lesson that propaganda and thought work could not be weakened in the quest for economic development. After the crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protest, the CCP further retightened political control over the flow of information, particularly over the media sector, and emphasised the need for strengthening

[5] The full sentence in Chinese is *Wenyi wei renmin fuwu, wei shehuizhuyi fuwu,* which was officially announced in an editorial by *People's Daily* on 26 July 1980.

[6] This slogan was put forward by Mao Zedong in his Yan'an talk in 1942, where he asserted that literary and artistic works are subordinate to politics and serve for socialist workers, peasants and soldiers.

political thought work. The 'core leader' at the time, Deng Xiaoping, reiterated the slogan that had been heard throughout the 1980s: 'seize with both hands, both hands holding tight (*liangshou zhua, liangshou douyao ying*)' (see Brady, 2008: 44-45). This articulation was then brought forward again at the CCP's Fourteenth National Congress in 1992, which stressed the importance of balancing the construction of 'material civilisation' (*wuzhi wenming*) and 'spiritual civilisation' (*jingshen wenming*), in other words, revitalising the national economy while at the same time re-emphasising political thought work (Yang, 2011).

Also at the Fourteenth Party Congress, the third generation of the CCP leaders, with Jiang Zemin as the new General Secretary, established a 'socialist market economy' as the strategic goal. This set the new agenda for propaganda and thought work, which was harnessed to facilitate the institutional transformation from a planned economy to a market economy. As a result of this new agenda, the media played a significant educational role to help Chinese people adjust to the challenges of a market economy (Brady, 2008: 49). This meant greater freedoms in economic-related propaganda work. But in political matters, Jiang Zemin put much emphasis on the propagandist role of the media in correctly guiding public opinion. In a visit to *People's Daily*, the so-called 'mouthpiece' of the Party, he reiterated the guideline that news media (as with literature and art) must serve the people and serve socialism, complying closely with the Party ideology (Renminwang, 1996).

Throughout the 1990s, the CCP was also facing an issue of legitimacy as a result of the 1989 incident. This revolved around the question how to transform a revolutionary party to a 'party in power' with the goal of maintaining its ruling status and the political system it led (see Brady, 2008: 47). As a result of relevant debates, Jiang Zemin proposed the Three Represents[7] in 2000, particularly in response to inquiries about the integration of the private economy with the socialist market economy, as well as the legal status of newly emerged social groups associated with the multiple economic model. As Tsao and Yeh (2012) note, this shift in the Party line signified that the CCP began to evolve from a proletarian party to a governmental party, so as to unite a diverse range of social groups (including capitalists) to advance the state's project of economic reform.

Another important theme correlating with the process of legitimisation was the construction of nationalism and mobilisation of patriotism. Since the Fourteenth Party Congress, the Party has launched propaganda campaigns for patriotic education that specifically targeted China's youth, including establishing patriotic education sites and strengthening patriotic education in schools (Brady, 2008: 49-51). The official discourse on nationalism and patriotism proved to be extremely effective in creating social unity and cohesion for post-1989 China, in particular

[7] 'Three Represents' refers to what the CCP currently stands for: it represents the development trends of advanced productive forces; it represents the orientations of an advanced culture; it represents the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China. See People's Daily Online (2006).

during major events such as the ‘handover’ of Hong Kong and Macau. Within this discursive framework, television has played a significant role in transmitting national cultural symbols into Chinese households, staging political and cultural spectacles, invoking popular sentiments and rallying viewers under the national flag (Zhao and Guo, 2005: 531).

3.1.4 Building a harmonious society as the remedy to ease social problems

At the CCP’s Sixteenth National Congress in 2002, Hu Jintao took over from Jiang Zemin as the new General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee. Although controls over the propaganda system remained in place, the focus of the propaganda work nevertheless shifted to suit new situations. Due to overt obsession with economic growth under Deng’s and Jiang’s leadership, there had emerged a series of social problems such as corruption, massive unemployment amidst the process of state-owned enterprises (SOE) reform, widening regional disparities and rising environmental concerns. The outbreak of these conflicts required Hu Jintao to come up with new guidelines and measures in order to balance economic growth and an increasingly disparate society (Zheng and Tok, 2007). Within this context, Hu put forward his ‘scientific outlook on development’ (*kexue fazhanguan*) in 2003 that is devoted to the creation of comprehensive, scientifically-designed and sustainable development (see Fewsmith, 2001).

In February 2005, Hu Jintao instructed the country's leading officials and Party cadres at a workshop to place ‘building a harmonious society’ at the top on their working agenda, which was specifically aimed at tackling social inequalities caused by reform and economic development. This political vision later became institutionalised at the Sixth Plenum of the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2006. It should be noted that the articulation of a harmonious society drew inspiration from Confucian ideals on how to rule a country, which indicated a revival of Confucianism in the CCP’s leadership, in combination with clear nationalist appeals. Under the slogan of building a harmonious socialist society, new propaganda campaigns were launched to strengthen ideological control over culture, media and education, including the suppression of dissident or ‘inharmonious’ information appearing in the media in order to ensure that ‘only the government’s perspective got out to domestic and foreign audiences’ (Brady, 2017: 134). Besides, propaganda work also incorporated active promotion of Confucianism-related conferences, projects, and state-sponsored research centres. Despite critical remarks that the adoption of Confucianism is more a pragmatic strategy for consolidating the Party’s leadership (Wu, 2015), it is rather evident that in Hu’s term of office (2002-2012), Confucianism, acting as a new source of the CCP’s legitimising strategies, began to serve the goal of nation building.

3.1.5 Tightened media control to promote the 'Chinese dream' in the 2010s

In November 2012, Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as the General Secretary of the CCP. While continuing to draw on traditional cultural values (i.e. Confucianism) and nationalist narratives, the new paramount leader of China began to articulate the new political slogan of a 'Chinese dream' that entailed the goal of achieving the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Xinhua, 2012). In March 2013 at the First Plenary Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress, Xi further elaborated on this initiative; he connected the fulfilment of individual dreams to the prerequisite of achieving the collective national dream (China Daily, 2014). This slogan then gave rise to a set of new initiatives centring around 'building a socialist cultural superpower' while at the same time seeking increased international influence (Shambaugh, 2015).

Underlying these new initiatives were the strengthening of CCP ideological leadership and the tightening of media control (Shambaugh, 2015; Brady, 2017). The 'red lines' in the CCP's propaganda and thought work have always been in place; what is new in the Xi Jinping era is the updated repressive measures that specifically target the Internet and cyberspace. In general, the ideological guidelines for traditional media remained largely the same: they are expected to focus on positive news stories that uphold unity and stability and are encouraging (Brady, 2017: 136). With regard to new media, however, the Xi Jinping government initiated a thorough reconfiguration of Internet governance, including the establishment of a new Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatisation[8] in February 2014, which is under direct control of Xi Jinping and has exclusive responsibility for regulating online content (Creemers, 2017). In January 2016 a new cyber law came into effect authorising the government to close down Internet access in China during 'major emergencies' (Brady, 2017: 137). These measures demonstrated a stronger hand in censoring content on the Internet. Apart from the repressive measures, new visual tactics and media forms that embrace Internet popular culture have been used to build a positive image of the CCP and to fortify Xi Jinping's personal authority as a political idol (Chang and Ren, 2018). Such methods include animated propaganda cartoons and comics in the form of online promotional videos; they were particularly attractive to the young generations who make up a big portion of the online communities and are used to getting information, having fun and making connections on the Internet (ibid.: 9). As such, the proactive propaganda strategies are much different from the patriotic education campaigns of the 1990s and have positively bridged the distance between the paramount leader and young Chinese generations. The latter point is of great importance

[8] The Chinese name is *Zhongyang Wangluo Anquan He Xinxihua Lingdao Xiaozu*. But this Leading Group has later changed its name to the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission*, Zhongyang Wangluo Anquan He Xinxihua Weiyuanhui.*

to the Party's current propaganda work, because educating the young Chinese generation is considered the top priority of the propagandists (see Xinhua, 2018).

From the above overview of CCP propaganda work at different historical periods, we have seen that while the emphasis on propaganda work has been persistent in the post-1989 period, the content and goals of propaganda work kept changing. By and large, in the reform era, the previous focus on class struggle has given way to promoting economic development, and from the 1990s onwards, more emphasis has been given to the building of nationalism and patriotism, so as to maintain the legitimacy of the CCP's rule over China. Despite the slight loosening of media control in the 1980s, ideological and political control over the media sector has constantly been tightened since the 1990s and still persists to this day. In terms of the effectiveness of the propaganda and thought work, Daniel Lynch (1999) holds the view that it has decreased dramatically during the post-Mao era. The author explains that two decades of 'reform and opening' have transformed the setting – administrative, economic, and technological – in which Chinese people construct their symbolic environment, which was previously dominated by the Party. In the new context, various communication methods and technologies have empowered media users to establish their own communication networks and share ideas, which was not necessarily desired by the Party (ibid.:3-4). In this regard, the effectiveness of central Party control over thought work in general and the media sphere in particular has been undermined. This viewpoint is certainly still valid in terms of acknowledging contextual changes that have brought new challenges to the CCP's propaganda work. Yet, in this project, I am inclined to adopt Brady's (2008; 2017) view that the CCP tends to actively absorb new propaganda strategies and persuasion techniques from a wider global context to serve its political purposes. The recent online propaganda campaigns aimed at promoting the personal authority of Xi Jinping are a case in point.

3.1.6 De-politicisation of Chinese television?

Chinese television has experienced instrumental usage in the Mao era, short-lived freedom in the 1980s, and retightened ideological control since the 1990s. Media scholar Lee Chin-Chuan (1990) has noted the relative 'de-emphasis of ideology' in televised content in the post-Mao era, due to the shift in focus of the Party's work from class struggle to economic development and the subsequent commercial reforms, which allowed television viewing not to be limited to political content. However, as Hong and Xu (2018) point out, the commercial reform of Chinese television did not necessarily weaken the ideological role or lead to the 'de-politicisation' of Chinese television. For one thing, the Party-state seeks to improve the effectiveness of its propaganda work by softening the ideological tone in state-sponsored programmes, while allowing a certain degree of creative freedom for more effective persuasion; for another, television practitioners know exactly how to tread the fine line between serving

the Party and satisfying audience interests at the same time (Hong and Xu, 2018: 315). Also, as noted in chapter 1, state power and market forces in the Chinese television sector are not necessarily two antagonistic forces, and in most cases, they can work together to realise both political and commercial goals: commercially successful strategies can be utilised to promote propaganda work or, more generally, the Party-state's official agenda. In the next section, we pay closer attention to the evolvement of Chinese television industry in the context of economic reform, with a focus on the conditional creative freedom granted by the Party-state to this industry.

3.2 Market reform and the evolution of Chinese television industry

As Lynch (1999:30-31) has noted, the development of Chinese television was considered especially important in the early years of reform both to help the Party-state attain its goals in thought work, and to serve as an excellent medium for revitalising the advertising industry, thereby contributing to the socialist 'commodity economy' (*shangpin jingji*, an earlier wording for 'market economy', *shichang jingji*). We have seen from the above that Chinese television faced a series of disruptions in the Mao era, which somehow prevented it from generating greater social impact. Yet this situation has largely changed along with the economic reforms and China's opening up to the world since 1978. In this section, I begin with an introduction to the industrial development of Chinese television, with a focus on major structural and operational transformations initiated by the Party-state, as well as their political implications. This is followed by an overview of how Chinese television producers have negotiated between the state's ideological control and the commercial imperatives.

3.2.1 Industrial development of Chinese television in the reform era

From 1978 onwards, the Chinese government has released a set of policies and regulatory guidelines instructing the media how to engage in economic reforms. In 1978, the Ministry of Finance endorsed the introduction of enterprise management (*qiyehua guanli*) to eight news media units (*danwei*), enabling these administrative units (*shiye danwei*) to operate as enterprises (*shiye danwei qiyehua guanli*). This policy encouraged these media to extract part of their revenue for the use of increasing employee income and, more importantly, for investing in further development; the latter point prefigured the subsequent commercial operation within the media system (Yang, 2008). In January 1979, the first Chinese TV advertisement was broadcast by Shanghai television station, signifying the commencement of the market economy (Renminwang, 2008). In October 1980, at the Tenth National Broadcasting Work Conference, the long-established role of TV broadcasting as a tool of class struggle and proletarian dictatorship was denounced and replaced by a new orientation of radio and television propaganda towards the service of economic reconstruction (Guo, 2005: 256). This

initiative considerably released Chinese television from the Party's strict ideological control, which then partially contributed to the aforementioned 'temporary freedom' enjoyed by television producers of the 1980s. It is also worth mentioning that, even though the development of Chinese television had stagnated in the pre-reform era, the need for propaganda work ensured that there was still great advancement in television technology, which provided a good basis for the subsequent expansion of national television networks.

Throughout the 1980s, the development of the television industry was characterised by processes of de-centralisation and commercialisation. At the 1983 National Radio and Television Work Conference, it was announced that Chinese television industry would adopt the strategy of 'running television on four levels' (*siji ban dianshi*), namely television stations on the central, provincial, municipal and county levels – before 1983, Chinese television had operated at the central and provincial levels only. This new strategy aimed to rapidly expand the national broadcasting network and to speed up the process of television development. Apart from this, the 1983 conference also called on various social funds to invest in the development of television industry (Yang, 2008). The need for absorbing social funds was mainly because the central government lacked the resources necessary to finance its aim of rapidly developing television (Lynch, 1999:32; Yang, 2008). As a result, television stations at all levels developed quickly, from less than 20 municipal-level TV stations in 1982 to 172 city and county TV stations in 1985 (Guo, 2005: 270). However, this rapid expansion led to difficulties of maintaining central control at local levels. For instance, in order to fill increased broadcasting time and to attract advertising fees, local television stations began broadcasting large amounts of low-quality entertainment TV programmes, which directly occupied the time slots of news and cultural programmes produced by the central television stations; consequently, the Ministry of Radio and Television issued Notice (*Tongzhi*) No. 224 in 1984, that required city and county TV stations to primarily transmit central and provincial programmes, and banned them from originating entertainment programmes (ibid.: 271). By the mid-1980s, Chinese mass media generally embarked on the path of enterprise management, and Chinese television was not excluded from this process. With the advent of TV commercials on the screen, advertising fees became a crucial part of television revenue. However, an increasing reliance on advertising resulted in the preference of commercial interests among publicly owned television stations; this reflected the ambiguity in the social role of Chinese television, that encompassed public service, commercial and propaganda functions at the same time (Guo, 2005: 278-280).

From 1992 onwards, market forces quickly swept through the Chinese media system and transformed it from the inside out (Zhao, 1998). As part of the plan to accelerate market-oriented development in the media system, Party officials redefined the mass media and other traditionally state-subsidised ideological and cultural institutions as part of a tertiary industry

to be run according to the principles of self-financing (i.e. market-based financing) and profit-making (Zhao and Guo, 2005: 527). Profit and advertising fees thus increasingly became important driving forces for Chinese television production and broadcasting. As mentioned in the previous section, after the 1989 Tiananmen turmoil, the Party-state retightened ideological control over the media system, including television. In this case, how to ensure TV stations attractive to various funding agencies while at the same time retain ideological supervision over content production became the primary concern of government regulators.

In September 1999, the State Council issued Notice No. 82 (entitled '*Opinions on Enhancing the Construction and Regulation of Broadcasting and Cable Networks'*). This guideline aimed to better structure and coordinate various media institutions, and to ensure that commercial operation does not affect the propaganda role of TV broadcasting. Specifically, it requested the restructuring of media institutions and the launch of media conglomerates at the provincial level[9] that should merge radio and television stations, cable TV and satellite TV. In the restructured media system, the government sought to separate politics from business, propaganda from commercial operation, by means of separating state-owned property for commercial operation from those for public service and political usage; moreover, for non-news programmes, it suggested to split content production and broadcasting (see Zhao, 2015: 120). In the past, state-owned television stations operated as both producers and broadcasters because the Party-state insisted on maintaining a direct control over the entire TV system; since this new policy was issued, private production units have been granted permission for the independent production of TV programmes (Hong and Xu, 2018: 303). The consolidation of media groups was brought forward partially in response to the duplicate construction since the 'four-level' television system, that had resulted in deficient management structures and unclear responsibilities at each level of media institutions, and partially to assist the state-run broadcasting network to better adapt to a market economy. The government expected that, through these guidelines, state-owned media institutions could more efficiently engage in market competition, particularly in the face of a global market after China's admission to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001.

As outlined in this document, Chinese television underwent a set of structural reform from the early 2000s and by 2003, most provinces – including autonomous regions and directly-governed municipalities having the same rank as provinces – had established their integrated media groups. In 2003, echoing the central government's call for boosting the development of a cultural industry, the television sector initiated the 'separation of production from

[9] These media conglomerates are generally headquartered in the capital city of provinces and autonomous regions, or in municipalities that are under the direct administration of the central government (z*hixiashi*, e.g. Shanghai). In 2004, however, Shenzhen, a city of Guangdong Province was granted permission to launch a satellite TV channel that can reach a national audience.

broadcasting' (*zhi bo fenli*). As stated by Yin Hong and Li Degang (2004), the overall aim of this strategy is to incorporate the mechanism of market competition into television programming. Following this logic, TV broadcasters at every level started to establish media enterprises that were affiliated to them. In so doing, they could delegate duties of content production in terms of TV dramas, variety shows and other entertainment programmes to these companies. Some of these companies were listed on stock markets in order to absorb various sources of capital, including foreign ones. Some TV broadcasters tried out commercial operation styles on sports- and science-oriented TV channels (ibid.:246). Among these broadcasters, China Central Television (CCTV) was one of the first to take on this challenge. Zhao Huayong, director of CCTV at the time, proposed to transform all CCTV channels, excluding the news channels, into thematic TV channels that operate on a commercial basis, reliant on advertising fees. This strategy meant in fact a separation of ownership and operation within the state-owned TV systems, which allowed privately-owned media companies to join the production of television programmes. However, for quite a long time, private producers were in a subservient position to TV stations, because it was the latter who finally determined whether the former's programmes could be purchased and broadcast on TV (Sun, 2014).

The period from 2003 to 2004 also saw the trend of TV channel specialisation among major provincial satellite television. Satellite TV broadcasting in mainland China started in 1989 when the first provincial-level satellite TV channel (Xizang STV) was launched in Tibet. In the 1990s, other provincial-level TV stations (including those in autonomous regions and directly-governed municipalities) began to launch their own satellite broadcasting services, and according to the regulation rules, only one satellite TV channel can be launched in each province.[10] By 2004, there had existed 51 satellite TV channels, 18 at the central level, 32 at the provincial level and one, Shenzhen STV, at the city level. Most of these could reach national audiences (Li and Jin, 2006). In order to stand out from the national TV market and more effectively compete with CCTV and other national broadcasters, provincial satellite TV stations successively developed distinctive brands for their flagship channels. The most popular ones include Hunan TV, known for 'entertainment and information', and Jiangsu Satellite TV, known for its focus on the 'affective dimension' of human life. It should be noted that their satellite TV signals can only be received in each household via local cable TV network. Hence satellite TV broadcasting in China is in fact a combination of satellite and cable television services.

In the following years, more specialised satellite TV channels (e.g. Beijing TV's Kaku Kids Channel) were launched, which further intensified the competition. In August 2009, SARFT

[10] Aside from one flagship satellite TV channel established in each province, major cities (i.e. Beijing, Shenzhen) have been permitted to launch another specialised satellite channel or a city-level satellite channel in the following years.

issued another guidance (SARFT, 2009) instructing the television network how to separate production and broadcasting. This required central and provincial television stations to focus more on public service programming and continue to produce news programmes, political interviews and social investigation programmes, whilst withdrawing from entertainment-oriented productions. However, they may still purchase TV dramas and entertainment programmes from independent production companies. On the one hand, this policy was another attempt to strengthen the party's ideological control over the television, by once again emphasising the propaganda and educational function of television (Meng, 2015: 674). On the other, it boosted the development of private media companies, laying the foundation for them to take bigger market share in producing entertainment TV in the next decade.

From 2012 onwards, Chinese television experienced more intensive commercialisation than ever before, characterised by a rising number of market players participating in entertainment production. The broadcast of the 2012 TV show '*Voice of China*' (*Zhongguo hao shengyin*) was considered the first 'real practice' of a separation of production from broadcasting, because the show was jointly produced by Zhejiang Satellite TV and Star China's Canxing Productions,[11] and both parties received equal shares from the huge commercial return generated from this show (Sun, 2014). This result signified that China's private media companies were no longer in a weaker position, and that satellite TV broadcasters and independent content providers started to build cooperative relationships. In addition, it was found that the success of this show also led to a new phenomenon, where an increasing amount of resources including personnel and funding was funnelled into private companies for the purpose of producing entertainment-oriented programmes that are popular with audiences and have a high commercial return. This move obviously stimulated the development in entertainment production.

In addition to the rising prominence of private production companies from the late 2000s to the early 2010s, the rapid expansion of digital media also accelerated the evolution of the Chinese television industry (Keane, 2015: 13). The new players in the television market included various online content providers, such as Youku, iQiyi, LeTV (i.e. the Chinese equivalent of YouTube). The advent of these online video sites – lots of them formed their Internet companies later – has profoundly changed viewing practices, moving a large part of the audience away from the television screen with rich database of serials, galas, and news programmes (ibid.:146). As Keane (2015: 146-147) has noted, the online video world was initially loosely regulated, but starting from December 2007, new legislation was implemented

[11] Canxing Productions (*Canxing Zhizuo*), full name Shanghai Canxing Cultural and Broadcast Company, was founded in 2010 as a subsidiary of Star China Media Corporation, a joint venture of Twenty-First Century Fox and China Media Capital. But in 2014, Twenty-First Century Fox sold its minority stake in the broadcaster Star China TV to China Media Capital, making the latter owner of Star China TV. See Williams (2014).

to both deal with copyright issues triggered by privately held online video websites and extend domestic ideological control online. In 2013, the State Council announced plans to merge SARFT with the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and form a new State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT).[12] The amalgamation of these two regulatory bodies was intended to streamline the licensing of any content-related products and services, and hence the SAPPRFT is considered the 'ultimate content gatekeeper' responsible for the approval of many aspects of production, including issuing and revoking permits (Keane, 2015: 14).

In recent years, online video sites, each having established their own production divisions[13] or relying on parent company's production company (e.g. Tencent Pictures), began investing in the creation of original programmes and selling them to TV stations. The participation of these Internet companies in content production has greatly changed existing patterns and hierarchies in film and television production. Previously, large media corporations held financial and human resources and hence dominated production; but ever since the Internet companies joined the market and opted to cooperate with small-sized production units, those small production groups and well-known directors-led team have been able to absorb quality social resources and grow bigger (Zhang, 2018). To better regulate the practices of the Internet companies, in 2017, SAPPRFT issued a censorship guideline through the China Association of Online Audio-visual Programming Services (*Zhongguo Wangluo Shiting Jiemu Fuwu Xiehui*). The guideline detailed the basic rules of making online audio-visual programmes and insisted on 'correct' political, aesthetic and social value orientation in these programmes (Xinhua, 2017). Basically, the production and release of Internet-broadcast programmes must go through a similar censorship mechanism as productions for TV broadcasting. It can be argued that in recent years, the control applied in the online video productions has echoed Xi Jinping's above-mentioned initiatives of regulating the cyberspace.

3.2.2 The reconciliation between political supervision and commercial interest

We have seen that market-oriented television reforms opened up space for private media companies (including online content providers) to take part in the creation of TV programmes. At the same time, the government has constantly issued regulations to ensure the 'correct' political, social and cultural orientation of these cultural products, thereby maintaining the

[12] SAPPRFT was abolished in March 2018. A newly established National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) began overseeing the movie and television industries. For consistency and clarity in writing, I continue to use the old and best-known name, SARFT, to refer to the governing body of the television sector.

[13] For instance, LeEco (a Chinese multinational conglomerate corporation established in 2011 on the basis of Le.com, formerly LeTV) launched Le Vision Pictures (*leshi yingye*), a private film production company dedicated to the production of entertainment, film and TV drama.

ideological function of television within the Party's propaganda work. As a result, Chinese television producers have to reconcile market rules with political supervision. To explain how they manage to do so, I look at the reality of Chinese television programming.

As maintained by Anthony Fung (2009: 181), there has been a dual system of television programming in China following the market reform: first, the core programmes explicitly planned for nationalistic and other political purposes; and second, entertainment programmes inspired by globally popular genres. As Fung goes on to note, the former are a more orthodox format, featuring the theme of the 'main rhythm' (also known as 'main melody' or 'mainstream melody', to be discussed in the following section) programmes – historical or modern dramas with a very positive national and didactic theme; these programmes have a monopoly on prime time. Outside that timeslot, television stations are quite free to amuse the audience with a variety of entertainment programmes (ibid.). Prime time in Chinese TV broadcasting is better known as the 'golden time slot' (*huangjin shijian*), lasting from 7 to 10 pm and conventionally consisting of two parts. The first thirty minutes – namely from 7.00 to 7.30 pm, sometimes extendable when major events take place – are crucially important, because the central television uses this timeslot to broadcast its flagship programme *News Bulletin* (*Xinwen lianbo*) on CCTV-1, and all provincial satellite TV channels are required to transmit this programme simultaneously as well. After the news programme, most television stations broadcast TV dramas from around 8 o'clock. Fung's observation is largely helpful in that he notices varied degrees of political supervision for different timeslots and TV genres.

Yet, it is worth noting that not all prime-time TV programmes have an explicit propaganda purpose or didactic tone. Commercial interests and entertainment are also taken into consideration in TV programming. Directors and producers of national television stations have developed their own programming strategies because this timeslot has not only political but also enormous economic significance. In general, prime-time programmes in China, as in other countries, have the largest audiences, which bring in profitable advertising revenue. Nevertheless, another significant aspect is that varying degrees of political supervision are found at different levels of television stations, which enables television producers to balance state interests and commercial interests. In particular, CCTV-1, as the flagship channel of China Central Television, falls under direct supervision of the SARFT, receiving the highest degree of supervision from the Party's Central Propaganda Department. By contrast, regional television stations are run by local SARFT bureaus and supervised by the local branches of the Propaganda Department. Compared to CCTV-1, provincial satellite TV producers 'generally have greater scope for negotiation and a higher degree of freedom' (Zeng and Sparks, 2019: 55; see also Wang, 2002). This differentiation is best exemplified by the case of Hunan TV. Producers in Hunan TV have preferred to explore new formats and genres in prime-time programmes, by either developing them in-house or borrowing experiences from

abroad, in order to attract larger audiences (see chapters 5 and 9). As noted earlier, provincial satellite channels were encouraged to brand themselves to target niche audiences for better engaging in national competition. But Hunan TV has often outright transgressed the state's guiding rules. Their entertainment-oriented experiments have frequently drawn criticism from the central broadcasting authorities for an 'excessive tendency towards entertainment' (*guodu yulehua*) that provided 'unfavourable values' for young audiences (see Sina News, 2018). Therefore, this television station has constantly had to revise their programming strategies, specific content or language in programmes, as demanded by the authorities. In contrast with Hunan TV, most Chinese television makers deliberately avoid producing problematic programmes at the most profitable timeslot, and seek to negotiate with various agencies on safe ground.[14]

The reasons why regional-level television producers can have extra negotiating space are that, on the one hand, 'the standard of censorship is not fixed' (Zeng and Sparks, 2019: 62). Producers generally follow the basic political criteria and use their professional knowledge to try out creative ideas; if the supervising authority – senior staff in most cases – finds anything sensitive (politically, culturally or socially), the producers will make revisions accordingly and present more acceptable material. On the other hand, the supervising authorities allow a degree of flexibility as long as the political bottom line of upholding the Party's legitimacy to rule is not challenged. The fundamental reason lies in the fact that, the central government is simultaneously pursuing the two conflicting aims of promoting the development of television as well as cultural industry and maintaining ideological conformity in entertainment (ibid.:65).

Therefore, we can find multidimensional negotiations among TV producers, advertisers, supervising bodies, as well as programme participants and audiences. In this sense, Chinese television practitioners are by no means passively taking orders from above but acting as 'cultural mediators' and actively seeking to transform institutional constraints (Bai, 2012). This observation conforms to Imre's findings (2016) about the television producers of former state socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly their negotiations between satisfying viewers' wishes to be entertained and broadcasters' political missions to educate and propagandise. To sum up, although Chinese television stations have to operate within state-sanctioned discourses, television producers still have plenty of room to navigate, seeking to achieve both professional objectives and commercial aspirations.

[14] As Zeng and Sparks (2019) suggest, the reason why Hunan TV producers were able to convince their provincial government (Hunan province) in extending the limits is that Hunan TV makes a big economic contribution to its province and hence has more economic, and possibly discursive power. However, this argument is based on the view of an insider working at Zhejiang Satellite TV (a competitor of Hunan TV), and thus may not include all possible explanations. It nevertheless indicates that there is always room for negotiations between television producers and the governing bodies in China. For further details about the operation of Hunan TV, see chapter 5.

3.3 Making the mainstream in the era of popular culture

The shift in the Party line from class struggle to economic development has not only facilitated the transformation of Chinese television in the economic sphere, but also led to a series of changes in the socio-cultural sphere, notably the formation of popular culture in the 1990s, which then gave rise to contemporary Chinese television entertainment culture. From the above analysis, we have found that the organising principles of Chinese television were not only about totalitarian control, but also stressed the development of the cultural industry. Of the latter aim, television entertainment has formed a crucial part, whilst being intertwined with the commercial interests of television stations seeking for advertising revenues. In this section, I examine the cultural context of the evolution of Chinese television, taking into account both internal and external factors. After this, I pay special attention to the political significance of television entertainment in China and the promotion of the 'mainstream melody' works by the Party-state as cultural propaganda.

3.3.1 The formation of popular culture in China

As noted by Chinese media scholar Yin Hong (2004), the defining feature of the Chinese cultural sphere in the reform era was the emergence of popular culture. Prior to that, during the Mao-era, the cultural sphere was characterised by the political enthusiasm for class struggle. From the late 1970s to mid-1980s, there emerged an 'enlightenment culture' featuring intellectual-led, critical reflections on the previous era, humanitarian thoughts deriving from such reflections, and urgent aspirations for Western civilisation. As a contrast, from the mid-1980s onward, neither the political enthusiasm nor the intellectual enlightenment could compete with the wave of popular culture. As Yin (ibid.: 38-41) argues, five factors mainly contributed to the formation of China's popular culture. First and foremost were the economic reforms, which provided the basic driving force. The shift towards market orientation and profit in the cultural sector has transformed cultural production to a simple mode of economic practices in exchange for profits. As a result of this process, it was the cultural tastes and consumption power of the masses rather than those of the elites that shaped cultural production.

Secondly, the formation of an urban culture since the 1980s has provided the necessary condition for the emergence of popular culture. When purging class enemies was no longer at the focus of people's everyday routines, living an abundant, happy life seemed to be more pertinent. At the same time, the advent of easily accessible mass media gave the growing population in the cities more opportunities to develop a shared urban culture. This was, of course, enabled by the third important factor – electronic media including audio-visual ones. These media forms, represented most effectively by television, excelled in providing moving images to attract a large audience who need not have literacy skills. Consequently, those who

previously could not understand elite culture were now able to satisfy their own cultural needs. The fourth factor noted by Yin was the loosening of ideological control in the cultural field. As we have seen from the political context discussed in the first section, the new ideological line of the 1980s required 'literature and art [to] serve the people and serve socialism'. This slogan allowed for the 'pluralism' of the development of Chinese culture, and the emergence of popular culture was even treated as an achievement of the socialist 'spiritual civilisation'. The last contributing factor to the formation of popular culture was the rise of a mass consumption society in China. According to Yin (ibid.: 37), popular culture is fundamentally a consumer culture, because the former is a cultural form that provides satisfaction to the public's aesthetic and entertainment needs in exchange for profits. In this regard, the consumer society that evolved around a commodity economy and in turn endorsed the 'commodification' of cultural works, provided a conducive social environment for China's popular culture.

Due to these factors, China's cultural sector entered an era of popular culture in the 1990s, which indicated both a weakening of political or enlightenment culture and the rising importance of mass audiences. In this popular culture, the political and cognitive functions, educative and aesthetic components of the culture have given way to entertainment and consumption. Yin (ibid.: 33-34) further observes that what popular culture offers the audience are merely beautiful illusions which do not involve any profound thinking but aim to create excitement, pure enjoyment and a kind of cultural game. In the self-contained texts of such cultural games, any conflicts rooted in real life are turned into binary oppositions, and all social and historical experiences are simplified into dramatic plots that focus on 'conflict and resolution'. To consume such cultural texts, the audiences only need to follow the storyline, to experience the simplicities of binary oppositions such as love and hatred, success and failure, life and death, and afterwards receive a sense of satisfaction when all conflicts are resolved. Hence the consumption process is not much of a cognitive experience or intellectual activity, but an entertainment activity seeking for symbolic satisfaction. Yin also notes that these characteristics of China's popular culture resemble many of the characters of the 'culture industry' described by Horkheimer and Adorno in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972), which highlighted the large-scale, standardised production of cultural goods driven by a logic of consumption. While Yin's articulation of popular culture has reflected this elitist concern over the potentially negative impact of popular culture on the human society, it nevertheless has predicted some of the key features of contemporary China's television entertainment culture, notably the increasing pursuit of audiences' consumption and enjoyment of TV programmes.

3.3.2 The political significance of Chinese television entertainment

It was from the late 1980s that Chinese television gradually replaced books and films and became the most influential mass medium in China (Yin, 2002; Zhu, 2008; Zhong, X., 2010). Television has also become the primary carrier and transmitter of popular culture and hence an important means of popular entertainment. Although watching television for entertainment values was not a novel thing either in the 1980s or early 1990s, it was not until the late 1990s that television entertainment became institutionalised in China (Bai, 2005: 3). This was largely because the market-oriented restructuring of the media system provided institutional conditions and commercial models to justify entertainment activities. Prior to the 1990s, the term 'entertainment' (*yule*) was barely used. Instead, the political authorities spoke of 'literature and art' (*wenyi*) to refer to aesthetic and leisure activities. For this reason, *wenyi* has another important political function apart from providing amusement for the public, which is 'uplifting the public's aesthetic sensibilities or unifying the nation under the Chinese Communist Party's rule' (ibid.: 4). In this sense, 'literature and art' seems more associated with the political and elite culture mentioned earlier – belonging to a kind of socialist 'high culture' and having an educative or enlightening function, whereas 'entertainment' comes as a product of popular culture, deriving from and catering for the cultural tastes of the masses.

Taking the general features of popular culture and its difference with other types of culture into account, it is not difficult to understand the new phenomena that have emerged in Chinese television programmes since the 1990s. As Bai (ibid.: 2) observes, the boundary between entertainment and traditionally non-entertainment programmes is increasingly becoming blurred: in news programmes, dramatic storylines and human interest angles were often integrated in news reporting; in weather forecast programmes, visually appealing female presenters were shown making erotic gestures and voices; the appearance of TV commercials became frequent between TV programmes; and various entertaining shows, games and TV serial dramas began taking up much of the broadcasting time. In one word, the makers of TV programmes began to value their consumption functions, by means of creating sensational material to attract audiences in exchange for advertising revenues. Bai (2005) attributes this trend of television entertainment primarily to the commercial forms of operation adopted by those television stations. This is largely true, if we understand China's contemporary television entertainment culture as part of the market reform, and particularly as a result of the restructuring processes since the late 1990s. However, aside from these internal factors, we should also pay sufficient attention to the external influences that came with China's opening to the West, as well as to other regions and countries all over the world.

The trend of television as entertainment started to become prominent along with Chinese television's growing international contact and exchange activities with the outside world from the 1980s onwards. As Hong (1998: 60-69) has summarised, China largely increased its

television programme importation 'not only in volume and speed but also in substance and scale' in the reform period, which resulted in a surge of imported education and entertainment programmes, such as English-language education programmes from Britain, TV series and entertainment shows from the US, Japan, Hong Kong and Brazil. Among these programmes, the most popular genres were Western television serials. Noticeably, the international and transregional importation was marked by a change in the provenance of imported content over time: while Western countries became a major resource for Chinese television stations in the 1980s, recent decades have seen a rise of imports from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea (Zhu, 2008: 99). The popularity of foreign TV programmes led to a marked growth in the domestic production of entertainment content. As noted by Michael Keane (2002a; 2008), Chinese television's engagement with entertainment programming went through a stage of copying foreign formats and genres without permission, and then moved from imitation and adaptation of international TV programmes to recent attempts of creating original content in order to develop overseas sales. In this process, popular TV programmes of either Western or East Asian origin provided Chinese television producers with both ready-made formats and creative inspirations (discussed in further detail in chapter 9).

Yet the influence of external factors on the broadcast content of Chinese television should be understood in the light of domestic transformations in Chinese politics, economy and class structure. Especially since the 'institutionalisation' of China's television entertainment in the late 1990s, the cultural industry has increasingly demonstrated a tendency to please urban consumers. Whereas the entertainment TV programmes of the 1990s were seen targeting a general public regardless of specificities, television entertainment in the next two decades has shown greater awareness of market segments differentiated by social class and gender. For one thing, the Party-state started articulating a new form of citizenship alongside the promotion of the cultural industry in the early 2000s – the middle class, which is 'endowed with high cultural capital and the power to consume' (Anagnost, 2008: 499). A growing middle class was considered helpful to social stability. Echoing this official discourse, television programming was increasingly designed to celebrate the lifestyle and to satisfy the cultural tastes of the urban middle classes (Zhao and Wu, 2014). For another, new television genres, represented by the so-called 'pink dramas' (*fenhong dianshiju*) that depict the cosmopolitan lifestyle and interpersonal world of urban consumers, were created for urban young female professionals with consuming power (Keane, 2005; Zhu, 2008: 94). Therefore, it is evident that Chinese entertainment TV programmes have become further commercialised and target-specific since the new millennium. Being granted more creative freedom, Chinese television producers ceaselessly experimented with new formats and genres by means of both borrowing from abroad and relying on self-innovation. An inevitable consequence of this trend of television

entertainment was the highlighting of the middle-class culture, along with an emphasis on consumption as a key element of citizenship.

The commercial trend in the cultural field quickly drew the attention of the government. As discussed in chapter 2, entertainment media have the potential to shape the political opinions and behaviour of the public. The government of China has long realised this point. They are particularly concerned with the political significance of popular cultural genres such as films and TV dramas. In order to instruct on the content production, government officials coined the term 'mainstream melody' (*zhuxuanlü*, also known as 'main melody', or 'main rhythm') to refer to cultural works that directly embody the Party's will. It was generally believed that this term was first introduced to filmmakers at the 1987 National Conference for Cinematic Production, and promptly taken up by propaganda and cultural departments, the literary establishment and television producers (Zhang, 1994, cited in Keane, 1999: 254). At the commemorating ceremony of the CCP's seventieth birthday in July 1991, Jiang Zemin further clarified the official definition of mainstream melody works, emphasising the positive direction of these works which must reflect the spirit of the socialist era (Conceison, 1994: 193). While this definition remained vague and ambiguous, Keane (2002b: 124) explains that mainstream melody works are supposed to convey what the political authorities consider as important to the people and to offer a positive social message. In principle, the socialist mainstream melody work 'defines itself against those commercial products by promoting nationalism, collectivism and socialism to its audiences' (Hong and Xu, 2018: 309). The advantage of making such programmes are evident. They receive financial support from the government and have designated distribution channels. The government seeks to ensure that mainstream melody TV dramas are broadcast on China Central Television and provincial satellite TV channels at evening prime time (Yin, 2002). Moreover, government awards are frequently given to mainstream melody films, documentaries and TV dramas, as a gesture of state approval.

For the cultural workers, to produce mainstream melody works is no easy task. On one hand, as mentioned earlier, the official guidelines to cultural works are generally abstract, so that the producers need to rely on their interpretation of the Party's will and their professional knowledge to create such works. On the other hand, the comparatively conservative, didactic messages embedded in mainstream melody works are not necessarily what audiences like. When the central authority imposes its own content preferences upon producers, following the official requirements may thus lead to a loss in profits (Hong and Xu, 2018: 309). Even under such difficult conditions, cultural producers in China have cultivated a method to mitigate the conflict between commercial and political interests, especially in recent years, when independent production companies joined in the production of mainstream melody works. Knowing more about market conditions, they attempted to repackage propaganda using commercially successful elements, including depictions of non-traditional anti-heroes, the

integration of greater complexities into plots and characterisations, as well as Hollywoodised creative strategies such as popularised political narratives and myth-making (Ma, 2014; Hong and Xu, 2018: 311). According to Yu Dong, founder of China's prestigious production company, Bona Film Group Limited, the integration of commercial components with mainstream melody works must consider three key elements: famous actors, production techniques and experienced production teams (Zhang, 2018). It should be noted that in the recent decade, not only have the production methods progressed, but the topic of mainstream melody narratives has greatly diversified, incorporating not only traditional themes such as the revolutionary history of the Party, but also more realistic themes that reflect the contemporary life of ordinary Chinese people. Nevertheless, they are still created to promote the mainstream political and ideological goals such as patriotism, nationalism and loyalty to the Party-state.

In sum, the prevalence of popular culture has empowered the audiences in terms of shaping the cultural products that meet their demand of entertainment. This bottom-up approach has seemingly challenged the Party's control over content production. However, as Brady (2008) has insisted on, the Party-state is agile in capturing various new conditions and updating its propaganda strategies. Facing the increasingly commercialised cultural sphere, it has 'rejuvenated its capacity, via the market, to affect the agenda of popular culture' (Wang, 2001: 71). Such efforts include the promotion of mainstream melody works. To engage with the production of these works, Chinese cultural producers have to strike a fine balance between presenting mainstream melody spirits and satisfying popular cultural tastes.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the changing political, economic and cultural context in which the transformation of Chinese television took place. In the post-1978 period, along with the shifting focus of the Party line from class struggle to economic development, there have been dramatic changes in the television sector: the first is the development of a television industry, owing to the establishment of a market economy, domestic technological advancement, and exchange of TV programmes and broadcast techniques with the outside world; the second aspect features the growing commercialisation in television production and consumption, which was facilitated by the triumph of the television entertainment culture from the late 1990s. Through these changes, Chinese television has departed from its role as a propaganda instrument and evolved into a multi-functional industry that needs to balance the Party's purpose of using television for ideological guidance, the producers' creative freedom and obligation to make profits, and the audiences' demand for entertainment. By and large, the production of TV programmes has changed from a top-down, one-way model to a multi-way system that involves a negotiation between political and commercial interests.

These changes in the last four decades, generally termed the marketisation of Chinese television, ostensibly suggest a decline in the Party's ideological control or even a 'de-politicisation' of the television. But if we explore the dynamics of the marketisation of Chinese television, we immediately find that the whole process was proceeding under the close guidance and supervision of the Party-state. In fact, after a short period of ideological relaxation in the 1980s, the Party-state has strengthened its control of the media from the early 1990s onwards, and has proactively promoted its own agenda of socialist construction that essentially involves an emphasis on nationalism, patriotism and collectivism. These findings conform to Sun and Zhao's (2009: 98) observation of Chinese media transformation, which they characterise as 'an ambiguous and paradoxical process' that has witnessed the progressive applications of neoliberal strategies on the one hand, and the continuing and indeed intensified (re)articulation of China's socialist legacies on the other. Therefore, it is reasonable to point out the long-established socialist traditions pervading in the transformation of Chinese television, and to emphasise that there is no clear-cut boundary between the political missions and entertainment functions with regard to Chinese television. In the next chapter, I propose a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine TV dramas, a popular genre with great political significance, so as to shed light on the dynamics, conflicts, negotiations and continuities of Chinese television.

Chapter 4

Methodological Approach: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses of Chinese TV Dramas

In previous chapters, we have seen the continuing influence of socialist traditions in the transformation of Chinese television. Central to this influence is the CCP's ongoing emphasis on the propaganda mission of Chinese television, which is set to promote the Party-desired socialist values, such as nationalism, patriotism, collectivism, as well as the need to embrace a market economy and consumerism. In the transformation, we have also noted the tension and negotiation between the political use of television and the aspirations for more creative freedom and entertainment productions. This situation shapes both the form and content of Chinese television programmes. From this chapter onwards, we begin taking a closer look into the dynamics and content change in Chinese television programming, so as to facilitate a thorough and timely understanding of the status of and transformation in Chinese television.

To this end, I use this chapter to describe the methods I employ for the goal of giving a systematic micro-analysis of the nuanced changes in television content. Specifically, I propose an approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to examine TV dramas, a popular genre in China with great political significance. The advantages of combining quantitative and qualitative research are readily demonstrated by the benefits that such mixed methods research can offer: the combination of quantitative and qualitative research is able to triangulate or illustrate findings deriving from one approach, to offset the weakness of quantitative or qualitative components, and to bring out a more comprehensive account of the area of inquiry (for more information of the ways in which the two approaches are combined, see Bryman, 2012: 633-634). Building on the strengths of mixed methods research, this project aims to answer two sets of research questions:

1) What are the subtle changes and possible continuities in television content, as a result of the negotiations between propaganda and entertainment;
2) Why have these changes or continuities occurred?

In order to address these questions, this project first employs a quantitative content analysis to delineate long-term trends in a particular genre of television programmes (in this case, TV drama), and facilitate the sampling of cases for in-depth qualitative investigation. Secondly, drawing on the selection of TV dramas based on the quantitative findings, these qualitative case studies will provide a more detailed and intensive understanding of the transformations that have occurred in Chinese television over the sample period. In the following parts of this chapter, I first introduce the reason why I have chosen to analyse TV dramas and highlight

the significance of this genre in the Chinese context. Next, I discuss the quantitative and qualitative methods adopted in this project, including sampling strategies, data collection and analytical procedures. This chapter then concludes with a reflection on the strength and limitation of mixed methods research.

4.1 Researching Chinese TV dramas: A politically significant genre

As the goal of this project is looking into the nuanced changes and continuities in television content, which are viewed as the result of the ongoing negotiations between propaganda and entertainment, the research object must be TV programmes reflecting both purposes. Hence, any analysis should focus on a popular genre that has the potential to entertain viewers but also has a political obligation that is tied to the purpose of educating and influencing the people, either explicitly or implicitly. By this measure, TV news and current affairs are excluded, as they are normally loaded with explicit political messages and didactic undertones. Furthermore, it is in general less likely that audiences choose to watch daily news for amusement – although this does not rule out the possibility that entertainment elements are increasingly seen in news programmes, and that some audiences indeed watch soft news as part of their entertainment activities. For similar reasons, Chinese entertainment TV shows, reality-based documentaries and lifestyle programmes are not ideally suited to this analysis because they usually do not have a clearly defined political mission in their content and production. Compared to these TV programmes, China's domestically produced TV dramas, especially those broadcast at prime time by central and provincial TV stations, are demonstrably of greater importance in balancing propaganda, pedagogical and entertainment considerations.

It should be emphasised that Chinese TV dramas show similarities to and also noticeable differences from TV dramas in other contexts, particularly the Western context. With respect to narrative forms, Western TV dramas are often classified as either TV series or serials. Television series adopt a narrative mode that has a narrative closure concluding the main plot at the end of each episode (Corner, 1999: 57). By contrast, a television serial conventionally has a complete storyline that unfolds from the first episode and develops throughout the whole serials, with a cliffhanger at the end of each episode, which requires audiences to watch all episodes in order to follow the story (Dunn, 2005). According to this differentiation, Chinese TV dramas, particularly those broadcast during evening prime time, are mostly serials (*lianxuju*), running daily from Monday to Friday (sometimes to Sunday) and then continuing through the following weeks until the last episode. A TV serial broadcast in the early 1990s normally contained twenty to thirty episodes on average, but this number has risen to over fifty episodes in recent years, owning to improved production abilities and increased budgets. These TV dramas have continuous narratives from one episode to another, a fixed group of characters and a closed storyline. What is distinct about Chinese TV dramas is their production

and distribution context. As with other TV programmes, the production and distribution processes are subject to strict censorship procedures. A TV drama script has to pass an initial proposal review by the afore-mentioned SARFT, so as to move on to the production stage; after that, the complete TV drama needs to go through an 'end-product' check by the SARFT again, so as to receive a distribution license (Zhu, 2008: 11). Even after the drama begins broadcasting, the State Administration retains the right to take it off the air, if the programme is believed to run counter to the official ideological line.

The significance of Chinese TV dramas is twofold. First, Chinese TV dramas have enjoyed large viewership and long-lasting popularity among Chinese audiences, regardless of their ages, educational levels and professions (Zhu, 2008), and for this reason Party officials believe that this narrative genre has noticeable 'political significance and impact' (Yin, 2002: 32). Second, the popularity of the TV dramas in China provides a profitable and stable market to the industry, and hence an indispensable resource for television entertainment. As noted by Keane (2005), serialised narrative techniques adopted by the dramas, their relevance to real-life experience and the development of characters and plots, are all key elements to attract and preserve audience interest. These advantages in turn form the basis of using TV dramas to facilitate Party propaganda and social education.

This instrumental use of TV drama has been associated with the Party's policies on television broadcasting in general, and on drama production in particular. Chinese TV drama has been involved in the grand project of constructing socialism since the first day it was produced. The first TV drama, *A Mouthful of Vegetable Cake* (*Yi kou caibingzi,* 1958), was a single-episode play created to promote the official agenda on saving food, and hence has a noticeable function of political education (Zhu, Keane and Bai, 2008b: 4). After a period of turbulence in television broadcasting caused by the Cultural Revolution, more TV dramas in the reform era are believed to have incorporated propaganda messages. Relevant examples include *Yearnings* (*Kewang*, 1990), which represents the effort of the Party to reconstruct socialist moral standards (see Rofel, 1994, and chapter 8 of this thesis). Some historical-political dramas are also highlighted by scholars (Zhu, 2008; Bai, 2008; Bai, 2014) for their contribution to the legitimisation of the Party's leadership, by either envisioning an ideal image of political leaders or directly depicting the Party's devotion to addressing social issues. As mentioned in chapter 3, Party elites began promoting the so-called 'mainstream melody works' from the late 1980s, including TV dramas as above in order to navigate popular entertainment productions towards the direction desired by the Party. Mainstream melody TV dramas, either reflecting the revolutionary history of the Party or representing the contemporary socialist good life, make up the majority of the prime-time TV dramas aired on national TV channels, including central TV channels such as CCTV-1, and provincial-level TV channels like Hunan TV.

As noted in chapter 3, national broadcasters have worked on developing their unique programming strategies since the early 2000s, in order to secure an advanced position in the national TV market. This suggests that the dramas selected and broadcast by these TV stations will be indicative of different extents of political supervision, commercial considerations, as well as different concessions to audience interests. In the next two sections, I will elaborate on how I selected TV dramas for quantitative and qualitative studies, and detail the analytical methods I have used.

4.2 Quantitative content analysis

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the first research question is designed to map the long-term trends and patterns in television content through a systematic investigation of prime-time TV dramas. Quantitative content analysis is useful for quantifying messages and identifying the trends, patterns and changes within them (Neuendorf, 2002), which makes it a good option to deal with the first research question. The statistical results generated by this method can reveal the evolution and dynamics of the content of TV dramas, which will help infer the relations between television dramas and the wider political, economic and cultural contexts – thereby addressing the second research question outlined previously.

For the quantitative content analysis, the aim is to examine how Chinese prime-time TV dramas have disseminated the messages desired by the Party as part of the duty to fulfil the propaganda function of television, and at the same time have committed to providing entertainment. Given that different levels of TV stations might adopt varying programming strategies, and that entertainment production has become an irresistible trend in the recent production and consumption of Chinese television, the overarching question can be split into specific sub-questions:

- Do TV dramas broadcast by different TV stations demonstrate different patterns and how do these differences map onto differing political and economic positions within the Chinese TV system (e.g. between those channels that have a more commercial orientation and those that have the strongest ties to the Chinese state)?
- Do certain TV channels with ties to the central government display more explicitly political content than provincial ones?
- Is there a trend indicating an increase in entertainment production?

4.2.1 Sampling strategies

The prime-time TV dramas for the quantitative study were sampled from CCTV-1 and Hunan TV. Following the overview of Chinese television in chapter 3, it is obvious that these two TV channels are both run by state-owned national broadcasters, subject to two

interlocking supervision systems – the Party's ideological control and government regulation, but operate as enterprises that seek for advertising revenue. They are both satellite TV channels whose TV programmes can reach the cohort of national audience from the same geographical location in mainland China. Also, as noted in chapter 3, the main differences between the two TV channels lie in the varying degrees of political supervision of their content production and their respective branding strategies. As the flagship TV channel of the central television, CCTV-1 has been the main site of facilitating the Party's propaganda work. By comparison, Hunan TV has sought to build its brand by featuring entertainment production ever since it was founded in 1997. Based on this distinction, the two TV channels are supposed to have different imperatives in selecting programmes for evening prime time. To sample prime-time TV dramas from each thus provides an opportunity to examine how the supposedly different programming strategies have led to varying dynamics, tensions and compromises between television propaganda and entertainment.

The sampling period starts on 1 January 1992 and ends on 31 December 2017, for the purpose of conducting a long-term investigation. I have taken 1992 as the starting point because the socialist market economy was officially established in this year. Since then, the marketisation process has initiated the formation of a double identity of Chinese television as both a politicised mouthpiece and a player on the economic market. Although such a transition was not immediately effective, scholars generally consider 1992 to have been 'a dividing point in the Chinese reform movement', which included media reform (Winfield and Peng, 2005: 256). As Hunan TV was not launched until January 1997, the starting date for sampling Hunan TV dramas is set on 1 January 1997, so as to reflect the long-term change on this TV channel since the first day its programmes went on air.

To map the whole picture of the trends and patterns, the sample included all prime-time TV dramas aired on either channel during the respective sampling periods. Documentary series were excluded from this sample, due to the consideration that this project only investigates TV dramas that deal with fictional stories or artistic representations of non-fictional people and events. Following this strategy, I collected the titles of TV dramas in the sampling dates from *China TV Guide* (*Zhongguo dianshibao*, published by China Central Television) during my field trips to China. Although there are occasional discrepancies between the schedules printed on the TV guide and programmes broadcast in real time, these are not of a scale to undermine seriously the validity of the research sample.

4.2.2 Units of analysis

The complete sample consists of a total of 1018 prime-time TV dramas from the two TV channels. In this sample, each TV drama is treated as a unit of analysis. It should be noted that a majority of these units are long drama serials containing more than ten episodes.

However, there also appeared a small number of mini serials (less than ten episodes) and one-episode dramas among the sampling units, particularly in the 1990s. This was due to the limited production capacity at that time. To produce mini serials and one-episode dramas was more feasible for Chinese TV producers than to make long drama serials. Hence the former two genres filled in a great proportion of the evening prime-time slots before 1998. However, from 1998 onwards, both CCTV-1 and Hunan TV tended to broadcast only long serial dramas, such as the 44-episode TV serial *Yongzheng Dynasty* (*Yongzheng wangchao*), aired on CCTV-1 in 1999.

4.2.3 Coding scheme

Each drama is coded in terms of a number of features, such as the broadcasting platform (CCTV-1 or Hunan TV), main theme, producer, period setting of the drama etc. Among the variables listed above, I am particularly interested in the themes. What theme each TV drama is centred on largely predicts what function the TV drama is expected to fulfil. For instance, Keane (2005) observes that Chinese television entertainment in the twenty-first century has incubated new popular drama genres which centre on interpersonal relationships. According to this observation, it is possible to presume that dramas revolving around love and romance are dedicated to entertainment purposes, whereas dramas dealing with explicitly political issues, such as the Chinese revolution led by the CCP, are produced primarily for propagandistic purposes.

To identify the theme of TV dramas, I drew on SARFT's categorisation of domestic TV serial dramas (SARFT, 2008). This official categorisation is provided for national TV producers, when they prepare to submit a TV drama script for an initial review by the SARFT. This categorising method involves two dimensions of categories – period setting and main theme. The first dimension measures the historical setting of each drama, according to their narrated historical period:

1. Contemporary era (*dangdai*) – from the economic reform in 1978 to present
2. Modern era (*xiandai*) – from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to 1978
3. Republican era (*jindai*, from *Xinhai* Revolution in 1911 to 1949)
4. Ancient times (*gudai*, before *Xinhai* Revolution)

The second dimension measures the main theme of dramas. In this categorisation, dramas are differentiated in terms of the subject matter represented by them. For instance, dramas depicting the development of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the modern era (1949-1978) are labelled 'military themes in the modern era' (*xiandai junlü ticai*); dramas reflecting the development of people's life in rural areas since the reform era are labelled 'rural

themes in the contemporary period' (*dangdai nongcun ticai*). There are also other categories to describe the main theme of dramas, such as 'love and romance', 'family' etc., which are listed below. Among these themes, there is a unique category labelled 'important theme' (*zhongda ticai*). This category specifically refers to the politically important theme prescribed by the SARFT, namely the revolutionary history of the CCP. Therefore, in my categorisations, I integrated the 'important theme' of the revolution with other themes identified from the official guideline, and retained 'period setting' as a separate measurement. Main themes include:

1. The revolution led by the CCP before the founding of the PRC
2. Military development – reflecting the development of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)
3. Rural life – the construction and development of the rural/remote areas in China
4. Biopics of role models recommended by the CCP, including political leaders, Party members, and other important historical figures
5. Love and romance – focusing on romantic relationships and courtships
6. Family – reflecting family ethics and the relationship between family members
7. Children/student life – focusing on school education and the growing up of children
8. Crime – including anti-corruption drama and cop drama
9. Economic reforms – reflecting enterprise reform and entrepreneurship in the post-1978 era
10. Dynasty drama set in the imperial courts of ancient China
11. Martial arts
12. Other

However, as Bryman (2012: 297) maintains, 'while such categorisations are often relatively straightforward, when the process of coding is thematic, a more interpretative approach needs to be taken.' This would require the analyst to 'probe beneath the surface' so as to make judgements (ibid.). In my case, each drama usually contains more than one theme – one might be dominant and others subsidiary. For instance, while some TV dramas are devoted to the representation of the revolutionary history, they also have a focus on depicting love and romance among the revolutionaries, which seems equally important for the storyline (see chapters 6 and 7). In such cases, in order to minimise the uncertainty about which category to employ, each drama was assigned to two categories according to the primary or secondary theme demonstrated by them. For other variables in this content analysis, the reader can find a full version of the coding schedule and coding manual attached in Appendix 1.

All data were processed using a computer programme – SPSS. While quantitative content analysis has often been criticised for only providing descriptive information, it nevertheless

offers clear trends and propositions regarding the patterns embedded in the text of TV dramas. As we shall see in the next chapter, the two TV channels have their own preferred themes when selecting dramas: the theme of love tops the prime-time dramas on Hunan TV, whereas CCTV-1 has screened a considerable amount of dramas concerned with revolution. These findings, discussed in further detail in chapter 5, have provided useful guidance to the selection of TV dramas for case studies.

4.3 Qualitative case studies

In order to provide an intensive and extensive analysis that could take us beyond a schematic overview of long-term trends, I have adopted qualitative case studies. The method of case study is especially useful in analysing the relationship of a phenomenon and its context (Yin, 2003). In this sense, while the quantitative analysis of TV dramas has provided evidence to capture the general trends, changes and patterns, the qualitative case studies aim to give in-depth analyses that cover the content, production and reception of selected TV dramas. Specifically, I approached to each case with a central focus on the relationship between aspects of plot and characterisation and their relations to the prevailing socio-political context of the times they were produced in. This was supported by a range of textual analysis techniques (e.g. narrative analysis) and approaches additionally used where of particular relevance to specific programmes (e.g. soap opera and gender approaches in the love and romance dramas). Key questions included the representation of propaganda messages, and the utilisation of popular elements and entertainment formulas in the programmes. Similar to the quantitative content analysis, the case studies were conducted in a comparative approach, in an attempt to identify continuities and changes over time.

4.3.1 Case selection

First, the selection of cases drew on the quantitative findings. As will be shown in more detail in chapter 5, the quantitative analysis has identified two prominent themes in prime-time TV dramas – love and revolution, which represent two important directions of Chinese television propaganda and entertainment in the last twenty-six years. The theme of revolution can best embody the propaganda imperatives of the Party, in the sense that dramas depicting the revolutionary past are expected to contribute to the legitimacy of the Party's rule over China. On the other hand, love-themed dramas reflecting the interpersonal relationships between lovers have been viewed as an essential part of television entertainment. In these regards, I selected two sets of TV dramas having either revolution or love as their dominant main theme. What needs to be emphasised is the possibility that, as noted in the previous section, a TV drama representing the revolutionary history may also incorporate extensively romantic plots as one of its narrative threads. This situation precisely conforms to the

phenomenon identified in chapter 2, which entails the intertwining process of propaganda with entertainment (see chapters 6 and 7).

The second criterion for case selection is periodisation. I roughly divided the sampling period into three periods of time: 1992-2002, 2003-2012, 2013-2017; and then selected one TV drama with the main theme of revolution or love from each of the three periods. The three phases were established in relation to the leadership transitions and hence to different Party lines; also, the three periods mirror the paramount leaderships of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. As outlined in chapter 3, the period from 1992 to 2002 saw rapid development of the market economy and the emergence of its associated social issues; the period 2003-2012 featured the propagation of a socialist harmonious society and a resurgence of Chinese traditional culture, particularly Confucianism; from the end of 2012 to present, the official ideological line has been oriented towards realising the 'Chinese dream' of national rejuvenation. These changes in the political context have set the backdrop for China's media reform in general, and for the transformation of Chinese television in particular. Therefore, it is reasonable to explore whether TV shows produced in different periods demonstrate distinct temporal features.

Aside from the factor of political change, the years around 2002 and 2012 also marked important moments of media change. By 2003, most provincial-level television stations had transformed into media conglomerates, for better engaging in transnational competitions after China's admission to the WTO. In the domestic TV market, the fierce competition forced provincial satellite TV channels to develop branding strategies and find their niche markets. Following this change, the production and distribution of TV dramas from the early 2000s, became more profit-driven and entertainment-oriented than before. A decade later in the early 2010s, online streaming services had begun to severely affect traditional TV consumption. TV sets were no longer the only platform for watching TV content. More audiences flocked into online streaming platforms for all kinds of programmes. Consequently, competing for audience attention had become a top priority for all national TV stations and their producers, which further intensified the trend of commercialisation and entertainment. Given these changes in the media sector, choosing dramas from different periods is also important to understand the nuanced dynamics of television production and consumption.

The third criterion for case selection is representativeness. The dramas selected have received either official recognition or widespread popular interest. I refer here to two prestigious Chinese TV drama awards – the *Feitian* Award, a government award granted by SARFT, and the *Jinying* Award, which is based on audience votes. It should be noted that from 2000 onwards, the *Jinying* Award came to be jointly organised by the Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the government of Hunan Province, SARFT's Hunan bureau, Hunan TV, as well as other supervisory bodies. This indicates that the decision on *Jinying*

Awards is eventually the result of a negotiation between official expectations and audience preferences. Nevertheless, the *Jinying* Award to a great extent reflects the popularity of TV dramas. There are also some dramas which did not garner *Jinying* Awards but were very popular with wider audiences. I also included these, as indicators of audience interest.

Based on the above discussion, I have selected eleven TV serial dramas for in-depth case studies (Table 4.1). It should be noted that the English titles included in this table are the ones used by the producers, distributors, programme schedulers, etc. Some of them might not be the best translation, e.g. War of China's Fate – a more accurate translation of the Chinese title would be 'Decisive Battles over China's Future'. However, considering the former has already been used for international promotions and appeared in International Movie Database (IMDb), I decided to use the best-known English names.

	Revolution		Love	
	CCTV-1	Hunan TV	CCTV-1	Hunan TV
1992-2002	***War of China's Fate*** (*Zhongguo mingyun de juezhan*, 1999[15])	N/A	***Holding Hands*** (*Qianshou*, 1999)	***Women in Beijing*** (*Beijing nüren*, 2000)
2003-2012	***Eighth Route Army*** (*Balujun*, 2005)	***Struggles in an Ancient City*** (*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*, 2005)	***My Youthfulness*** (*Wo de qingchun shui zuozhu*, 2009)	***Meteor Shower: Season 2*** (*Yiqi youkan liuxingyu*, 2010)
2013-2017	***On the Taihang Mountains*** (*Taihangshan shang*, 2015)	***The Disguiser*** (*Weizhuangzhe*, 2015)	***My Year of 1997*** (*Wo de 1997*, 2017)	***The Interpreters*** (*Qin'ai de fanyiguan*, 2016)
	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4

Table 4.1: Eleven TV dramas for in-depth case studies

As we see from this table, there are only two dramas featuring the theme of revolution on Hunan TV, respectively selected from the latter two periods, 2003-2012 and 2013-2017; no revolutionary drama comes from the first period (1992-2002). This is due to the limited number of revolutionary dramas aired on Hunan TV during this period. Of only four dramas regarding the revolution between 1997 and 2002, two had been previously broadcast by CCTV-1, and

[15] The year enclosed in the brackets represents the year the programme was premiered on relevant TV channels. Besides, the Chinese names of the TV dramas are also included here for readers' information.

the copies of the other two are not available to track. Hence, I decided to skip the first period and only focus on the latter two periods.

These eleven TV dramas are either award winners or hit dramas with high viewing ratings. The viewing ratings were retrieved from information released by CSM Media Research – a specialised company dedicated to TV and radio audience research in mainland China and Hong Kong.[16] While these cases are representatives of successful TV productions blessed by the government, critics and/or audiences, they also belong to a large number of prime-time TV dramas watched by Chinese audiences every day. None of them triggered government censorship or was forcefully taken off the air. It is reasonable to say that these programmes have been running in politically sanctioned discourses. In this sense, a qualitative study of them can provide insights into the sanctioned content of Chinese television throughout the last twenty-six years. The general information of these TV dramas (including the director, production year, original work, adaptation information, storyline etc.) will be given in empirical chapters 6-9. Meanwhile, readers can also find a filmography attached in Appendix 2.

4.3.2 Analytical procedures

The analytical methods in the case studies combine narrative analysis procedures and propaganda analysis, facilitated by not only the textual information of the programme, but also a variety of secondary sources that offer insights into the relationship between the texts and their production and reception context. Particularly, I wish to identify the ideology and meaning embedded in the texts of TV dramas, thereby establishing links between aspects of plots and characterisation and the dominant political and cultural contexts in which the dramas were created.

The case studies aim to inquire into how a prime-time TV drama fulfils the multi-dimensional purposes of satisfying the state, making profits and entertaining the audience. There are four case studies in total, encompassing all eleven TV dramas selected (as in Table 4.1): the first case is concerned with revolutionary dramas aired on CCTV-1 (chapter 6); the second case study works on revolutionary dramas broadcast by Hunan TV (chapter 7); the third one looks at love-themed dramas on CCTV-1 (chapter 8); and the last case study is about examples of the same genre on Hunan TV (chapter 9).

For each case study, I started from a narrative analysis of the basic structural elements in the TV dramas: characters. I paid attention to different types of characters (e.g. protagonists, antagonists, third parties etc.), analysing how their actions drive the plot and inform the

[16] CSM Media Research, commonly known as *Yangshi suofurui*, is a joint venture mainly co-funded by CTR Market Research (*Yangshi shichang yanjiu*) and Kantar Media. It provides real-time rating information for mainland Chinese television stations, and these data are sometimes published and retrievable at mainstream websites in China, such as Sina Entertainment (*Xinlang yule*).

audience about certain messages. As Vladimir Propp (1984) noted in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, character actions and the function of these actions serve as the basic units to tell a story. Analytical concepts from structuralist narratology, e.g. Lévi-Strauss's binary-opposition model, were also used to analyse different types of character. But unlike the structuralist approaches that focus more on the text, I intended to establish connections between the text and the wider context. As stated by Fulton (2005: 110), characters in TV serials are normally modelled on particular types of people existing in reality, so that an analysis of their behaviour and action can shed light on the social context and their position within the society. In this way, the analysis of characters and plots would serve as a springboard to access more information with regard to the political purpose, commercial consideration and institutional strains associated with a TV programme.

In principle, the narrative analysis was conducted for the purpose of facilitating propaganda analysis. Hence, the analytical focus was on the ideological function of characters and plot. Through an interpretation of the ideological dilemmas encountered by the characters and their choices, I would be able to identify the meaning embedded in this particular representation, thereby inferring the messages disseminated by the producer or the propagandist. For instance, I am interested in the way a Communist leader was portrayed in order to draw empathy from the audience; I am also attentive to details where special techniques were used to maximise the effect, such as the increased proportion of depicting the human side of political leaders in the TV drama (more details in chapter 6).

Certainly, propaganda analysis cannot work well without making reference to the contextual factors outlined in chapter 3. For each case study, I extensively drew on secondary information from various news media, websites, online databases, official documents, as well as important yearbooks, so as to explain the particular development of plot and characters. In addition to identifying potential propaganda purposes in the drama, I also worked on teasing out temporal changes and/or continuities in narrative forms and showing their links to the trend of popular entertainment. Besides, I applied some analytical methods from gender studies and literature on other TV genres to my case studies, in an attempt to map out the influences of various TV genres and popular formats on Chinese TV dramas (see my discussions on soap opera and gender dimensions in chapters 8-9).

In sum, the four case studies were grounded in China's political, economic and cultural transformations over the last few decades, aimed for connecting specific TV programmes to the uniqueness of the period in which they were produced. The corresponding four chapters are not isolated from each other, but rather are organised in a comparative way and with a historical perspective in mind. This means in the case studies, I not only compared the differences between the two TV channels in broadcasting the same theme, but also examined the development in the narrative forms of one theme within the three periods discussed above.

While much focus was given to the differences and changes in TV dramas, I was also attentive to similarities and continuities. In so doing, I would be able to demonstrate where the enduring emphasis of the socialist-style Chinese television lies.

4.4 Conclusion: Strengths and limitations of mixed-methods research

In this chapter, I have highlighted the two research questions of this project, illustrated the importance of analysing Chinese prime-time TV dramas, and introduced the methodological approaches. Because the research questions examine two dimensions, one concerned with the changes and continuities in Chinese TV dramas on the textual level, the other in relation to contextual settings, I have opted for a mixed-method investigation which comprises a quantitative content analysis and four qualitative case studies. The content analysis aims to quantify prime-time TV dramas aired on CCTV-1 and Hunan TV from 1992 to 2017, in an effort to identify key trends and patterns embedded in the main themes of the dramas. The quantitative findings invite a closer inquiry into the internal dynamics between production, representation and consumption, and the four qualitative case studies of eleven TV dramas have been designed for this purpose.

The advantage of this research design is that, as mentioned at the outset, mixed methods can compensate for the limitation of using one approach. In this project, qualitative case studies can provide more evidence to support and explain the results generated from the quantitative content analysis. At the same time, the quantitative findings also provide a rationale for selecting cases for the in-depth case studies. Overall, the two approaches contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the transformation in Chinese prime-time TV dramas throughout the last two decades and a half.

However, it is important to acknowledge that ‘mixed methods research is not intrinsically superior to mono-method or mono-strategy research’ (Bryman, 2012: 649). Especially when it comes to the consumption of time and resources, mixed-methods research runs the risk of investing lots of time and efforts while getting unrelated results. To avoid situations like this, I had to make sure that the process of data collection and analysis only served to answer the research questions, so as to prevent from wasting time in searching or processing unnecessary information. Besides, employing mixed methods in a project would also confront the question of how to best integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings. Rather than separating the two components, as suggested by Bryman (ibid.), the researcher is expected to make them speak to each other throughout the project and bring the findings together. To tackle this issue, I have managed to present and discuss my quantitative and qualitative findings in an interrelated way in the following chapters and particularly the concluding chapter.

Chapter 5

Revolution and Love: Two Prominent Themes on Prime-time Chinese Television

In this chapter, I present and discuss the findings of my quantitative content analysis. The key importance of the content analysis is to chart change and continuities over time, so as to demonstrate the evolvement of Chinese television from a micro perspective. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I sampled prime-time TV dramas broadcast on CCTV-1 and Hunan TV from 1992 to 2017, and treated each specific TV drama, regardless of the number of episodes, as a unit of analysis. Hence in this chapter, the central question is how the content of these dramas has changed over the sampling period. In delineating the trends and patterns in television dramas, I also seek to make a temporal comparison between the two TV channels, and then map the findings against the complex framework of television propaganda, education and entertainment in China. In the following parts of this chapter, I first highlight the differences in the political and economic positions of the two TV channels and thus predict the possible trends in their programming strategies. This is followed by a presentation of the quantitative findings, with a special focus on the annual patterns of revolution- and love-themed dramas. Next, I draw on the theoretical and contextual information outlined in chapters 2 and 3 to explain these findings, and as a conclusion highlight the necessity of conducting in-depth case studies.

5.1 CCTV-1 VS Hunan TV: Political, economic positions and programming

From previous discussions about the structure of Chinese television system and its recent commercialisation, we find that different levels of TV stations have varying degrees of freedom to pursue commercial interests, even though ideological supervision and government regulation are always in place. In such situations, negotiations between the political interests of the Party-state and the commercial interests of TV stations constantly occur as part of the day-to-day routines of Chinese TV practitioners, which may lead to shifting programming strategies and affect the delivery of television content. Based on this observation, I have compared the content of TV dramas on two different levels of national broadcaster – CCTV-1, the central, and Hunan TV, the regional, to shed light on the nuances and complexities within Chinese television system. Before turning to the results of content analysis, I first outline the unique political and economic positions of the two TV channels, thereby providing hypotheses on their potential differences in programming.

5.1.1 CCTV-1: A political apparatus and government enterprise

As noted in chapter 3, CCTV-1 is the flagship channel of China Central Television, placed under direct ideological supervision of the state administration and the CCP's Central Propaganda Department. Hence it is positioned first and foremost within the political apparatus of the Party-state, set at the forefront of serving the Party's national propaganda work. This means that market reforms within CCTV-1 must be carried out in an extremely careful manner. As recalled by Yang Weiguang, former director of CCTV, in the early 1990s, even attaching a TV commercial to *News Bulletin* was no easy task, running the risk of being criticised for commercialising serious news programmes (Zhu, 2012: 29).

Yet in recent years, this situation has changed significantly due to the powerful influences from marketisation in nearly every aspect of Chinese society. As mentioned in chapter 3, market reforms at CCTV in the early 2000s nurtured a series of specialised CCTV channels working on a typical commercial *modus operandi*: they are allowed to purchase non-news programmes from the national TV market; and the broadcasting of TV programmes is financed through advertising revenue. That said, CCTV operates not only as a political institution but also as a government enterprise: specifically, CCTV's business and commercial activities are managed through its wholly owned commercial entity, China International Television Corporation (CITC). The market-oriented units of CCTV have formed several subsidiaries of CCTV/CITC, including a listed company, China Television Media Ltd (CTM) (Zhong, Y., 2010). But it should be noted that this listed company, while jointly owned by many investors including China Agriculture Bank, China Foreign Trade Trust etc., is placed at the bottom of CCTV's organisational hierarchy and thus does not have any chance to intervene into the operation of CCTV channels (ibid.: 655).

Obviously, what has been excluded from the commercial operation system were CCTV's news centre and public service units. These latter components are fully owned by the Party-state; and the production of news programmes is still closely controlled by the government, continuing to serve the traditional propaganda and educational functions. CCTV has therefore transformed into a mixture of 'a commercial entity and a state-controlled national network with a cultural mandate' (Zhu, 2012: 38). However, despite the frequent measures of 'separating production and broadcasting' within the television sector, the boundaries between ownership and operation, between public service and market-oriented sectors have remained blurry at CCTV until the present day (ibid.: 33). For this reason, the cultural tastes and interest of CCTV's audiences also remained largely subordinate to the state's interests and priorities.

Compared to news programmes, the selection and broadcasting of prime-time TV dramas generally confront less political constraints, yet still need to avoid transgressing the official ideological line. The ground rule of selecting prime-time dramas for CCTV-1 is that the chosen programmes must promote the mainstream melody, spread positive social views and embody the socialist core values (Liang, 2015: 10). This means, these programmes have to meet the

criteria of the afore-mentioned 'mainstream melody dramas'. Although such requirements still seem vague, CCTV producers have managed to make programming plans several years in advance, which estimate the amount and approximate broadcast time of several politically important themes (ibid.). These themes closely coincide with national commemoration days, such as the founding anniversary of the CCP. The programming schedule released beforehand is aimed at attracting qualified drama productions from within the industry. Apart from these 'customised' TV dramas for specific political purposes, CCTV-1 also transmits other themed dramas during prime time, such as historical dramas set in imperial China and romantic themes.

Since CCTV-1 continues to be characterised as the mouthpiece of the Party-state, one would expect that dramas aired on CCTV-1 are heavily associated with propaganda purposes by showcasing large amounts of politically relevant dramas. At the same time, Chinese media scholars (e.g. Bai, 2005) have also noted that while the trend of popular entertainment is sweeping through the Chinese television system, CCTV-1, arguably the least entertainment-oriented channel, has started developing promotional strategies to attract more audiences, such as moving the scheduled broadcast time for prime-time dramas to earlier time slots, as well as purchasing and producing audience-favoured genres. In this case, it is reasonable to explore whether such promotional strategies adopted by the CCTV have also been reflected in the changing pattern of broadcast content. Based on these hypotheses, the first set of questions regarding CCTV-1 are elaborated as follows:

(1) Are dramas broadcast on CCTV-1 more likely to contribute to political[17] agenda-setting, by representing a considerable amount of politically relevant content?
(2) Among the TV dramas on CCTV-1, is there a trend indicating an increase in audience-favoured themes that are not explicitly propagandistic?

5.1.2 Hunan TV: A 'real commercial' broadcasting system

As discussed in chapter 3, Hunan TV, as a provincial satellite TV channel and part of the Hunan Broadcasting System (HBS), is subject to the regulation of the Provincial Radio TV Bureau in Hunan and receives ideological guidance from the provincial branches of the Party's Propaganda Department. Hence in comparison to the Central Television, it is only remotely

[17] In the field of political communications, there has been a growing academic interest recently in extending the range of 'politics' – which was conventionally associated with public affairs, into the private sphere, such as feminist theorists' argument that 'the personal is political too' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2005). However, it should be noted here, the 'political' agenda mentioned in this thesis refers to issues falling into the conventional definition of the political realm, such as the promotion of socialism and nationalism, the justification of government policies, etc. In chapter 8, I will discuss in further detail how the private sphere in the Chinese TV dramas has also been linked to the socio-political issues in the public realm.

supervised by state-level governing bodies. Besides, when this satellite TV channel went on air in 1997, entertainment immediately became the key element in its branding strategy (Keane and Zhao, 2015). It is thus less likely to be tied to national political missions. These aspects have prepared conditions for Hunan TV to adopt a model of utterly commercial operations.

Indeed, the economic interests of Hunan TV have been placed at the heart of its operation. Similar to CCTV-1, the market-oriented business of Hunan TV is managed by a designated media company, Hunan TV & Broadcast Intermediary Co Ltd (HTBI). However, where this operational model differs from CCTV-1 is in the relationship between Hunan TV and HTBI, a company that has been listed on the Shenzhen Exchange since 1999. As mentioned earlier, CTM, the CCTV-controlled listed company has extremely limited access to CCTV content. By contrast, HTBI controls and manages all core business of Hunan TV, notably content (esp. drama) production and trading (Zhong, Y., 2010: 661-662). Although the largest share of HTBI belongs to the Provincial Radio TV Bureau, a majority of the stock (56.51%) is owned by other commercial investors which theoretically have the power to ally against the interests of the provincial government bureau (ibid.: 659-660). This ownership structure of Hunan TV suggests that government control of this TV channel needs to make more room for commercial interests, and thus far less prominent than that in CCTV-1. Therefore, Hunan TV has been identified as 'a real commercial television broadcaster in communist China' that has nation-wide reach and influence (ibid.: 666).

The reason why Hunan TV is allowed to adopt such a flexible operational model, whilst comparatively less bounded by political control, is generally believed to relate to the geo-economic status of Hunan province (Zhong, Y., 2010; Huang, 2006). This province is located in the less-developed area of southern-central China, and thus its TV station is permitted extra autonomy to conduct an experiment with wholesale marketisation, so as to contribute to the revenue of the state-owned broadcasting system, and more importantly, build a strong media group that can compete with foreign media flows (see Huang, 2006).

In terms of content, Hunan TV places great emphasis on the commercial return gained through content innovation. As Ouyang Changlin, president of Hunan TV once noted, content innovation is the lifeline of Hunan TV (Zhu, 2012: 208). In order to create original programmes that can generate enormous commercial returns, Hunan TV has extensively borrowed foreign formats and TV genres, even though such efforts were often accused of infringing copyright (more details in chapter 9). Following this strategy, Hunan TV originated a series of highly popular entertainment TV shows in China, such as *Happy Camps* (*Kuaile Dabenying*, 1997-present), *Super Girls* (*Chaoji Nüsheng*, 2005-2006). The success of Hunan TV not only lies in its creative spirit and commercial experiments, but also in the ways that these moves have shaped the directions of national television entertainment culture. Hence, Hunan TV is

arguably the pioneer of Chinese entertainment television, which makes it a strong competitor to CCTV-1 on the national TV market.

The commercial strategy of Hunan TV has determined its mode of engaging the audience. Unlike CCTV-1, which has to prioritise the Party's political imperatives, Hunan TV operates on the basis of the entertainment pursuits of the audience. In 2003, it further refined its branding and launched the project of 'Happy China' (*Kuaile zhongguo*), aiming to provide entertainment content specifically to the young generation across China. From then on, 'youth, entertainment and the national market' have become three important dimensions in their commercial considerations and programming strategies (Zhu, 2012: 204).

In previous chapters, we have seen that Chinese television entertainment in the new century incubated new drama genres focusing on the cosmopolitan lifestyle and interpersonal relationships of the emerging urban middle class. Most of these TV dramas are particularly dedicated to young female audiences by depicting romantic relationships and emotional pursuits. Such romantic drama genres should be absorbed into Hunan TV's programming strategy as a consequence of their popularity with the niche audience. On the other hand, Hunan TV does not operate in a vacuum. As mentioned in chapter 3, its experiment with commercial operations often draws criticism from Beijing regulators, which leads to constant revisions of programme content and the continuing exploration of new formats. Therefore, it is important to examine if and how this entertainment provider adjusts itself to the Party's political control and propaganda imperatives. Here are the two questions associated with Hunan TV:

(3) Are dramas on Hunan TV primarily centred on entertaining audiences by showing lots of romantic themes?
(4) Are there any propaganda-related themes on Hunan TV; and if yes, how are they distributed on this TV channel?

5.2 Sampling, coding and intercoder reliability

As discussed in chapter 4, the sampling period for the content analysis starts from 1992 which marked the starting point of the market-oriented reforms in Chinese media system. Moreover, since Hunan TV was founded in January 1997, the sampling on this channel commences from 1997. The key rationale for the sampling was to facilitate the analysis of how different levels of Chinese TV channels began to embrace the market in the post 1992-period, while at the same time coping with control from the political authorities.

The sample included 574 prime-time TV dramas from CCTV-1 and 444 from Hunan TV. As introduced in chapter 4, each drama is treated as a basic unit of analysis; and the theme of the entire drama is my primary concern for coding and analysis. This is because the theme of

a prime-time TV drama largely determines what functions the programme is expected to fulfil. Drawing on the thematic categorisations given by the SARFT, in my coding process, I have identified eleven categories (see chapter 4 and below) to measure the theme of each drama. In order to assign the dramas into categories, I collected the basic information of the sampled TV dramas from relevant websites, TV Guides and newspapers. Based on the main description of each drama from these recourses, and also according to my own experience of watching those dramas, I was able to put the dramas into different categories of theme. It should be noted that each drama has had the opportunity to be assigned to two categories (coded twice), in accordance with the dominant and subsidiary theme demonstrated in the drama. When there was no clearly secondary theme in the drama, it has been coded once. For instance, dramas depicting the revolutionary struggles led by the CCP were put into the category 'revolution'; in the meantime, if the revolutionary drama involved depictions of protracted military conflict, as well as the development of the CCP-led army, it was also put into the category of 'military development'. By and large, most of the dramas falling into the latter group were about the People's Liberation Army in the post-1949 era.

Furthermore, 'rural life' referred to dramas reflecting the development of rural areas in China, mostly set in the countryside. The category 'role model' was for those biographical dramas with a real-life figure as its central character, in which his/her good deeds or historical achievements were highly praised by the Party-state. 'Love and romance' referred to dramas adopting a large amount of romantic plot and revolving around the romantic entanglements between the leading characters. Family dramas focused on family ethics and relationships in domestic settings. In the event that love dramas involve extensive depictions of family relations, and family dramas show abundant depictions of the romantic love, these dramas were coded twice and put into both the two categories.

Next, dramas reflecting children's life and their schooling experience were labelled 'children/student'. The category 'crime' included both anti-corruption drama and cop drama. The theme 'economic reform' referred to the dramas (*gaigeju*) displaying enterprise reform and the emergence of entrepreneurship in the post-1978 era. 'Dynasty' drama – also known as *wangchaoju*, or *gongtingju* – is a specific drama genre with the story set in the imperial courts of ancient China. This term is interchangeable with 'historical period drama', or 'costume drama', but the Chinese TV genre has its period setting specifically tied to the feudal times in Chinese history and features emperors and empresses. The last theme 'martial arts' was used to describe dramas having martial arts as their central plot and main selling point. Most of the martial-arts dramas (*wuxiaju*) in this sample adopt the form of costume drama and are set in a past time period.

For the purpose of evaluating the reliability of this categorisation, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted on fifty-five dramas randomly extracted from the sample. This subset was

coded twice by me with a two-month interval. Krippendorff's Alpha for two coders showed a high level of agreement for the variable 'theme 1' (dominant theme): 92.7%, α=0.918; and a comparatively lower level of agreement for the variable 'theme 2' (subsidiary theme): 83.6%, α=0.809. The latter was primarily due to the confusion about whether or not I should assign a secondary theme to some of the TV dramas. But overall, the results of the test have suggested the reliability of this coding.

5.3 Key findings of the content analysis

Following are two sets of analysis with regard to the distribution of these themes over the sampling period. As I will show in the analysis, I not only compare the distinct distribution of different themes on CCTV-1 and Hunan TV, but also delineate the trends and fluctuations of selected themes on a yearly basis, notably the themes of revolution and love.

5.3.1 Distribution of different themes

As Figure 5.1 shows, the first thing to note regarding the distribution of different themes is the strikingly high percentage of TV dramas with romantic themes, not only on Hunan TV (64.41%, n=286), but also on CCTV-1 (36.06%, n=207).[18] This finding already indicates that

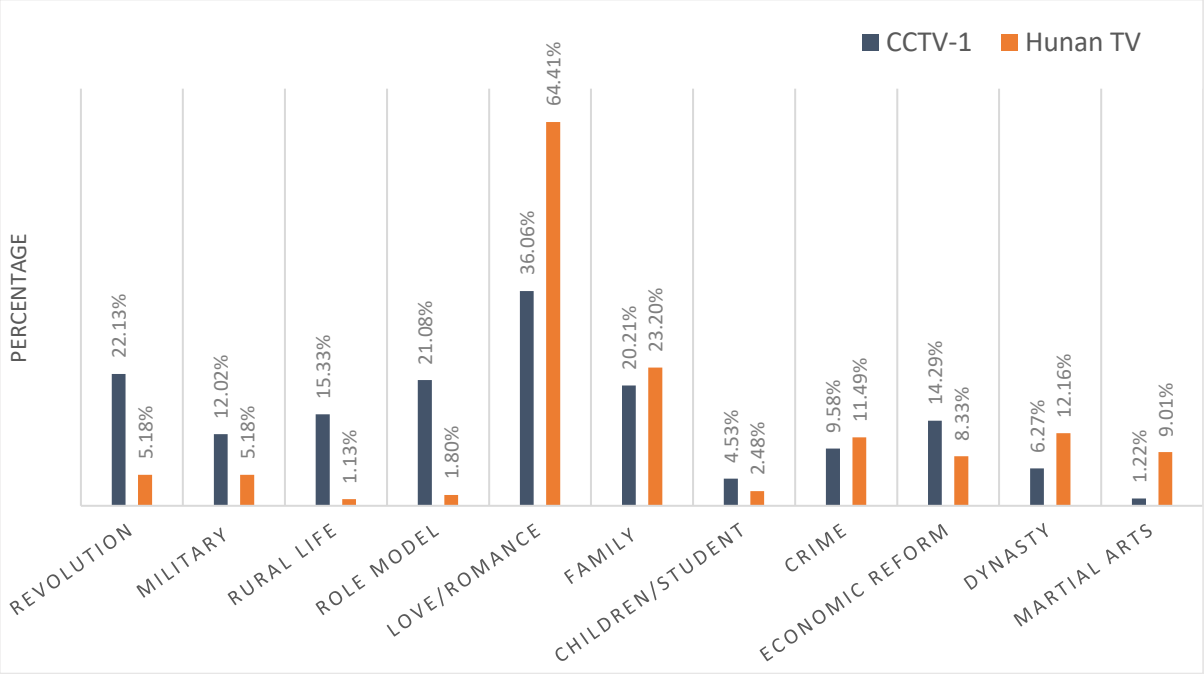

Figure 5.1: Distribution of different themes on CCTV-1 and Hunan TV, 1992-2017

[18] The percentage in Figure 5.1 was calculated on the basis of the number of themes appeared in TV dramas. For example, the number of love themes counted from Hunan TV was 286, meaning that a sum of 286 TV dramas had the theme 'love/romance' against the total 444 prime-time dramas sampled on Hunan TV from 1997 to 2017. Hence the percentage for 'love' on Hunan TV shows 64.41%. In addition, because each drama might have more than one theme, the 268 love themes included the amount of both dominant and secondary themes. For further details about the number and percentage of themes, see Table 5.2 on the following page.

even though CCTV-1 is closely tied to the Party-state's propaganda mission, it has still allocated the largest proportion of the prime time to broadcasting dramas with the theme of love and romance. This is at least consistent with the predominant function of TV drama, which is to entertain the audience using popular formats and themes.

Despite this shared feature, differences in the distribution of the other themes are also evident. Table 5.2 shows the specific number and corresponding percentage of each theme on the two TV channels. Among the dramas broadcast at CCTV-1's prime time from 1992 to 2017, those depicting the revolution led by the CCP and the biopics of role models account for the second- and third-largest proportions – 22.13% (n=127) for revolution and 21.08% (n=121) for role models. Since these two themes are closely tied to the Party's propagandistic agenda of commemorating the revolution and praising Communist role models, this result conforms to our expectations of the propagandistic use of this TV channel.

In contrast to CCTV-1, the distribution of themes in Hunan TV prime-time dramas shows marked differences: apart from the romantic theme, the other two most prominent themes include 'family' and 'dynasty' (Table 5.2). This is to say, from 1997 to 2017, there have been 23.20 percent (n=103) of the dramas focusing on family life, and 12.16 percent (n=54) of the dramas revolving around the struggles and conspiracies in ancient dynasties of China.

CCTV-1 (1992-2017)				Hunan TV (1997-2017)			
Themes in descending order		n	%	n	%	Themes in descending order	
1	**Love/romance**	207	36.06	286	64.41	**Love/romance**	1
2	Revolution	127	22.13	103	23.20	Family	2
3	Role model	121	21.08	54	12.16	Dynasty	3
4	Family	116	20.21	51	11.49	Crime	4
5	Rural life	88	15.33	40	9.01	Martial arts	5
6	Economic reform	82	14.29	37	8.33	Economic reform	6
7	Military	69	12.02	23	5.18	Military	7
8	Crime	55	9.58	23	5.18	Revolution	7
9	Dynasty	36	6.27	11	2.48	Children/student	9
10	Children/student	26	4.53	8	1.80	Role model	10
11	Martial arts	7	1.22	5	1.13	Rural life	11

Table 5.2: The number and percentage of themes on CCTV-1 and Hunan TV, 1992-2017

(n= the number of times a theme appeared in TV dramas; up to two themes could be coded per drama)

Furthermore, revolution and role model dramas on Hunan TV have taken up much smaller proportions than those on CCTV-1, with only 5.18% (n=23) featuring the revolution and 1.80%

(n=8) focusing on biopics of role models (Table 5.2). This result suggests that dramas showing clear propagandistic agenda – by either glorifying the revolutionary past of the CCP or praising the role models, have been among the least popular, and possibly least profitable themes on Hunan TV. Thus, it becomes evident that programming on this TV channel was mostly centred on providing light entertainment rather than disseminating political messages.

The overall pattern in Figure 5.1 also shows that the percentages of different themes on CCTV-1 were comparatively evenly distributed – possibly for the purpose of balancing the needs for TV entertainment, Party propaganda and social education. By contrast, those on Hunan TV show an overwhelming preference of love themes, whereas proportions of other themes were considerably lower. It suggests that programming on this channel is more blatantly driven by the popularity and consequently, commercial values of TV dramas.

5.3.2 Annual patterns of different themes

The temporal comparison of trends shows a more complex picture. From the analysis above, we noted that the varying proportions of different themes were generally consistent with the differing political and economic positions of the two TV channels. In order to further highlight the contrast and potential similarities between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV over time, I have chosen the themes of revolution and love to conduct a longitudinal analysis. This comparison is also facilitated by the annual patterns of other prominent themes, such as role model, family and rural life on CCTV-1.

As showed in Figure 5.3, the two trendlines suggest that love and revolutionary dramas aired on CCTV-1 have both seen a moderate growth in their yearly percentages before 2015, which implies that the proportion of other themes have declined correspondingly during the same period. This assumption is somehow supported by results in Figure 5.4, where we can see a downwards trend particularly in the themes of role model and rural life.

In Figure 5.3, it is worth noting the relative dominance of love themes to 'revolution' in the period 1992-1997 and the period 2000-2009. This shows the popularity of love-themed dramas in both the two periods on CCTV-1. The high percentage of love themes in the first period can be linked to a genuine public interest in the dramas depicting the emotional life of people. As we shall see in chapter 8, such a fervour for love themes initiated from a 1990 serial drama *Yearnings* (*Kewang*, also known as *Aspirations*), which was arguably the first Chinese domestic TV drama centred on the love experiences of ordinary people. The sensation caused by this drama has encouraged the production of many similar dramas in the early 1990s. The dominance of love themes between 2000 and 2009 suggested the continuing influence and great market potential of this popular genre, especially in the phase of market-oriented media reforms.

Equally important in Figure 5.3 is the annual pattern of the revolutionary theme. Even though dramas with romantic themes accounted for larger proportions in most of the twenty-six years, the percentages of revolutionary dramas surpassed the former or saw a significant surge in certain years (i.e. 1999, 2005, 2010 and 2015). These dynamics precisely coincided with the Party's propagandistic agenda of building nationalism and patriotism in these politically important years: 1999 was the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the PRC, and the years

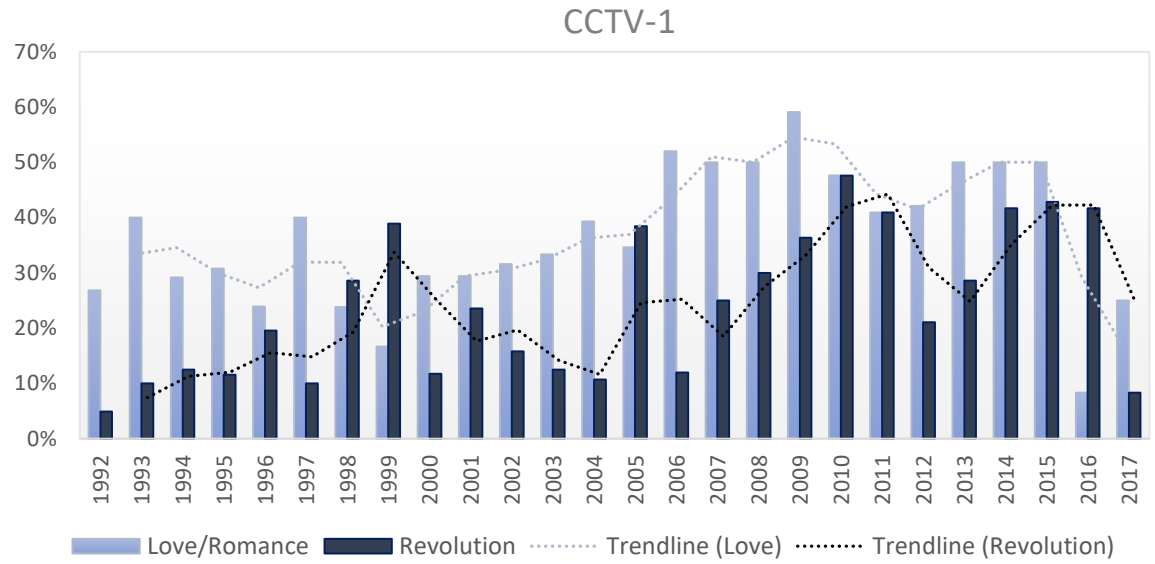

Figure 5.3: Yearly percentages of love and revolutionary dramas on CCTV-1, 1992-2017

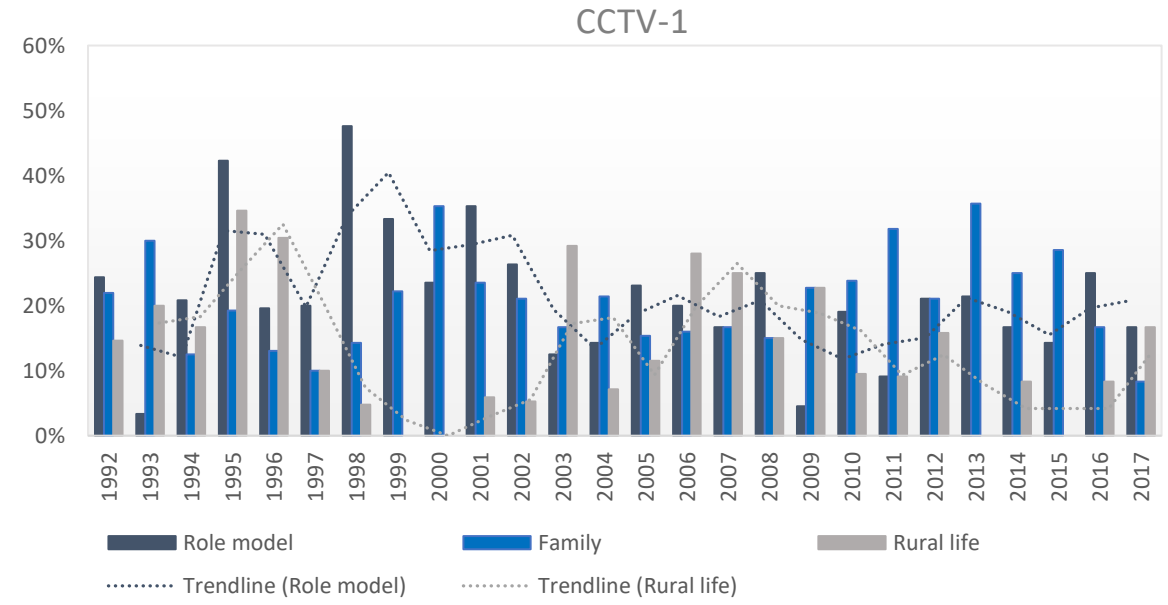

Figure 5.4: Yearly percentages of 'role model', 'family' and 'rural life' dramas on CCTV-1, 1992-2017

2005, 2010 and 2015 respectively marked the sixtieth, sixty-fifth and seventieth anniversaries of China's victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945, also known as Anti-Japanese War and World Anti-Fascist War in mainland China). It thus becomes evident that CCTV-1 particularly preferred to broadcast large amounts of revolutionary dramas in these years, in order to contribute to both the Party's propagandistic agenda and national commemorative events.

Last but not least, in Figure 5.3 we can also find the collapse of 'love' then 'revolution' in the years 2016-2017. For revolutionary dramas, this periodic drop in their yearly percentages was not uncommon throughout the twenty-six years. Yet the vertiginous decrease in love themes might reflect a change in the programme strategy of this channel in recent years. Notably, as Figure 5.4 shows, the decrease in the themes of revolution and love from 2015 onward was accompanied by a mild increase in the percentages of role model and rural life dramas. This can be seen a consequence of the tightened media control, as well as government's emphasis on the propaganda and educational function of central and provincial television stations in the 2010s.

On Hunan TV, the yearly percentages of revolutionary and love dramas have shown marked differences over the sampling period (Figure 5.5). The paucity of revolutionary content on Hunan TV relative to CCTV-1 is quite prominent. Despite the vastly different proportions, this graph also shows similar patterns to CCTV-1: there has been an overall upwards trend in the percentage of both love and revolutionary dramas over the sampling period. Besides, as with CCTV-1, during particular periods, notably in 2005, the percentage of love-themed dramas declined, whereas the proportion of revolutionary dramas increased. This fluctuation likewise indicated the influence of the propaganda imperatives set by the Party, even though Hunan TV has conventionally given priority to broadcasting romantic serials rather than political themes. After 2005, the percentage of love dramas returned to its previous high levels and correspondingly, the revolutionary theme went back to its low proportions.

Yet, it is also noticeable that from 2010 onwards, dramas with love themes have seen a gradual decline in the annual proportions (Figure 5.5). Comparatively, there have been steady proportions of revolution-themed dramas broadcast on this TV channel throughout the 2010s. This dynamic also seems to relate to the increasingly tight political control over the media system during this period, and particularly to the criticism drawn by Hunan TV for its 'excessive entertainment tendency', as discussed in chapter 3. The change in the political and media context very likely had an impact on the programming strategies of Hunan TV and thus led to the adjusted proportions of different subject matters.

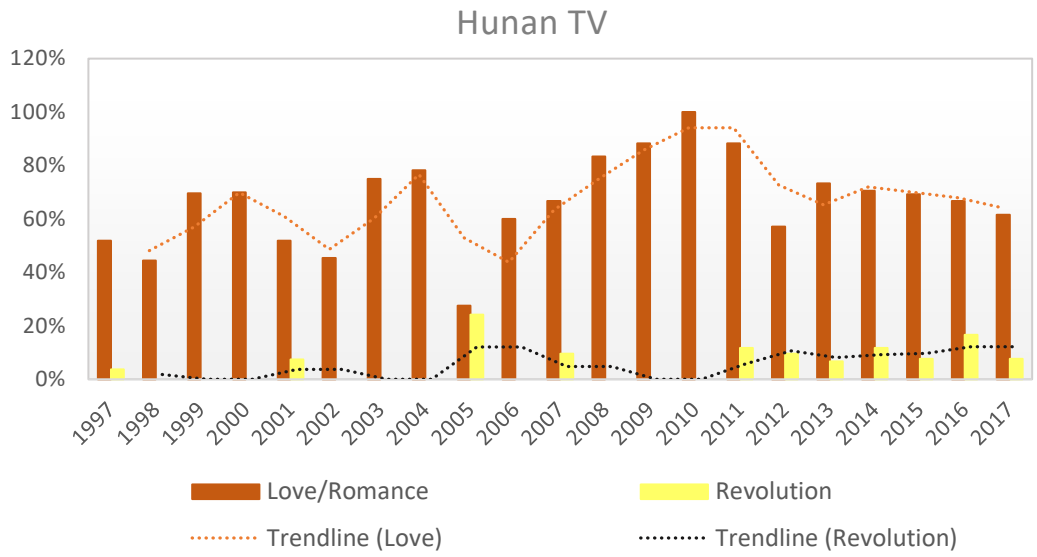

Figure 5.5: Yearly percentages of love and revolutionary dramas on Hunan TV, 1997-2017

On the whole, the breakdown of the two themes by year has demonstrated an important common feature between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV, which reflects the difference between everyday broadcasting and particular programming strategies in politically important periods. Although the Communist revolution is possibly not an ideal programme type to help Hunan TV increase advertising revenue, this TV channel still attempted to broadcast small amounts of revolutionary dramas in order to comply with the Party's propagandistic agenda – this trend has been especially obvious in the recent decade. By contrast, CCTV-1 has made more contributions to promoting the revolutionary achievements of the CCP throughout the sampling period. This pattern reflects the overall impact of the Party-state's propaganda requirements on TV programming in the Chinese television system, though its effectiveness seems to vary from central TV channels to regional channels. Moreover, it is also evident that love dramas have become a long-lasting popular genre favoured by both the two TV channels, which has been demonstrated through the higher percentages of love dramas during most of the sampling period. Despite this, we have also noticed a downwards trend of love themes in the 2010s. In the next section, we turn to a detailed discussion of the quantitative results with reference to the background information outlined in previous chapters, so as to answer the questions listed at the outset of this chapter.

5.4 Discussion: Differences and similarities between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV

Prime-time television arguably occupies the most valuable time slot in a day for either recreational purposes or the timely indoctrination through political ideas. As the results presented above demonstrate, the two TV channels have utilised prime-time TV dramas for both purposes. To what extent did the two TV channels with varying political and economic

agendas devote to the Party's propaganda work and/or commit to providing entertainment? The comparative analysis above has demonstrated remarkable differences but also similar trends between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV.

The most prominent difference lies in their programming orientations. This is demonstrated through the different proportions of variously themed TV dramas on the two channels. As we find in the statistical overview, CCTV-1 has tended to broadcast a larger number of politically relevant content (e.g. the CCP's revolutionary history and role models to be emulated), whereas Hunan TV has given priorities to themes that were popular with the (young) audience (e.g. romantic love, family life, and conspiracies in imperial courts). These results confirm the hypotheses in relation to questions (1) and (3) in that CCTV-1 has proved to be the main site for Party propaganda, whereas Hunan TV has primarily been an entertainment provider.

This differentiation between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV is not simply because of the divergent branding strategies adopted by these satellite TV channels or because of their different areas of specialisation. Rather, it reflects the impact of marketisation on the Chinese media system, as well as the varying degrees of political supervision and creative freedom that result from the negotiation between Party control and market forces. Hence, the above contrast between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV also embodies the contradictory transformation of Chinese television: the central government sought to boost the development of the Chinese television industry by making concessions to certain managerial and creative liberties, while also trying to maintain political control over the television sector (see Zeng and Sparks, 2019: 65). Besides, my findings have reflected the multifaceted functions of Chinese television in the post-reform era. Despite being a politicised propaganda tool, it can also entertain the audience, while at the same time generating enormous financial profits. This observation also resonates well with Colin Sparks's (1997; 1998) analysis of the media systems in socialist Central and Eastern Europe, where loosened state control, advertising activities and more entertainment content were observed in the socialist media systems in the face of the influences from market reforms and foreign broadcast signals.

The quantitative analysis also shows several common patterns and trends between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV. The first similarity is the high proportion of love-themed dramas broadcast on both channels. Even though revolution and role models have been two prominent themes, taking up high percentages on CCTV-1, the percentages of love themes were remarkably higher during most of the period since 1992. Particularly, the annual breakdown of love dramas on CCTV-1 showed an overall increasing trend in their percentages. This suggests the consistent popularity of love themes since they were made in the early 1990s. These results have important implications not only in terms of the pressures placed upon CCTV-1's producers by the market, but also for our understanding of the all-encompassing influence of popular entertainment culture in post-1990 China.

As noted earlier, the producers of CCTV-1 need to run the channel as an enterprise and make it more profitable, particularly through non-news programmes like prime-time TV drama. Aside from being politically correct, the content of CCTV-1 prime-time dramas must thus be attractive to the audience. Otherwise the viewing figures would decrease, which would potentially undermine the competitive strength of the central government's medium. One important tactic to attract audiences is to incorporate entertainment content that offers excitement, enjoyment and satisfaction into the prime time. As discussed in chapter 3, China began embracing a consumer culture in the 1990s, wherein the political and educational functions of high culture have given way to the entertainment function that was widely accepted by the Chinese public. A key feature of this entertainment culture is its indulgence in enjoyment and provision of satisfaction. The love-themed dramas produced since the early 1990s have shown much relevance to the real-life experiences of audiences, but represented them in dramatic forms based on binary conflicts between love and hatred, success and failure. This would provide audiences with symbolic satisfactions in terms of issues that could not be solved in real life. This function of the love-themed dramas thus precisely echoed the traits of contemporary entertainment culture. It also explains why TV dramas depicting the emotional life and romance, rather than those filled with propagandistic or educative content, were more likely to grab the audiences' attention and resonate with them. Although from the findings above, we did see clear drops in the percentage of love themes on both channels in recent years, it was more likely affected by tightened political control rather than decreased audience interest in this subject. Therefore, these findings largely confirm the hypothesis in question (2): there was indeed a notable increase in themes favoured by the audiences (especially love) that are not explicitly propagandistic among the CCTV-1 dramas.

The second significant similarity between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV is the changing pattern in the proportions of revolution-themed dramas over time. On both CCTV-1 and Hunan TV, we can spot occasionally sharp increases in the percentage of such dramas – and correspondingly, reductions in the proportion of love dramas. This was often the consequence of responding to the Party's propaganda imperatives in certain, politically important years. For instance, in May 2005, the CCP Central Committee issued a notice on commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of China's victory in the Anti-Japanese War (Renminwang, 2005). Apart from proposing to organise nation-wide ceremonies, themed exhibitions, and group visits to historical sites, the Party also required the media sector to showcase selected films, television programmes, and literary works, which centre on upholding patriotism and nationalism, promoting the significance of the victory of the Chinese people, and acclaiming the great historical achievement of the CCP in leading the Chinese people to victory. Thus, the broadcasting of abnormally large proportions of prime-time revolutionary dramas can be considered part of these celebrations. Similar commemorative events initiated by the Party's

Central Committee were also prominent in 2015, when the country celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the victory. It is worth noting that, four revolutionary dramas in the following case studies were selected from 2005 and 2015 respectively.

Furthermore, this similar pattern of responding to political influence also suggests that Hunan TV, a regional TV channel committed to providing entertainment content, likewise needs to align itself with the Party's propaganda initiatives by showcasing explicitly propagandistic content, at least during the commemorative periods. This finding provides an answer to question (4). While Hunan TV has been granted a larger extent of autonomy, it is obliged to respond to the political control from Beijing regulators and meet the Party's propaganda goals – otherwise it would trigger censorship and thereby disturb the normal running of this profitable TV channel. This reflects the bottom line of adopting a thorough commercial operation within the Chinese television system.

At the same time, the contrast between everyday broadcasting and 'festive' programming during special commemorative periods has demonstrated distinctly socialist television temporalities, and hence bears a resemblance with the temporal features found in the socialist televisions of Central and Eastern Europe. As noted by Mihelj and Huxtable (2016), the rhythm of socialist festive programming was primarily tied to secular holidays, such as New Year, rather than religious holidays like Christmas. More prominently, festive programming was also a feature of politically important holidays that were specifically linked to the communist vision of history and progress, such as Red Army and Navy Day (February 23) and Victory Day (May 8) in the Soviet Union (ibid.: 345). During these festivals, television schedules in the (former) socialist states were combined with a significantly greater proportion of programmes designed to commemorate the revolutionary achievements of the past and anticipate the glorious future (ibid.). As we find from the above quantitative results, similar scheduling practices have also been prominent in contemporary socialist China: while CCTV-1 and Hunan TV have both shown a long-lasting interest in broadcasting romantic themes at the evening prime time, they have also increased the proportion of revolutionary dramas in response to major state celebrations. Although this research does not provide a detailed analysis of the festive programming over a calendar year among Chinese television channels, the existing analysis nevertheless has shown the distinct temporalities of socialist TV, which were closely related to the political agendas of the party-state. In this regard, it is plausible to argue that the temporal preferences seen from Chinese television in many ways coincide with those of other (former) socialist television systems.

Overall, the above comparative analysis between CCTV-1 and Hunan TV has suggested the different degrees of political control, commercialisation and freedom of production existing in the Chinese television system. Through the analysis, we find that Party control placed upon regional television stations, such as Hunan TV, is comparatively flexible, due to the increasing

pressures from market forces and, of course, due to the central government's insisting on the development of the television industry. Yet, such a relaxation in Party control does not lead to a retreat of the Party-state from the television sector. Rather, as suggested by the case of Hunan TV, the precondition of extensively adopting commercial operations within Chinese television sectors is sticking to the bottom line of the Party-state by being subservient to the Party's political needs. At the same time, we cannot ignore either the economic pressures on television practitioners or the power of popular entertainment in recent decades, which have largely enriched the programming of a widely-known mouthpiece – CCTV-1. Because of the continuing intertwining of Party logic and market logic within the Chinese media system (Zhao, 1998), Party propaganda and popular entertainment, as embodied by the revolution- and love-themed prime-time dramas, have become more than ever juxtaposed on Chinese television.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the results of my content analysis, which delineate the proportions and annual trends in the prime-time TV dramas with various subject matters. Particularly, I have focused on two themes – revolution and love, because they are seen to be the most prominent themes across the entire sample. In the meantime, they represent two explicit orientations of television stations in relation to the tension between propaganda and entertainment. In so doing, I intended to map the programming of CCTV-1 and Hunan TV onto their distinct political and economic positions. The quantitative findings have fleshed out the intertwining process of Party propaganda and popular entertainment in television programming: while CCTV-1 has abided by its political mission by broadcasting large amounts of revolution-themed TV dramas, there has also been a trade-off between its political obligations and commercial interests; while Hunan TV has been granted more autonomy in its commercial operations, and its programming has primarily centred on providing audience-friendly entertainment, it has also shown allegiance to the Party's propaganda work by promoting nationalist themes during politically important commemorative periods.

The quantitative findings thus not only offer a temporal comparison within the Chinese television sectors, illustrating varying degrees of political supervision, commercial operation and concessions made to popular entertainment, but are also helpful in linking the differences, similarities and changing patterns found from the two TV channels to the wider political, economic and cultural transformations taking place in China in recent decades. Furthermore, the results of the analysis also correspond to recent research on socialist television in Central and Eastern Europe, and I have noted intriguing similarities between Chinese television and other (former) socialist television systems.

However, the quantitative results only allow conclusions as to general trends and dynamics. They cannot reveal the nature of propaganda and/or entertainment messages delivered through TV drama. Besides, the quantitative analysis so far has been premised on considering revolution and love as two distinct indicators of propaganda and entertainment. This has ruled out the possibility that revolutionary TV dramas also have the potential to become entertainment by incorporating more entertaining elements in its narratives and promotional strategies, and the assumption that romantic dramas are sometimes injected with implicitly propagandistic meanings. As the quantitative analysis only tells us so much, we will turn to the qualitative case studies to further examine how the plot, characterisation and narrative forms of the selected dramas navigate between propaganda and entertainment.

Chapter 6

Patriotism, Nationalism and Historical Figures: Revolutionary Dramas in CCTV-1

Serial television dramas reflecting the revolutionary history of the CCP have long been favoured by the political elites of mainland China as a crucial part of the Party's propaganda work that aims to legitimise Party leadership. Most of these TV dramas are set in the historical periods of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the subsequent Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) fought between the CCP and the KMT[19] led by Chiang Kai-shek. In Chinese history, there were two phases of the Chinese Civil War. The first one lasted from 1927 to 1937, ending with the formation of a united front between the CCP and KMT to fight the Japanese invaders. The second phase of civil war lasted from 1945 to 1949, finishing at the establishment of the PRC by the CCP and the retreat of the KMT troops to Taiwan, hence also known as the Chinese Communist Revolution.[20] Because establishing a 'new China' means such a significant military and political achievement for the CCP, the second phase of civil war thus more often became the main theme of state-sponsored propaganda works.

The revolution-themed dramas mainly depict the political leaders of the CCP and the 'revolutionary masses' at war, with a focus on the efforts and sacrifices that the Party made to establish the Communist regime. Since TV drama became one of the most popular narrative forms in the 1990s, the revolutionary history has been an indispensable theme on the screen. As noted in chapters 3 and 4, some of these TV dramas belong to the genre of 'mainstream melody works' that are sponsored by the Party-state through financial backing and guaranteed broadcasting platforms. These drama productions are called 'significant revolutionary and historical themes' (*zhongda geming lishi ticai*), specifically designed to meet the propaganda imperatives of the Party-state during periods of national celebration (e.g. National Day on 1 October and anniversaries of the CCP's founding day). As CCTV-1 still plays the role of Party mouthpiece, it has become the main site to air these dramas.

In this chapter, we focus on a selection of this type of domestically-made revolutionary dramas which were broadcast on CCTV-1 during different periods: *War of China's Fate* (1999), *Eighth Route Army* (2005), and *On the Taihang Mountains* (2015). As noted in previous

[19] KMT is short for *Kuomintang* of China, which literally means Chinese Nationalist Party. In mandarin, *Kuomintang* is also spelled as *Guomindang*, abbreviated as GMD. For consistency in writing, I use KMT to refer to Chinese Nationalist Party throughout this thesis. After losing the civil war, the KMT retreated to Taiwan, becoming the dominant political party until democratisation in the late 1980s, and remained one of the major ruling parties in Taiwan until present.

[20] It should also be noted that due to different political positions in the civil war, mainland China and Taiwan name the war differently. According to the official media in mainland China, the second phase of the civil war is called 'War of Liberation' (*Jiefang zhanzheng*).

chapters, the objective of conducting qualitative case studies is to provide a more detailed and intensive understanding of the transformations and possible continuities that have occurred in Chinese television over the sampling period. Based on the three dramas, this chapter aims to explore how state-initiated, ideologically supervised propaganda dramas represent the revolutionary history in order to disseminate the Party's propaganda messages. At the same time, in a longitudinal perspective, this chapter also examines what changes have taken place in the television content because of the profound economic, political and cultural transformations. In what follows, I will first introduce the background of the mediated revolutionary discourse associated with the Party's propaganda work, illustrating its particular narrative conventions, and then turn to an in-depth analysis of the selected revolutionary dramas, with a special focus on the unique features demonstrated by those broadcast on CCTV-1.

6.1 The revolutionary discourse and Chinese TV drama

The construction of a revolutionary discourse can be seen in many media forms in China and has been a long-lasting strategy employed by the CCP to legitimise its power and leadership. In times of war, secret pamphlets and posters were the primary media for persuading peasants and workers to overthrow their landlords and the capitalists, thereby joining the revolution. Artistic forms were equally important for the revolutionary mobilisation at the time, including theatrical performances, singing, cross-talks (*xiangsheng*), rhythmic comic talks (*kuaibanr*) (Cai, 2016b; Xie, 2016). These artistic performances not only provided leisure time and relaxation to the soldiers, but more importantly, they explained to peasants what class struggle was and why it was necessary, as well as envisioned a bright and victorious future, which could encourage the soldiers and the revolutionary masses to devote themselves to the war.

After the foundation of the PRC, propaganda films and literary works – termed 'Red Classics'[21] (*hongse jingdian*) in the reform era – became the primary means of utilising the revolutionary legacies to promote Chinese socialist values. By representing the revolutionary history, the 'Red Classics' were devoted to delivering the messages that 'only the CCP can save China', and that 'only socialism can develop China' (Yu, 2013: 168). For the people who lived in the 1950s and the 1960s, these cinematic and literary works largely shaped their identities and collective memories regarding the country's history (Cai, 2013). Even in the post-reform period, when the newly introduced discourse of marketisation seemingly undermined

[21] The Red Classics loosely refer to a set of artistic works produced in response to Mao's Yan'an talk in 1942. These include literary and cinematic works, songs, etc. which mainly reflect the life of socialist workers, peasants and soldiers through the depiction of the revolutionary movements led by the CCP. Of these, the most famous ones are the eight 'Revolutionary Model Plays' (*geming yangbanxi*, more details in chapter 7).

the revolutionary discourse, the revolution remained a solid resource for the Party's claim to legitimacy. As Zhao (2011, cited in Veg, 2012: 42) observes, the Party continues to draw inspiration from the revolutionary legacy and uses it strategically for contemporary politics, despite embracing market reforms in the meantime. This strategy seems especially useful when the market reforms reached a stage where various social conflicts were exposed and threatened to undermine the CCP's leadership. At such points in time, the revolutionary narrative was believed to be able to bring the people back to the symbolic moment when 'the CCP saved China', and thus remind them of the achievements of the Party. In this way, any drawbacks in contemporary politics can be downplayed by emphasising the Party's past merits. Therefore, the revolutionary discourse was not only necessary during war time, but has continued to serve as a key mechanism for alleviating contemporary conflicts and sustaining the Party's rule.

As discussed in chapter 4, Chinese TV dramas have a long history of serving propaganda purposes. However, because of the interruption in Chinese television broadcasting during the Cultural Revolution, it was not until the early 1980s that the Central Television stations restored the production of TV dramas and launched the first domestically made TV serial, *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* (*Diying shiba nian*, 1981). This nine-episode TV serial was also the first drama production adopting the revolutionary narrative and thus containing propagandistic elements. It depicts the heroic deeds of a Communist Party member, Jiang Bo, who has secretly worked as an undercover agent in the KMT camp and provided important military intelligence to the CCP, thereby contributing to the Communist takeover of mainland China. Although this topic shows strong alignment with the Party's propagandistic agenda, at the time the drama received criticism from the political authorities for its tendency towards entertainment, notably its dramatic tension and excitement – which in the eye of the political authorities were something related to 'capitalist spiritual pollution' (Yin, 2002: 30). As noted in chapter 3, the political control over Chinese media system became comparatively relaxed in the 1980s, and foreign imports began appearing on the Chinese TV screen; however, the political authorities remained anxious about potential negative consequences brought by the TV programmes from abroad, particularly the West. It was also because of this concern that the Party-state launched the aforementioned 'mainstream melody works' in the late 1980s. This state initiative can therefore be viewed as a measure to re-adjust political control in the film and television sectors on the one hand, and a tactic to make the demand for entertainment beneficial to the Party's leadership on the other hand.

The early 'mainstream melody' films and TV dramas that followed the revolutionary narrative include *The Birth of New China* (*Kaiguo dadian*, 1989) and *The Death of Qiubai* (*Qiubai zhi si*, 1987). These productions either focus on depicting milestone events in the Party-state's historical development or pay tribute to the Communist Party leaders and important Party

members. According to Cai (2013), they have provided a hegemonic reading of history and of the collective memory of the revolutionary past for national audiences. Because these productions are concerned with the history of the Party-state, they are subject to stricter ideological control and supervision by SARFT's special leading team (led by members of the CCP Central Propaganda Department) than other TV and film productions.

However, these state-promoted revolutionary narratives have become increasingly at odds with the trend towards popular entertainment since the 1990s. As noted in chapter 3, a key change in the television culture from the 1980s to the 1990s was the waning of the political and educational function of Chinese television and the emerging emphasis on television's entertainment value. Following such changes, the presentation of the revolutionary past in a propagandist and didactic tone seemed incompatible with the tastes of contemporary audiences, especially the young generations, who prefer entertaining, exciting materials rather than serious political topics. In addition to the discrepancy between the Party's goals and the audiences' interests, the main site for broadcasting the revolutionary dramas, prime-time television, is gradually losing its power in gathering audiences due to the advancement of digital technology. That audiences are now equipped with various portable devices to watch TV at any time poses another threat to the effectiveness of propaganda through revolutionary TV dramas. As Keane (2015) observes, most Chinese audiences nowadays enjoy online binge-watching, whereas fewer continue to look at television screens. Therefore, the telling of revolutionary stories in a serial, daily form on prime-time TV competes with various online platforms and resources, which further increases the difficulties in producing and promoting such 'mainstream melody' works.

As a result of the new situation brought about by the market economy, the Party's propaganda strategies have become increasingly flexible and adaptable to the new media environment (see chapter 3). This has given Chinese media practitioners and creative producers ample autonomy to engage in media and artistic creations and, notably, to repackage propaganda works using popular elements. Consequently, there have been prominent examples in recent Chinese cinema retelling revolutionary history and selling it to the people, which has not only fostered nationalist sentiment in the country but also provoked a growing academic interest. Sebastian Veg (2012) has analysed two state-sponsored blockbusters about Mao Zedong (*The Founding of a Republic*, *Jianguo daye*, 2009; *The Founding of a Party*, *Jiandang weiye*, 2011). He finds that both films rely on famous actors from Greater China, restructure historical events, and use a combination of revolutionary narratives and popular entertainment elements to retell the story of Mao Zedong, thereby acknowledging Mao's contribution to establishing the modern Chinese polity. Judging from their commercial success, these two films have mapped out an effective way of speaking to contemporary audiences. Cai (2014) has also recognised the positive impact of celebrity

participation on the marketing of propaganda films exemplified by *The Founding of a Republic*. It seems that recent 'mainstream melody' films have fully recognised the importance of integrating popular narrative forms and employing celebrity actors to increase box-office revenue. In contrast to the extensive attention paid to the film blockbusters, 'mainstream melody' TV dramas that are specifically tailored for propaganda purposes through representing historical events have received much less academic scrutiny. However, the successful model of the 'mainstream melody' films makes it plausible that similar narrative devices and popular elements can also be incorporated in the revolution-themed dramas broadcast by CCTV-1.

In the remainder of this chapter, we look at three revolutionary dramas of this kind, in order to identify key changes and potential continuities in these dramas over time. All the three dramas were created in response to state celebrations which marked the historical and political achievements of the CCP. *War of China's Fate*, broadcast on CCTV-1 in 1999 and echoing the fifty-year anniversary of the founding of the PRC, describes the historical progress of the civil war between the CCP and KMT. Its narrative covers the period from the end of the Second World War to the founding of the PRC. The second drama, *Eighth Route Army*, aired on CCTV-1 in August 2005, corresponded with the sixtieth anniversary of China's victory during the Second Sino-Japanese War by representing how the CCP-led guerrilla warfare has effectively resisted the Japanese invasion. The third drama, *On the Taihang Mountains*, was broadcast a decade later in 2015, also in remembrance of China's victory in the war against the Japanese. The narrative in these dramas generally revolves around the military conflict between the CCP, KMT and Japanese armies from 1937 to 1949 (more historical background is given below). Yet the narrative focus has been primarily on highlighting the CCP's achievements, thus showing explicitly propagandistic content. All three dramas received government support during the production process and subsequently won the government-sponsored *Feitian* Award, which suggests their cultural and political significance. Furthermore, the three dramas were aired on CCTV-1 during different periods, spanning the period from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s when transformations in Chinese economy, politics and the cultural fields were taking place and shaping the development of Chinese television. A diachronic comparison between the three dramas enables us to identify changes and continuities in the televised adaptations of the revolutionary narrative and to situate these in the changing economic, political and cultural context – in particular, among the process of marketisation and the trend towards popular entertainment. In the following sections, I turn to in-depth analyses of the three dramas, focusing on key narrative elements regarding main characters, plot and settings.

6.2 *War of China's Fate:* 'Only the CCP can save China'

As noted earlier, *War of China's Fate* was especially dedicated to contributing to the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. It was aired on CCTV-1 from late September to early October 1999 to coincide with the celebrations around National Day on 1 October. This thirty-episode TV serial was produced by China Television Production Centre (CTPC), a drama production unit affiliated to CCTV and known as the 'national team' (*guojia dui*) for producing TV dramas in China. Although the audience rating of this drama is hard to trace, what can be certain is the official recognition and praise of this drama. At the twentieth *Feitian* Award ceremony held in 2001, *War of China's Fate* won a Special Excellence award, the highest level in the category of long TV serials, which proved the political significance of this drama. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of this drama can inform us of the state-endorsed narrative conventions of the 'significant revolutionary themes' in the 1990s.

War of China's Fate focuses on important historical events and political struggles taking place in mainland China from the end of Second World War to the founding day of the PRC. It aims to address the key question: who – the CCP or KMT – would legitimately rule China after the Japanese invaders had withdrawn from China? This political dualism goes back to the time shortly after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Sun Yat-sen played a key role in establishing the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912, and in the early 1920s worked towards making KMT the rightful ruling party of the ROC, which his successor Chiang Kai-shek accomplished in 1927. The CCP was founded in 1921 and from the late 1920s gradually expanded its revolutionary base areas, also seeking to enlarge its power whilst fighting against the Japanese invaders in a loose united front with the KMT between 1937 and 1945. *War of China's Fate* is set against this historical background and depicts the civil war between the KMT and CCP from August 1945 to October 1949. The main characters can be grouped into three camps: the CCP leaders (especially Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai), the chairman of the KMT and president of the ROC at the time (Chiang Kai-shek) as well as the Japanese invading forces. Apart from the three camps, the narrative of the drama also revolves around revealing various domestic and international political forces involved in the fight. The story unfolds from the US intervention to support Chiang in establishing a democratic government in mainland China, but this financial and military support is later used by Chiang to suppress Mao's revolution. The subsequent narrative focuses on how the CCP's political leaders resist the repression from the KMT, and at the same time unite various national democrats to subvert Chiang's Nationalist Government.

In the portrayal of the political figures, a binary-opposition model is evident. Lévi-Strauss (1955) argues that the conflicts used for driving plots often stem from binary oppositions. Therefore, according to him, binary oppositions are key elements in analysing narrative structures. In this drama, binary oppositions can be identified between protagonists and

antagonists, peace and war, good and evil. The protagonists are Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and the main antagonist is Chiang Kai-shek, all played by typecast actors who look exactly like the historical models. Mao and his comrades are portrayed as righteous, patriotic, brave, optimistic, and real peace-makers, fighting for democratic rule over the country, while at the same time opposing Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorship and persecution of the democrats. Such portrayals are achieved through specific camera angles. Low-angle shots are often used for the Communist leaders, in order to show their greatness and power. At the same time, the lighting is bright and warm, reinforcing the positive image of them as glorious leaders (see Fig. 6.1 and 6.2).

Figure 6.1: Zhou Enlai (left) and Mao Zedong (right). *War of China's Fate* (1999)

Figure 6.2: Mao Zedong is giving a speech. *War of China's Fate* (1999)

In contrast to the CCP leaders, Chiang Kai-shek is often depicted as a grumpy, greedy and selfish dictator. In the narrative, he constantly violates the agreements between different political parties and refuses any further cooperation between the CCP and KMT. He seems rather frustrated at being defeated by the CCP in several battles, but instead of seeking peace talks with the CCP, he sends more of his troops to the frontline and speeds up his efforts to make a fortune from the war. Whenever he appears, the background is suffused with cold lighting, which delivers the image of a violent and bad-tempered dictator with frequent negative moods. Through these

Figure 6.3: Chiang Kai-shek in *War of China's Fate* (1999)

representations, he is portrayed as the embodiment of the evil, as opposed to the good Communist leaders. Obviously, such a binary opposition is created primarily to show the superiority of the CCP over the KMT. However, the static representations only provide flat, stereotypical images of the characters, without any personal narratives or detailed depictions regarding character development.

The binary oppositions are evident not only in the depiction of characters, but also in the background settings. In the narrated world, Chiang Kai-shek is in power whereas the CCP is in opposition, so when the leaders of the two camps appear in parallel camera shots, contrasting surroundings, costumes and props immediately show the differences. For instance, in scenes showing a meeting (Fig. 6.4 and 6.5), the room in Chiang's presidential palace is equipped with classical-style, upscale mahogany furniture and a patterned carpet, whereas the CCP's meeting room is like a randomly-picked cave house filled with desks and chairs of a mixed style. Both scenes are designed with outdoor sunlight shining through the window, but the backlight in the KMT's meeting room is so strong that no one can clearly see the faces of the characters. Moreover, the strong backlight in Chiang's room creates a cold and ambiguous feeling. By contrast, every subject is lit properly in the CCP's meeting room, and the combination of soft frontal light and mild backlight creates a warm and friendly atmosphere. This contrast in the *mise en scène* suggests an uncertain future to Chiang's Nationalist government, and a bright future for the Communist Party leaders. It also reveals the class differences represented by the two camps. Chiang Kai-shek, together with his military commanders, constitutes the ruling class that possesses enormous wealth, which distances them from ordinary people. By contrast, the political and military leaders of the CCP live with villagers and borrow their houses as temporary headquarters, representing the interests of the poor. The visual contrasts in these scenes generally give an impression that the CCP are on the side of the people and determined to fight for them.

Figure 6.4: Chiang Kai-shek is holding a meeting in his presidential palace. *War of China's Fate* (1999)

Figure 6.5: CCP's meeting room in *War of China's Fate* (1999)

To make the legitimacy of the CCP even clearer, the drama employs a voice-over narrator. Rather than describing the war situation from a neutral stance, the voice-over reinforces the binary treatment of good and evil and aligns the viewer with the Communist cause. From the opening scene of the first episode, the voice-over takes the side of the CCP and identifies it as 'our party' (*wo dang*). Whenever there are scenes of battles, the voice-over summarises the achievements of 'our army' (*wo jun*) and the losses of the KMT army. In the narration, phrases such as 'our Party' and 'our army' are used frequently as a way to show allegiance to the CCP. In contrast to 'us', the group identified as 'others' mainly refers to Chiang Kai-shek, his Nationalist government and army, as well as the American diplomats trying to negotiate a coalition government between different political parties in China. As Pickering (2001) argues, the construction of nationalist discourse operates through social inclusion and exclusion, especially the relegation of 'Others': in the process of constructing a negative 'Other', the discursive 'we' will be united. This is particularly the case with regard to the revolutionary drama discussed here. Through the binary construction of the good, upright 'our Party' and the evil KMT force, the audiences can easily unite with the Party as the 'national Self'. This discursive construction of nationalism through revolutionary narratives was in line with the propaganda campaigns of the CCP in the 1990s, as noted in chapter 3: After the 1989 turmoil, the key strategy to maintain social stability and cohesion was to promote the discourse of nationalism and patriotism, alongside the boost for economic development. Hence these themes became the primary focus of narratives in the 'mainstream melody' works of the 1990s, which aimed to reinforce people's loyalty and allegiance to the Party-state.

War of China's Fate mainly stresses how the CCP's political leaders sought to construct a democratic[22] government in China. To this end, they are represented as the embodiment of peace and democracy, and as the only legitimate leaders of China. By contrast, Chiang Kai-shek does nothing but to insist on launching a civil war; moreover, he seeks to rely on various foreign powers, which could potentially harm China's sovereignty. Therefore, it seems justified for the CCP and the Chinese people to overthrow the KMT regime and thereby establish a new one led by the CCP. It should be noted that *War of China's Fate* resembles the old documentary-style 'mainstream melody' films such as the aforementioned *The Birth of New China* (1989) in adopting historical footage from the war. This is combined with actor performance in order to represent the real battle fields and deliver a sense of historical reality. Apart from these limited war scenes, the remainder of the drama is mainly formed of didactic conversations filled with political slogans. Judged by today's standards, such narrative forms

[22] 'Democratic' is here understood in the sense of Mao's 'New Democracy'. In his essay *On New Democracy* (*Lun xin minzhuzhuyi*) published in January 1940, Mao 'assumes that democracy means a government that reflects the interests of China's ordinary people; he does not mean elected representative government in the American sense.' (Cheek, 2002: 77).

seem repetitive, dull, and lacking entertainment. Yet, given that this drama was produced in 1998 when the entertainment TV culture had just emerged on provincial satellite TV channels such as Hunan TV, it is no surprise that this CCTV propaganda drama only satisfied the taste of the political authorities, not necessarily that of the masses. Compared to *War of China's Fate*, *Eighth Route Army*, which was made six year later, includes more entertainment elements.

6.3 *Eighth Route Army*: The 'mass line' as the key strategy to win the war

At the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the CCP's Red Army joined the KMT's National Revolutionary Army in order to establish a united front against Japan, changing its name to the Eighth Route Army whilst in practice still being led by the CCP. The 2005 serial drama *Eighth Route Army* recounts the historical facts of this period, depicting the anti-Japanese revolutionary movement orchestrated by the CCP. This twenty-five episode TV serial was jointly produced by CCTV, local CCP Propaganda Department in Shanxi province, Shanxi Television Network, and August First Film Studio (*Bayi dianying zhipianchang*) – a state-run production studio belonging to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Such a production team already indicates the great political significance of this drama. As noted earlier, it was created in response to state celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of China's victory in the war against the Japanese. It premiered on CCTV-1 in August 2005, also echoing the Army Day on 1 August. Remarkably for a propaganda drama, *Eighth Route Army* garnered not only the government-sponsored *Feitian* Award, but also a *Jinying* Award for Excellent TV drama, which is based on audience votes. This result indicates a more favourable audience reception than that of *War of China's Fate*. Focusing on the depiction of main characters and plot, I will point out the new narrative traits and techniques adopted in this drama and explain them in the light of the political and cultural context of the mid-2000s.

The plot of *Eighth Route Army* begins with the outbreak of the war in July 1937, when the Japanese army invaded Beijing, and concludes with the surrender of the Japanese army to the Allied forces in September 1945. Although historically both the KMT and CCP fought the Japanese, the storyline mainly revolves around how the Communist Party leader Mao Zedong and General Zhu De led the Eighth Route Army and the Chinese nation to final victory. Particularly, the 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*) developed by the CCP leader, Mao Zedong, together with the call for 'relying on the people', are emphasised and praised throughout the narrative. The 'mass line' policy is historically one of the political and organisational principles of the CCP and is still in use nowadays. It basically stresses doing everything for the ultimate interests of the people, relying on people's power and listening to people's needs, and then interprets their needs within the framework of Marxism, thereby implementing Party policies.

In *Eighth Route Army*, the producers sought to express the idea that mobilising the people and constructing a powerful united front – which included the KMT – were the CCP's key strategies to secure victory in the Sino-Japanese war. Even though such a representation exaggerates the contribution of the CCP to the final victory, this is the key message delivered by this propaganda drama. For this purpose, the simplified binary treatment of good CCP and evil KMT, as in *War of China's Fate*, has been discarded by producers of this drama. Instead, more complicated depictions of characters have been adopted in *Eighth Route Army*.

To the extent that the plot is driven by the fight between the CCP army and the Japanese, the binary opposition of 'hero vs. villain' still works. The CCP leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhu De, are portrayed as wise and benevolent military commanders, devoted to building the united front. To this end, they seek to unite any potential associates in China, including KMT military leaders, soldiers and even Japanese captives. On the other hand, the antagonists are unsurprisingly the Japanese army generals. They are depicted as brutal madmen committing massacres in Chinese cities, villages, and even bombing their own compatriots living in China. Such a contrast between good and evil is evidently aimed at highlighting the justice and greatness represented by the CCP.

Alongside the binary juxtaposition of China and Japan, the portrayal of the KMT force contains more complicated character positioning than that in *War of China's Fate*. First, several KMT army generals, soldiers, and party members are associated with the good 'our side'. These people, including both real historical figures and fictional characters, are depicted in more detail compared with the ordinary revolutionary masses. For instance, Wei Lihuang, a KMT general who was historically a former enemy of the CCP's Red Army in the first phase of the civil war (1927-1936) and also appeared in *War of China's Fate* on the enemy side, is portrayed positively as a close friend of the CCP in *Eighth Route Army*. For example, in the fourth episode, the Eighth Route Army goes to attack a Japanese military airport, which greatly relieves the pressure on the KMT's battlefront. Wei Lihuang feels extremely grateful and thanks Zhu De, the CCP army general, in person. After this, the former becomes an admirer of the CCP's military strategies and a trustworthy collaborator. Another example is Hao Mengling, a KMT military commander serving under Wei Lihuang's Fourteenth Army Group, who was also a historical figure and died in the defence of Xinkou. In this drama, his bravery and sacrifices are fully represented and acknowledged through his voice-over soliloquy upon his death. In this monologue, he shows his determination to sacrifice himself in defending 'our nation'. Aside from positive depictions of these two historical figures, the portrayal of a fictional character, Liu Qianqian, a KMT correspondent, also shows positive recognition. She initially works for the KMT newspaper, but later chooses to join the CCP out of admiration for the Communist policy of 'putting the people first' – a slogan in line with the 'mass line' policy. In these cases, we find that the characters from the KMT camp are no longer portrayed as

'national Others', but tend to be represented as members of 'our side' – the side of the CCP – and 'our country'. These have shown nuanced changes in the construction of nationalist discourse in the new century.

Not only do the KMT generals and ordinary party members receive positive recognition in this drama, but the representation of Chiang Kai-shek becomes more complicated. In *Eighth Route Army*, he is no longer a static, vicious character, but a patriotic ruler facing dilemmas (Fig. 6.7). At the outset of the drama, he warmly praises the contribution of the Eighth Route Army to defeating the Japanese army (Fig. 6.6). But as the story unfolds, particularly at a point where he sees the power of the CCP growing through the guerrilla war and thus feels his rule threatened by the Communists, he decides to eliminate them. This development of this character and the multifaceted depiction of Chiang Kai-shek imply that the representation of the KMT has moved beyond the one-sided narrative convention but includes more nuanced representations.

Figure 6.6: Chiang Kai-shek greets a CCP general. *Eighth Route Army* (2005)

Figure 6.7: Chiang Kai-shek is giving a speech on defending China. *Eighth Route Army* (2005)

However, even though the 'patriotic' KMT force has been categorised as belonging to 'our side', this does not mean they are as equally good as the CCP. In specific representations, they are still depicted in an inferior position to the CCP leaders. For example, in every frontline battle that the KMT's Revolutionary Army participates in, KMT commanders always need support and guidance from the CCP, as we have seen earlier from the case of Wei Lihuang. Besides, in the opening introduction given by the voice-over narrator, the CCP is described as 'taking the lead' (*shuaixian*) to unite the nationals and fight against the enemies, whereas Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government is 'forced' (*bei po*) to agree to the plan of a united front. Such narratives highlight the CCP as the only legitimate leading force that represents the interests of 'our people' and 'our nation'.

Through these representations, we find the contrast between the CCP and KMT softened; but simultaneously, there is more emphasis on the notion of a united font which entails uniting

all Chinese people to fight against the Japanese. This treatment was precisely in line with the new focus of the Party's propaganda campaign from the early 2000s. As discussed in chapter 3, the CCP faced increasing pressures resulted from the 'side effect' of the accelerated market reforms from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, including corruption, unemployment, widening regional disparities and above all, the issue of legitimacy of a 'proletarian' party experimenting on a capitalist-style market economy. In order to alleviate social tensions and, more importantly, consolidate the CCP's leadership, Jiang Zemin put forward the Three Represents. These were ratified at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, affirming that the Chinese Communist Party represents the fundamental interest of the majority of Chinese people. Immediately after the promulgation of this ideological guideline, at the National Broadcasting Work Conference in the same year, Xu Guangchun, director of SARFT at the time, stressed the requirement that national TV broadcasting in the following years must abide by the principles of the Three Represents (China Broadcasting and Television Yearbook, 2003: 5). Given that *Eighth Route Army* was produced in 2004, it is reasonable to link its emphasis on the 'mass line', which entails representing and fighting for the interest of the Chinese people, to the wider political context of the time of production. With regard to defining the Chinese people, all patriotic Chinese, regardless of party affiliations, can be considered as belonging to the 'national Self'. This representation is also indicative of an increasingly positive attitude towards the KMT from mainland China in the early 2000s.

Apart from the complexities in character positioning, we also find some other new narrative traits in this drama, which were not yet evident in *War of China's Fate*. Despite *Eighth Route Army* also utilising archival footage to display the reality of the revolutionary past, it integrates more fictional plotlines and personal narratives. In addition to depicting important political leaders, the producers of this drama designed several fictional characters who serve as subordinates and maintain friendly relations with the CCP leaders. They are soldiers, military doctors, and war correspondents, witnessing and experiencing the war from the perspective of the masses. Hence, aside from representations of leaders' resolution and determination, the narrative focus also includes the daily life of these fictional characters, who live around Mao Zedong and Zhu De. Particularly, we find many personal stories with emotional ups and downs, and even romantic plots designed for these fictional characters. In relation to this, the CCP leaders are portrayed as caring for their subordinates and try to find them girlfriends, which shows the human side of the leaders. As discussed in chapter 3, the emergence of the popular entertainment culture at the turn of the new century gave rise to the pursuit of individual satisfaction and personal development, which rendered the exploration of individual's emotional life a popular theme in TV productions (Keane, 2005). Such themes were more often associated with love or family dramas. Nevertheless, concerns for individual life and well-being became an irresistible trend affecting television productions of all subject

matters, including revolutionary themes. All changes in the cultural context of the early 2000s indicated a narrative turn to human interest, which was also reflected in this drama. As we can see from both political leaders and fictional characters, more representations of people's internal emotional experiences, personal dilemmas, determination and sacrifice are incorporated with the grand narratives of politics and battles, adding a special layer of human concern to the cruelty of the revolutionary past.

Notably, *Eighth Route Army* was not the only TV production showing this narrative turn. Revolution-themed dramas adopting the model of personal narratives and broadcast in the same period included other CCTV-1 prime-time dramas as well. Among them, the most well-known one is *Drawing Sword* (*Liang jian*, also known as *Unsheathing the Sword,* aired on CCTV-1 in September 2005), which follows the personal life of a fictional CCP general, Li Yunlong, against the background of the Anti-Japanese and Korean Wars (1950-1953). More similar cases will be revealed in chapter 7, where the revolutionary dramas broadcast by Hunan TV are analysed. Here, it should be noted that the propaganda dramas of the mid-2000s have already demonstrated new narrative features which were manifestly different from those made in the late 1990s. Next, I will analyse a revolutionary drama which retells the same historical events as *Eighth Route Army*, but was produced in the mid-2010s.

6.4 *On the Taihang Mountains*: Uniting all patriotic forces and building a strong wartime base

Also set in the historical period of the Anti-Japanese War, *On the Taihang Mountains* focuses on two CCP military leaders, Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping – the commander and political commissar of the 129th Division of the Eighth Route Army – and recounts their battles and revolutionary life in one of CCP's largest wartime bases, the Taihang Mountains. It is hence another piece of 'mainstream melody' work featuring the recurrent theme of fighting the Japanese; this one was produced specifically for the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of China's victory in the war. It was made in 2013, and broadcast on CCTV-1 from 4 to 19 August 2015. Inasmuch as this drama features the development of the military force led by Liu and Deng, it also echoes Army Day on 1 August, which once again verifies my argument in the preceding chapter about the distinctly socialist-style festive programming in Chinese television. As with other 'significant revolutionary theme' dramas, *On the Taihang Mountains* garnered a *Feitian* Award in 2015 as Excellent TV drama. At first glance, this drama seems to share many similar plot elements with *Eighth Route Army*. But it was made nearly ten years later, and hence shows a development in the narrative techniques and aesthetic forms that were in relation to new changes in the wider context.

The story mainly revolves around the formulation of Liu and Deng's military strategies, the

battles they participated in against the Japanese invaders and, particularly, how they led the 129th Division to develop the Taihang mountainous area into a strong wartime fortress. While still structured on the binary treatment of 'good' CCP leaders and 'bad' Japanese army generals, the drama also incorporates a narrative focus on representing the short-term cooperation as well as political competition between the leaders of CCP and KMT. In these representations, we also find the same personalised narrative strategies characterising the human side of the leading CCP political and military figures, and complexities in depicting the KMT leaders, that we saw from *Eighth Route Army*. Yet, aside from these narrative techniques, more personal dilemmas and dramatic tensions have been built into this drama.

First, the depictions of both CCP and KMT political leaders and military commanders are driven by more personal dilemmas. Liu Bocheng, the CCP commander of the 129th Division, is portrayed as a kind-hearted and knowledgeable commander who constantly cares for his troops. His dilemma thus lies in his wanting to achieve victory but sacrifice as few soldiers as possible. Therefore, he calculates the number of casualties every time after battles. Chen Geng, another historically important military leader of the CCP, is depicted as living apart from his family for safety reasons. He continually needs to choose between fighting for his communist beliefs and caring for his family. This dilemma reaches a climax when his wife, Wang Genying, also a Communist soldier, loses her life in one of the battles. The producers even designed a dramatic plot, in which Chen Geng and Wang Genying have a chance to meet each other before Wang dies, talking about their son and their family memories (Fig. 6.8). These details were created in order to display the sacrifices people encountered in the revolutionary war on the one hand, and to portray the human side of leaders on the other hand. The Communist leaders thus are no longer pictured as fighting machines or superior god-like figures, but portrayed as ordinary people with successes and failures, gains and losses, which make the revolutionary narratives more accessible for national audiences.

Figure 6.8: Wang Genying (left) and Chen Geng are sharing a picture of their son. *On the Taihang Mountains* (2015)

KMT leaders and military commanders have their dilemmas as well. While Chiang Kai-shek needs to acknowledge contributions made by the CCP in fighting against the enemies, he is also worried that the quick expansion of the CCP will threaten his authoritarian

rule. On most occasions, he is depicted as a torn character who has political ambitions but eventually fails to maintain his rule. The situation faced by his army chief in Shanxi province, Yan Xishan, is by no means easier. As a former warlord who has his own troops, he seeks to prevent other KMT military forces from tapping into his area to fight the Japanese. As a result, Yan is eager to eliminate Japanese invaders from the province of Shanxi, but would rather achieve this by relying on the CCP's guerrillas than on the National Revolutionary Army of the KMT. All these representations demonstrate the entangled relationships between different political forces during the war, suggesting that the wartime situation is far more complicated than any binary opposition allows. Adding these dilemmas to the construction of characters not only reveals more details about conspiracies and politics during wartime, but also added considerable dramatic tension to the narratives.

At the same time, we find other dramatic plot created to increase the excitement and suspense in the representation of the war. On the side of the 'good', Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping are portrayed as great military experts who are still modestly studying the techniques to achieve victory, rather than stereotypical characters of victorious generals who always win. For instance, in a battle with the Japanese army, Liu Bocheng almost loses his life because of flaws in his strategy. On the side of the 'evil', the commanders of the Japanese army are portrayed as less stupid as had been the case in the other two dramas analysed earlier. Rather, they tend to be depicted as competent and ferocious opponents of the CCP leaders. In some scenes, they also develop smart plans, which help them secure occasional victories over the Chinese resistance force. Dramatic plots such as these give viewers an impression of the dangerous situations and the unpredictable result of battles, which suggests that the hard-earned victory over the Japanese was no easy task.

In order to heighten the intense feeling of danger in the war, the drama employs a sequence of combat scenes, including gun battles, explosions, chases and escapes, to give vivid depictions of the battlefront (see Fig. 6.9). While such visual techniques are more frequently seen in Hollywood war films and recent Chinese propaganda films, they were comparatively less employed in Chinese TV dramas, particularly those made in the 1990s, such as *War of China's Fate*. This situation started to change in the early 2000s, after China's admission to the WTO. On the one hand, Chinese TV producers started to draw inspirations from imported Hollywood blockbusters as a result of the increasing cooperation between domestic TV producers and foreign production companies (for example, see Ma, 2014). On the other hand, as noted in chapter 3, domestic TV producers in the early 2000s began showing greater awareness to the differentiation of various niche markets. One unique feature of *On the Taihang Mountains* is its narrative devices modelled on typical Hollywood war films, such as visual depictions of the battlefront, detailed explanation of military tactics, as well as tracking the emotional development of the people at war. The adoption of these techniques particularly

targets domestic audiences who enjoy watching war films and military-themed TV serials. Such a multi-perspective representation of war with intense combat scenes and humanistic care has largely exceeded the narrative devices we saw in either *War of China's Fate* or *Eighth Route Army*.

Figure 6.9: The 129th Division of the Eighth Route Army seeks to conquer the County of Yushe occupied by the Japanese army. *On the Taihang Mountains* (2015)

The development in the narrative techniques of propaganda dramas of the 2010s can be considered a fruitful result of exposing state-owned television stations to market forces and especially of the 'separation of production from broadcasting'. As outlined in chapter 3, the Chinese television sector started delegating the production of non-news programmes to independent media companies in the early 2000s. By 2009, nearly all central and provincial television stations had withdrawn from entertainment-oriented production, whilst focusing on producing public service programmes only, and purchased TV serial dramas from the market. Unlike the two dramas discussed in the preceding two sections, which were still produced in full or in part by CCTV, *On the Taihang Mountains* was primarily produced by a specialised media company, Yanzhao Hezhong Culture Media Co. Ltd. The producers received support from the Central Propaganda Department's local branch in Hebei Province, as well as the local governments and television stations of the filming sites. Compared with state-owned and tightly controlled television stations, independent media companies are more open to market competition, and thus sensible to the commercial realities. This means they are more inclined to utilise popular narrative forms and entertainment elements to enhance the quality and commercial value of their TV products. Therefore, *On the Taihang Mountains* provides a comparatively more exciting depiction of the revolutionary past. Compared with the other two dramas, *On the Taihang Mountains* incorporates more elements that potentially contributed to

the victory of China. In this drama, the elements that lead the CCP army to victory are not vague beliefs in democracy and peace (*War of China's Fate*), or pure reliance on the people's power (*Eighth Route Army*), but a combination of many factors, including brilliant military strategists, smart political commissars, a highly-disciplined and cohesive Red Army, a visionary Party leader, the support of the revolutionary masses, and a strong wartime base.

In spite of the change in narrative strategies and visual effects, what remains consistent is the construction of a national identity. *On the Taihang Mountains* also adopts an omniscient voice-over narrator who aligns the audience with the Communist camp. In the opening episode, he first praises the initiative taken by the CCP leaders to build the united front and then enthusiastically introduces the army led by Liu and Deng. In the last episode, the voice-over once again emphasises the important contribution of the Liu-Deng Army to winning the war. It declares that this army represents the interest of the Chinese people, leading them to the victory over the Japanese enemy.

In addition to employing narrative voices to directly describe the good deeds of the national 'Selves', more narrating processes have been accomplished by the lines spoken by the characters not belonging to the CCP or the revolutionary masses. These 'Others' exist not only as opponents of the CCP, but more often as witnesses to the Party's achievements. For instance, a KMT journalist and some army generals who have seen the Red Army fighting on the frontline successively acclaim the cohesion and loyalty of this army; the Japanese army generals complain about the CCP's abilities of propaganda and agitation. The perspective of the 'Other' side successively gives credits to the legitimisation of the CCP's leadership from a 'non-self' stance. Furthermore, when defending the nation becomes a priority, the CCP seeks to unite all national patriotic forces, including KMT military commanders, soldiers, patriotic landlords, and even the bandits stationed in the Taihang Mountains. It is worth noting that overthrowing feudal landlords used to be an important task of the Communist revolution. But in this drama, there is no plot related to obvious class-struggle situations, which, to a considerable extent, reflects the historical situation. As Liu and Deng repetitively claim, the private properties of patriotic landlords should be protected by the Eighth Route Army so as to earn their trust and broaden and consolidate the united front; only those exploiting the labour of villagers and peasants are treated as enemies of the people. In this discourse, the bandits have also been accepted to 'our side', because they are willing to choose the righteous path and fight against the Japanese enemy.

In its construction of nationalism and patriotism, this 2015 drama also highlights the importance of the united front. Aside from continuing to emphasise the aspect that the CCP represents 'the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people' (People's Daily Online, 2006), the connotation of the united front in the mid-2010s can also be interpreted in the light of two developments in the Chinese political context. One is concerned

with the changes in the cross-strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan. In the past few years, the relationship between the CCP and KMT began to resume along with Lien Chan's (former chairman of the KMT) visit to mainland China in 2005. Since the KMT, under the leadership of Ma Ying-jeou, won the Taiwanese presidential election in 2008, the cross-strait relations have improved, and cultural communication and economic cooperation across the Taiwan Strait simultaneously increased. This led to the 2015 meeting in Singapore between Ma and the CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, which took the two parties 66 years to achieve. Although subsequent changes in the leadership of Taiwan affected the development in the cross-strait relations, it has not practically changed the official attitudes of the CCP towards the KMT.[23] Given that both the two parties are advocates of the 'one China' consensus, it is plausible to predict that the 'patriotic' KMT force will continually be portrayed as part of the 'national Self'. As noted by Wolte (2017), such representations are in line with the current PRC policy aiming to seek 'peaceful reunification' with Taiwan. They are also seen from many propaganda films made in mainland China, including *The Founding of a Republic*.

On the other hand, the construction of nationalism by means of presenting how Chinese people are united to achieve victory, also echoed current president Xi Jiping's articulation of realising the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. As discussed in chapter 3, the official ideological line from late 2012 shifted to building a strong socialist superpower and realising the 'Chinese dream'; various artistic and media representations have been used to promote this official discourse. As claimed by Xi Jinping at the closing meeting of the First Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress in 2013 (China Daily, 2013), an important way of pursuing the Chinese dream is to foster the national spirit that centres on patriotism […]; in order to achieve this, '1.3 billion Chinese people should […] unite as one, and gather into invincible force with the wisdom and power'. As previously mentioned, Chinese television producers must take into account dominant ideologies when repackaging past events into propaganda dramas. It is thus reasonable to argue that the emphasis on building a united front in this drama is precisely the embodiment of the dominant political ideology in current China.

To sum up, *On the Taihang Mountains* utilises a more dramatic plot, and creates much excitement and tension to represent the revolutionary war, for the purpose of satisfying the entertainment pursuits of contemporary Chinese audiences. In the meantime, it should be noted that all these efforts serve the construction of a collective narrative centred on nationalism and patriotism, which is fundamentally aimed at consolidating the CCP's rule over China.

[23] The cross-strait relations became deteriorated after Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan (also known as *Minjindang*) won the 2016 Taiwan general elections. This was largely due to Tsai's refusal to affirm the '1992 consensus' which insists on 'one China' principle but accepts different interpretations of this 'one China'.

6.5 Conclusion

Through the analyses of three revolution-themed dramas aired on CCTV-1 from late 1990s to mid-2010s, several narrative turns can be identified. First, the depiction of the CCP and KMT leaders and party members has transcended simple binary opposition, and has involved more complicated character positioning. Particularly, in the recently-made two dramas, Chiang Kai-shek and his troops are no longer simply portrayed as the enemy of the CCP, whom the CCP must eliminate, but more as competent opponents and devoted patriots, with whom the CCP needs to unite in the fight against the Japanese army. In such representations, the sacrifices made by the KMT in the war started to be positively acknowledged, even though such an appraisal somehow tends to be offset by Chiang Kai-shek's provoking of the civil war. As the analysis shows, the increasingly softened contrast between the CCP and KMT in the latter two dramas are in line with the new change in cross-strait relations, where the CCP has sought to show an increasingly welcoming attitude to the KMT across the Taiwan Strait.

Secondly, alongside the depiction of the revolutionary war, the two dramas made in the new millennium have also shown growing interest in representing the life and emotions of people living in the turbulent revolutionary era. On the one hand, political leaders from both sides are no longer static characters, but exhibit dynamics which demonstrate complicated, entangled relationships as well as personal dilemmas. On the other hand, producers have tended to create more fictional characters, so as to present their revolutionary spirit and the impact of war on ordinary Chinese people. Such a trend towards personal narratives has demonstrated the narrative turn to human interest, which were typically embodiment of the emerging urban entertainment culture in the early 2000s, that values individual well-being and personal development.

Thirdly, in terms of aesthetic expressions, more combat scenes have appeared in the recently-made two dramas, whereas in the 1999 drama, *War of China's Fate*, only a limited number of war scenes were found. It is also evident that the 2015 drama, *On the Taihang Mountains*, has adopted more dramatic plot elements and suspense techniques that partially emulated the narrative forms and visual effects from Hollywood war films to create excitement for contemporary audiences. Such development can be understood as the consequence of a series of reform measures implemented within the television sector for a shift towards market-oriented production and international cooperation.

Yet at the same time, what remained consistent in the representation of the revolutionary past is the construction of nationalism and patriotism, as well as the propaganda message delivered through the voice-over that only the CCP could have led the Chinese people to victory. But it is also obvious that the propaganda messages embedded in each drama have echoed the distinct ideological lines articulated in each period. Based on these findings, we find that the delivery of propaganda messages via TV drama has been able to utilise new

narrative devices to facilitate propaganda and ideological persuasion, which reflects the flexibility of the Party's propaganda strategies on the one hand, and the powerful influence of the market economy on Chinese television on the other hand.

Chapter 7

Omnipotent Heroes and Sexy Spies: Popular Representations of the Revolutionary Past in Hunan TV

Following last chapter's discussion of the revolutionary dramas aired on CCTV-1, we now look at another set of representations of the revolutionary past on Hunan TV, the provincial TV channel that was the first extensively commercialised in China. In the previous chapter, I have highlighted the narrative characteristics of the propaganda-oriented revolutionary dramas, as well as the new narrative strategies incorporated into for the purpose of popularising the revolutionary theme. These were adopted as a result of increasing market orientation. It is evident that dramas broadcast on CCTV-1 have been closely tied to the mission of political propaganda and social education, and hence make comparatively fewer concessions to audience tastes. By contrast, entertaining audiences and bringing amusement to young viewers are central to Hunan TV's branding strategy. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that the dramas broadcast by Hunan TV provide different representations of the revolutionary past than their counterparts on CCTV. In this chapter, I discuss two exemplary cases from Hunan TV: *Struggles in an Ancient City* (2005) and *The Disguiser* (2015), with the aim of examining new kinds of revolutionary narratives. What I am interested in here is to identify the narrative techniques which make revolutionary history popular and propaganda messages acceptable. Special attention is given to the diachronic comparison of the two cases, in order to discern traits of development in the popular narratives. Notably, the two dramas represent two popular sub-genres of the revolution-themed TV drama: *Struggles in an Ancient City* is a TV adaptation of a Red Classic (see previously and below); *The Disguiser* belongs to the category of 'spy drama' (*diezhan ju*) that mostly consists of adaptations of spy novels from the post-reform era. Before venturing into a detailed textual analysis of the two dramas, I first introduce the background and current debates around the two sub-genres of revolutionary TV drama.

7.1 Red Classics and spy dramas

As mentioned in chapter 6, the term 'Red Classics' generally refers to a set of revolution-themed literary and cinematic works promoted by the Party-state from the 1950s to the 1970s, which reflect the revolutionary life of Communist soldiers, workers and peasants during the pre-PRC period. These works include the eight 'revolutionary model plays'[24] that were highly

[24] Among them, Peking opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (Zhiqu weihushan),* together with its original novel *Tracks in the Snowy Mountains* (*Linhai xueyuan*) have been adapted to films and TV dramas most frequently in recent years. The ballet *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*) has also been adapted to TV serials and received much attention.

advocated by Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution; however, they were condemned in the post-Mao 1980s by cultural elites and thereafter faded away for a while. The new millennium has witnessed the resurgence of the Red Classics in mass-cultural production. As Liu (2010) observes, both the state and popular culture sectors have facilitated their return. For the Communist regime, these works have served to restore the ideological hegemony that the leadership believed was hugely diluted by global capitalism. For the public, the revolutionary literature and arts evoked a nostalgic sentiment across China, particularly from the older generation who grew up with the revolutionary works.

In order to attract contemporary young audiences, contemporary adaptations of the Red Classics sometimes depart from the collectivist values embedded in the original texts and express a more strongly individualistic ethos and orientation. Occasionally the discrepancies between contemporary reinventions and their original texts have created conflicts. For instance, the increased emphasis on the protagonists' personal dimension in the drama adaptations aired on provincial satellite TV channels has incurred criticism from both the government and loyal fans of the original works.[25] Criticism from the authorities denounces the 'vulgarisation' of the canonical texts as the adaptations probe into the sexual relations and romantic entanglements of the protagonists, elements that do not feature in the original works (Renminwang, 2004). Audiences with deep emotional attachment to the original works are dissatisfied with the remakes where these conflict with their own memories. Regarding the difference between the established tales and the contemporary remakes, researchers (Zhao, 2005; Cai, 2013) explain that in the original works, the absence or downplay of gender relationships and individual desires mostly resulted from the Mao-era principle that Communists would commit more to the revolutionary cause when not involved in any emotional entanglements. The purposive suppression of human desires was hence a discursive and political strategy to prevent any distraction from the revolutionary movement. In the post-reform context, where the revolutionary spirit has decreased, and individual pleasures are given greater priority, new interpretations and representations were able to emerge. However, some of them have stimulated public controversies and ultimately triggered censorship. On 9 April 2004, SARFT released a Notice which urged government agencies at various levels to tighten censorship on TV adaptations of the Red Classics (SARFT, 2004). The Notice required relevant film and TV production units to adhere to the 'core spirit' of the

[25] TV adaptations that have raised extensive controversies include the 2004 drama *Tracks in the Snowy Mountains* and the 2005 drama *Red Detachment of Women*. The former was denounced by state media largely in that it created many personal entanglements between the Communist hero, Yang Zirong, and the bandit group led by the antagonist, Zuo Shan Diao. According to media critics and the authorities, this reinvention shows disrespect for the original works. In a similar way, *Red Detachment of Women* also received heavy criticism because this TV adaptation highlighted the romance between two Communist Party members which was thought to be an insignificant element in the original work. See Liu and Yu (2004).

original work and value the audience's pre-existing expectations about the Red Classics; any parodies or vulgar alterations of the original texts were strictly prohibited. This regulation consequently led to a steep drop in the number of adaptations from the Red-Classics. Only a few managed to survive, including the 2005 TV drama analysed in this chapter – *Struggles in an Ancient City*, a remake of the novel (1958) and film (1963) of the same title. In an attempt to prevent potential criticism in the first place, director Lian Yiming claimed that this drama focused on patriotism (*aiguo*) rather than love (*aiqing*) (Sina Entertainment, 2005). It was hoped that by holding on to the theme of patriotism and promising to adhere to the original storyline, Chinese TV producers would carve out a less controversial path in their reinvention and reimagination of the Red Classics.

Similar debates are also evident in the other TV fictional genre that represents the revolutionary war – spy dramas. Having burgeoned since the early 2000s, this genre mostly focuses on the intelligence war fought between the CCP, the KMT government and the Japanese invaders from the late 1930s to the 1940s. Main characters include CCP undercover agents working in the KMT government and the collaborationist governments set up by Japan, engaging in intelligence gathering and assassinating Japanese invaders and 'national traitors'. Unlike the Red Classics, which gained momentum in the early 2000s and then met with criticism, spy dramas have enjoyed consistent, long-lasting popularity until the present day. According to Chinese media scholar Bai Xiaoyi (2010), this is because spy dramas demonstrate a successful integration of revolutionary themes with the dramatic plots inherent in crime narratives. While crime dramas had been erased from prime time since 2004 due to their 'overt' exposure of violence and homicide, spy dramas quickly picked up the thrilling effects that used to make crime dramas popular. Specifically, they added elements such as mystery, suspense and plot twists to the notion of 'invisible war', maximising suspense and thereby stimulating excitement. Despite the different situations and narrative foci of Red Classics and spy dramas, Kong (2012) holds the view that the spy drama belongs to the broad category of Red Classics in that it draws inspiration from spy films or dramas produced in the 'high socialist' period (1949-1976) and in that its recent prevalence has also been nurtured by the wave of nostalgic sentiments associated with the Red Classics. If the spy drama can be considered broadly as part of the Red Classics, it perhaps shares similar problems faced by those adaptations, for instance, the conflict between the revolutionary ideals in the collectivist period and their contemporary reconfigurations.

In fact, a great portion of spy-themed TV dramas have been adapted from contemporary novels created in the 2000s. The most famous serials include *Plotting* (*Ansuan*, 2006), *Lurk* (*Qianfu*, 2009), and the 2015 hit drama *The Disguiser* (which forms the other case study of this chapter). The novels on which they are based have not been canonised in the same way as the Red Classics, so the storylines of these dramas originate from contemporary individual

writer/producer's understandings of, and speculations about, the revolution. This creates the possibility that their narrative focus may more easily diverge from revolutionary ideals than is the case with the reimagination of the Red Classics. As Ni Wei (2013) states, current spy dramas normally emphasise individual problem-solving skills and hence weaken the role of Party organisation, which seems to acknowledge the personal power and agency of individuals instead of the significance of the revolutionary collective. In his view, this is a misrepresentation of the revolution, as well as of the collective aspirations of the revolutionaries. Controversies such as this one invariably revolve around the tensions between revolutionary realism in the past and new representations at present, between the supposed collectivism of the revolutionary and socialist eras and the individualism of the contemporary era. In spite of these tensions, it is equally obvious that the new productions provide an ongoing renovation and reimagination of the revolutionary past. By so doing, they adopt a new filmic language to retell the seemingly worn-out clichés, and at the same time, point to the changes in the current socialist culture.

In this chapter, I analyse two dramas that have been comparatively more successful than the controversial Red Classics adaptations. In the two cases, I examine the popular elements that are being added to representations of the revolutionary war, and then explore the extent to which entertainment-oriented national TV stations can depart from the prescribed route of orthodox propaganda and still deliver a revolutionary ethos in novel and popular ways without being censored. As discussed in chapter 3, the Chinese media sphere has experienced a series of market reforms in recent decades, which has made television production increasingly sensitive to viewer ratings and audience interest. We have already seen from the revolution-themed dramas on CCTV-1 that televised political content has recently tended to embrace more entertaining elements and shifted the narrative focus towards human nature and individual concerns. Since the CCTV-1 dramas substantially centred on the depiction of male, historical figures (i.e. the Communist Party leaders) in decisive wars and battles, they left comparatively little room for the representation of ordinary revolutionaries, especially women. By contrast, the leading characters of the two dramas aired on Hunan TV are fictional revolutionaries including outstanding women warriors and spies. They devote themselves to struggles set in a totally different environment from the war front. The more narrative space given to these female characters in Hunan TV allows us to further look into the gender relations in popular representations of the revolutionary war. In the following sections, I focus on how the main characters are depicted and on whether there is any evidence of new character portrait and visual language derived from the binary opposition of good and evil. If these do emerge, I intend to identify the development of popular narratives from early 2000s to mid-2010s. *Struggles in an Ancient City* was created in late 2004 and broadcast in 2005, at a time when domestic TV producers started to gain more creative freedom to explore consumer

interests in exchange for advertising revenue. *The Disguiser* was produced and screened a decade later, at a time when various online streaming services had entered the TV distribution market and drawn part of the audiences' attention away from the TV screen. The ten-year time span allows a diachronic comparison of the relations between television entertainment and revolutionary discourse. Furthermore, the in-depth analysis of the two dramas also facilitates a comparison between Hunan TV and CCTV-1 in terms of their different foci and articulations of Chinese history and politics. It allows us to consider whether they narrate the common revolutionary past differently and if so, how the propagandist or educational messages diverge. It also allows us to speculate as to what has produced these differences, in particular whether these may reveal the greater commercial pressures Hunan TV confronts in attracting and maintaining its share of audience.

7.2 *Struggles in an Ancient City*: Heroes, traitors and the restrained love

The TV drama *Struggles in an Ancient City* (hereafter: *Struggles*) is an adaptation of the 1958 Red Classics novel that recounts the CCP-led anti-Japanese struggles in an occupied city of northern China. The 20-episode drama serial was first aired on 17 May 2005 on Jiangsu's City Channel (*Chengshi Pindao*), a terrestrial TV channel broadcast within Jiangsu Province. Later from August onward, it was successively broadcast daily on three provincial satellite TV channels (including Hunan TV) to reach national audiences, as part of the state commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of China's victory in the Anti-Japanese War. Hence this drama also facilitates a synchronic comparison with the CCTV-1 drama, *Eighth Route Army*, which was broadcast during the same period for the same commemorative event.

Unlike other controversial remakes of the Red Classics that had led to government censorship in early 2004 (as noted earlier), this drama garnered official recognition after its debut, which made the rebroadcasts possible. The survival of this drama is largely down to its experienced production team, Hai Run Movies & TV Production Group. With good records of producing award-winning TV serials and adaptations of Red Classics,[26] this private media company had gained considerable experience in treating the politically important topic of revolution. *Struggles* largely follows the storyline of the original novel, which was written by military writer and reporter Li Yingru and published in 1958, but also incorporates new plot and narrative devices (Zhang, 2004). According to the director, the aim of adding new content was to enrich the existing story, create excitement and thereby attract young audiences, but the additions by no means alter the political stance, character design or revolutionary love reflected in the original work (ibid.). Apart from the slight change in content, this drama also

[26] Prior to *Struggles in an Ancient City,* Hai Run had successfully produced and released two Red-Classics dramas: *Steel Meets the Fire* (*Liehuo jingang*, 2003) and *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (*Xiaobing Zhang Ga*, 2004).

recruited plenty of well-known veteran actors to increase its popularity. It stars Siqin Gaowa, Liu Wei, Jiang Wu, as well as the increasingly popular Japanese actor, Koji Yano – best known for his acting as an 'evil' Japanese military commander in revolutionary films and TV dramas made in China. By adhering to the established political principles and revolutionary spirit, the production team managed to sell this remake to many municipal and provincial TV channels.

The drama is set in mid-August of 1945, when the Second World War is coming to an end in Europe, whereas in the Far East, the Japanese Army still occupies several major cities in North China. In this situation, a CCP agent, Yang Xiaodong, is secretly sent to a Japanese-occupied city in Hebei Province with the mission to promote an uprising in the local 'puppet government'[27] against the Japanese Army. Assisted by Jinhuan and Yinhuan, twin sisters working as CCP underground agents, and the Communist guerrilla led by Captain Liang, Yang Xiaodong sneaks into the headquarters of the 'puppet army', seeking to persuade their regimental commander Guan Jingtao to revolt against the Japanese. Eventually, Jinhuan sacrifices her own life in order to cover up the fact that Guan Jingtao is working with the CCP, and thereby wins over the collaborationist army's cooperation. With their help, Yang Xiaodong defeats Duotian, the maniac Japanese military advisor, and crushes his plan of bombing the city. The overall narrative focus of this drama is on how the Communist heroes stage an uprising in the city, which is governed by pro-Japanese Chinese officials and army troops.

This storyline immediately shows differences to the previously discussed CCTV-1 dramas which are all set at or near the battlefront and mostly in rural areas. The urban environment in *Struggles* allows closer contacts and more direct violence between opponents, and hence allows for more exciting plot designs and a more dramatic depiction of characters. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on these characters and their actions, in order to highlight the distinct narrative devices adopted to make the fictional revolutionary story popular and attractive to contemporary young audiences.

The first distinct trait demonstrated in *Struggles* is associated with the conventionally binary opposition of good and evil, represented by the Communist secret agent Yang Xiaodong and the Japanese military consultant, Duotian. At times this opposition teeters on the boundaries of cliché, with Yang depicted as an extraordinary hero who can easily slip into the headquarters of the 'puppet' troops, and then get out safely. In comparison, the Japanese commander is portrayed as a sinister and ferocious enemy, threatening to destroy the city using biological weapons. To further demonstrate his villainy, Koji Yano, the actor who plays Duotian, wears a fake moustache, which is a typical feature of evil Japanese commanders in Chinese films and TV dramas.

[27] The term 'puppet government' refers to several collaborationist governments established by Imperial Japan, beginning in 1934 in Manchuria and existing in many parts of China before Japan's surrender in 1945.

Yet, the distinctiveness in this binary treatment of good and evil lies in the dramatic tension created between the two opponents. This tension is very different to the front-line battles shown in the CCTV-1 dramas. The urban setting in *Struggles* allows greater proximity in the engagement of the forces of good and evil. This opens up a whole host of dramatic possibilities – car chases, physical fights and gun battles. We can easily pick up these dramatic devices by looking at the confrontations between Yang and Duotian. In one scene, Yang seeks to flee from the headquarters of the 'puppet' army, driving away Duotian's car while the latter is still inside. A fierce fight between the two ensues in the fast-moving vehicle (see Fig. 7.1): while Yang is at the steering wheel, Duotian points a gun at Yang's head, trying to make him stop in order to make good his escape. Yang refuses to do so and, instead, crashes the car against a wall, escapes from the scene, and leaves Duotian in the car, unconscious. This sequence not only displays the intense and hostile confrontation between the two characters, but also reveals the inferiority of Duotian. It conforms to the setting frequently seen from the CCTV-1 dramas that the CCP members are smarter and stronger than their Japanese enemies. Moreover, the fights between Yang and Duotian, wherein the latter is often defeated, add a layer of personal hatred – mostly on Duotian's part – to the emotion-laden war between their two countries. In these ways, the fight between good and evil becomes a means of creating suspense and drama.

Figure 7.1: Duotian (left) points a gun at Yang Xiaodong, forcing him to stop. *Struggles in an Ancient City* (2005)

Besides the conventional binary treatment of good and evil, the drama introduces a different type of binary opposition, namely that between the brave Communist heroes (heroines) and the ridiculous 'traitors to the nation' (*hanjian*), exemplified by the 'puppet' troops. Ridiculing the traitors opens up spaces for revolutionary fiction to create comic effects and simultaneously enriches the strategies of television propaganda and education. The contrasting effect between depictions of the 'brave' and the 'weak' is best illustrated by the highly dramatic opening scene, where CCP agent Yang Xiaodong is trying to slip into the city at midnight but encounters a 'puppet' troop patrol. When alerted to his presence, the patrol fires randomly, injuring Yang and nearly capturing him. It is at this critical moment that Captain Liang shows up, scares away the puppet troops and saves Yang. In this sequence, Yang displays strong personal heroism and courage: when he is in danger, he stays calm and

composed throughout, although he eventually needs a last-minute rescue from his comrade Captain Liang. In contrast to the Communist heroes, the 'puppet' troops are portrayed as ridiculous and cowardly traitors. When they see the face of Captain Liang, they drop their guns immediately and surrender to the Communist guerrilla without hesitation (Fig. 7.2). By being portrayed as ridiculous, their loyalty to the 'puppet' regime and Japanese army is ridiculed as well. The drama therefore suggests that the political stance of these 'traitors to the nation' has no ideological roots. In addition to their problematic behaviour, they also wear ill-fitting uniforms and hats, thus looking exceptionally clumsy and messy. In this way, these clown-like characters are funnier than the other characters, which adds humorous elements to the representation of the conflict.

Figure 7.2: The 'puppet' troop surrenders to Captain Liang (right) immediately when they see his face. *Struggles in an Ancient City* (2005)

The comic effects of the puppet troops also fulfil an educational function. Their cowardice and fickleness create a contrasting effect between them and the brave, selfless Communist heroes with their strong faith and unswerving loyalty. While the above example already displays the bravery of CCP agent Yang Xiaodong, this courage and resolute loyalty to the revolutionary cause is more pronounced in the actions of the Communist heroine, Jinhuan. In contrast to the 'puppet' army's wavering belief in their political stance, Jinhuan takes her own life in exchange for the victory of the revolutionary struggles in this city. Her last wish has been to save Guan Jingtao, the regimental commander of the 'puppet' army, who the CCP agent is seeking to work with to stage an uprising from within the Japanese-controlled government. From this juxtaposition, the audience can easily tell the difference between the great and the small, recognising who is really fighting for 'our' nation. It is worth noting that this portrayal of traitors was widely used in films produced from the 1950s to 1970s for educational purposes, particularly those targeting young audiences, such as *The Letter with a Feather* (*Jimao xin*, 1954) and *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (*Xiaobing Zhang Ga*, 1963). The comic appearance of the

'traitors' and their wavering stances in these cinematic productions are visually recognisable, indicating that these characters should be denounced by the good Chinese people. In contemporary remakes of the Red Classics, such as *Struggles*, TV producers continue to use this stereotypical representation of the 'traitors to the nation', thereby simultaneously providing amusement and education for the audience. Also, it is noticeable that this type of comic depiction and ironic tone of narration is almost completely absent in the epic style of CCTV-1's historical war dramas.

The third significant narrative trait in *Struggles* is the detailed depiction of two female protagonists – Jinhuan and Yinhuan. This serves to praise the heroic actions of female revolutionaries on the one hand, and to display romantic relationships between the revolutionaries on the other. As shown above, Jinhuan is a highly accomplished underground agent, appearing on several occasions as a confident, calm and brave fighter who confronts the enemy fearlessly. Yinhuan, on the other hand, mainly assists the work of the guerrilla by serving as liaison whilst working as a nurse in the city hospital. This casts her in a supplementary and less important role. However, the most foregrounded love relationship between leading characters is that between Yang Xiaodong and Yinhuan. In this relationship, the male character (Yang) is portrayed as experienced and mature, whereas the female character (Yinhuan) is positioned as an admirer of Yang. It is thus evident that the romantic plot has allocated relatively conservative gender roles to male and female revolutionaries – the men active and outgoing, the women subservient (more details below). It is also obvious that the depiction of love relationship becomes entangled with the revolutionary mission.

As mentioned earlier, wartime romance has been an important narrative dimension placed at the heart of contemporary remakes of Red Classics; yet the excessive exploration of Communist heroes' personal romances has drawn criticism from both the state and the public. In the case of *Struggles*, however, criticism for too much romantic narrative has not been found. On the contrary, loyal fans of the original works even complained about the insufficient depiction of the love between Yang Xiaodong and Yinhuan in the 2005 TV serial, because romance between the leading characters was an important dimension in both the 1958 novel and 1963 film. In the TV remake, their loving relationship was more like a revolutionary friendship between comrades which can be given up for the sake of the revolutionary cause (Tang, 2005). Indeed, producers of the 2005 serial sought to downplay the romantic entanglements between main characters in order to pass censorship. According to the director, this implicit representation of love resulted from his understanding that the romance between revolutionaries tends to be subtle, unexpressed and friendship-like; and, above all, that the theme of this drama is patriotism, not romance (Sina Entertainment, 2005). We can find that the director was trying to adopt an effective strategy to avoid being censored, given that some TV adaptations of Red Classics had triggered censorship due to their obsession with depicting

love. Therefore, the portrayal of revolutionary women in the 2005 serial is largely focused on armed struggles instead of emotional relationships. This once again reflects the efforts Chinese TV producers have made to find a balance between commercial interests and political control.

Another issue with the depiction of revolutionary women in the 2005 version of *Struggles* is concerned with the gendered role allocated to these female revolutionaries. As I have mentioned earlier, CCTV-1's revolutionary dramas foreground the achievements of male political leaders, which leaves little narrative space for the depiction of revolutionary women. Even though the images of female revolutionaries can be seen to have increased in recently produced dramas (e.g. in *On the Taihang Mountains*, 2015), most of the roles include the military leaders wives or assistants, nurses and journalists, all of whom play subordinate roles in the patriarchal order. In *Struggles*, the situation of female revolutionaries is a similar one. While it is evident that Jinhuan and Yinhuan are given more narrative space and have more important responsibilities and roles, their depiction still conforms to a pattern of gender inequality commonly found in the CCTV-1 revolutionary dramas. In fact, this pattern seems to have been reinforced by popular representations of the revolutionary past. As Gong (2011) maintains, the relationship between male and female revolutionaries in commercial adaptations of the Red Classics tends to follow a model whereby a Communist hero is often accompanied by a young female warrior. This difference in the status of male and female roles has led some authors (e.g. Wang, X., 2003: 147) to claim that this gendered representation corresponds to the reform-era slang '*xiaomi bang dakuan*' – which literally means a young female secretary dating an older and much richer entrepreneur. Although a notion formed in the reform era seems inappropriate to describe a relationship set in the revolutionary period, it has emphasised the dominant position of male Communist members and subordinate role of revolutionary women.

Contemporary TV serials tend to reconstruct the past through the lens of the present. We can perhaps link the phenomenon of increased representation of women in revolutionary dramas to the growing awareness to the consumer power of female audiences from the early 2000s. We can also connect the gendered representation in the revolutionary stories to the female images in other contemporary popular drama genres, notably love-themed TV serials/series. Scholars (Huang, 2008: 107-112; Zhu, 2008: 94-98) researching on Chinese 'pink dramas' in the 2000s – that depict the cosmopolitan lifestyle and romantic life of urban consumers – have identified a contradictory femininity associated with modern women in China. In these trendy dramas, women are depicted as having an independent career while still being obedient to Confucian ideals regarding gender roles, by avoid transgressing the patriarchal order (more discussions in chapter 9). As with the case of 'pink dramas', the efforts to make revolutionary dramas attractive to female audiences have not practically changed the

nature of female roles and the gendered view towards women. In *Struggles*, the image of Yinhuan not only conforms to the stereotype of revolutionary women, bearing resemblance to the depictions of wives and girlfriends in the CCTV-1 dramas, but is also consistent with the gendered representation of women in other contemporary popular dramas.

To summarise, *Struggles in an Ancient City* shows how contemporary successful adaptations of the Red Classics need to remain consistent with the original stories and more importantly, with the politically defined collective memory of the revolutionary past. At the same time, these contemporary dramas display innovations in the way of presenting characters and driving the plot. Within the binary opposition between good and evil, more action scenes between individuals are added to create intense feelings and thrilling experiences among audiences, as a method of catering to the taste and preferences of contemporary audiences. Alongside good and evil characters, a group of comic figures are created for amusing effects and also have an educational function. In addition, popular narrative devices also include the depiction of romantic love between fictional revolutionaries. But of course, this important narrative dimension needs to be treated with caution. This suggests there remains pervasive and considerable self-censorship in contemporary TV productions in China, even in the commercial sector. Although there is a more extensive representation of women to be found, the nature of their roles still tends to reinforce the gendered power relations and patriarchal ideology. Revolutionary women either die for the revolutionary cause, or are shown as submissive to the male authority figures; they seldom exist as autonomous and empowered agents in their own right.

7.3 *The Disguiser*: Omnipotent communist heroes and the *femme fatale*

As one of the most successful TV fictions in 2015, *The Disguiser* received not only official recognition, but also praises from the industry and audiences. It was nominated for the 30th *Feitian* Awards in 2015 in the categories best TV drama and best male actor, and in the same year selected by SARFT as an outstanding example to inspire TV drama production in the following year (Sina Entertainment, 2016). Besides, this drama also won several awards from the National Television Production Association in 2017 (Sina Entertainment, 2017), indicating the recognition from within the industry. More importantly, this drama received high ratings from both television viewing and online platforms, which suggests that the spy stories previously targeting the older generation have received extensive attention from young audiences (Renminwang, 2015).

The success of this drama largely resides in its complex storyline which revolves around the Ming siblings' undercover missions in Shanghai. The story is set in the aftermath of the

Battle of Shanghai[28] in 1937, when the KMT's National Revolutionary Army lost Shanghai to the Japanese Army.[29] After the Japanese Army had gained control of the city, they began to recruit pro-Japanese Chinese officials to govern it, which formed a local 'puppet' government. This triggered various means of struggles and assassinations conducted by the Chinese resistance forces, including Communist undercover agents and the KMT's *Juntong*[30] spies. Against this background, *The Disguiser* tells a dramatic spy story that unfolds between the Communists, the KMT, the Japanese Army and its 'puppet' regime. The plot centres on the powerful Ming family. Ming Lou, the elder of two brothers, serves as the chief financial officer of the Shanghai 'puppet' government, which makes him a celebrity in this city. He has another secret identity as a *Juntong* spy of the KMT government. But in fact, he is a loyal member of the CCP, devoted to eradicating traitors and collecting intelligence for the frontline battles against the Japanese army. His younger brother, Ming Tai, is a college student and seemingly spoiled playboy who has been secretly recruited by Wang Tianfeng, a KMT *Juntong* spy and trainer, to be a secret agent of *Juntong* at the outset of the drama. The Ming family's business and assets are managed by their eldest sister, Ming Jing, a capitalist who has been covertly financing the CCP-led anti-Japanese movement for years. Unaware of each family member's secret actions, Ming Tai returns to Shanghai with his mission partner, Yu Manli, to engage in assassinations and intelligence gathering. Through co-operation between the KMT *Juntong* and CCP undercover agents, the Ming siblings manage to bring down the enemies of the 'puppet' regime and support the CCP in its frontline battles.

The success of this drama relies on not only an attractive original story, but also an experienced production team. It is based on a popular spy novel written by Zhang Yong, who also acts as the scriptwriter. The drama was produced and distributed collaboratively by Shandong Film and TV Group (a provincial media group, commonly known as Shan Ying) and a private corporation – Daylight Entertainment (Zhengwu Yangguang), established by former Shan Ying employees in 2011. Shan Ying was one of the earliest influential film and TV production institutions in China and has received numerous awards since its foundation in 1986. Excelling in making quality drama, Shan Ying and Daylight Entertainment have nowadays become a widely-favoured brand among Chinese TV audiences. In *The Disguiser*,

[28] The Battle of Shanghai, also known as the Battle of Songhu (*Songhu huizhan*), was one of the fiercest battles fought between the KMT's National Revolutionary Army and the Imperial Japanese Army. It lasted from August to November 1937, at the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and ended with the retreat of the KMT army to Nanjing.

[29] After the Battle of Shanghai, those parts used to be controlled by the Nationalist government were lost to the Japanese Army. The foreign concessions in Shanghai remained intact until the outbreak of the Pacific War initiated by Japan.

[30] *Juntong* was the abbreviated Chinese name of the military intelligence agency of the Nationalist Government before 1946, mainly serving for intelligence gathering and spying operations. Its official name was National Bureau of Investigation and Statistics (Military Commission).

they employed youth idol Hu Ge and other popular actors so as to attract young audiences, which proved to be effective (China News, 2015). The popularity of this drama suggests that if packaged in the form of spy stories, the revolutionary discourse has great commercial value in the contemporary television market. In the remainder of this section, I will tease out the distinct narrative techniques that make this drama popular and its propaganda messages acceptable, while also giving attention to the development in narratives as compared to *Struggles*, and to the elements which deviate from the prescribed route of Party propaganda seen in CCTV-1.

The first thing to note is the depiction of personal dilemmas resulting from the complex identities of the protagonists. This is signalled clearly in the title of the drama: each key figure needs to disguise themselves effectively in order to accomplish their mission for the resistance force. While the binary opposition between good Communists and evil Japanese commander still persists, the drama places more emphasis on revealing the dilemmas of the people on the 'good' side. Ming Lou is portrayed as an experienced Communist hero who has high political consciousness and moral standards. Even though he works in an extremely dangerous environment, running the risk of being exposed any time, he is so skilled in disguising himself that no one else (apart from his personal assistant, another Communist undercover agent named Ming Cheng) knows his real identity (see Fig. 7.3). His only weakness is his affection for his younger brother Ming Tai. Knowing the conspiracies and crises of working in such a dangerous situation, he is very reluctant to see Ming Tai taking the same route of being an undercover agent. Therefore, when Ming Tai becomes a *Juntong* spy under his command – Ming Lou also takes on the role of leader of the KMT spy squad in Shanghai, he has mixed feelings of sending his brother on potentially fatal missions.

In stark contrast to the omnipotent image of Ming Lou, the younger brother Ming Tai is portrayed as a carefree playboy at the beginning of the story. However, his character develops

Figure 7.3: Ming Tai (left) does not know his brother Ming Lou's (right) real identify until the end of this drama. *The Disguiser* (2015)

alongside his experience of several anti-Japanese missions. After the cruel training given by Wang Tianfeng, he is sent to Shanghai to conduct anti-Japanese activities. Unlike his brother, who remains skilful throughout the drama, Ming Tai cannot even pull the trigger during his first assassination mission. With the help of his partners, he finally becomes a capable spy. At the same time, Ming Tai becomes aware of the corruption among KMT senior government officials and gradually loses faith in the government he works for. By contrast, in the collaboration with Communist agents, he comes to appreciate and respect the beliefs of the Communists and their devotion to the liberation of his country. Therefore, he needs to make a decision whether continuing his mission in the KMT *Juntong* or joining the CCP. The situation is further complicated by the arrival of a female Communist agent, Cheng Jinyun, who is shown to be a perfect match with Ming Tai either during collaborative missions or in loving relationships. In order to join Cheng Jinyun, Ming Tai must first break up with Yu Manli, who has already developed affections for Ming Tai.

By zooming in on individual lives, *The Disguiser* interweaves the grand revolutionary narrative with personal life and family stories. Not only the Ming brothers face personal dilemmas, but their entire family confronts the hard choice between defending the interests of family or of nation. As noted earlier, the Ming siblings come from an upper class background, owning the Ming Corporation and serving as government officials. Accordingly, they live the glamourous lifestyle commonly found among old capitalists in Shanghai of the 1940s: they inhabit a mansion inherited from their father, wear tailored suits, drink coffee and wine, and play tennis on their private tennis courts. Inside the family house (Fig. 7.4), expensive antique furniture can be seen in every room, which are taken good care by servants. The interior decorations remind us of Chiang Kai-shek's president palace in the 1999 CCTV-1 drama *War*

Figure 7.4: Interior of the Ming's family house
The Disguiser (2015)

of China's Fate. But here in *The Disguiser*, the narrative stance is totally different. The Ming family's luxurious lifestyle and stable life course ostensibly distance them from their turbulent revolutionary career – they seem like those people who enjoy various wartime privileges and thus are least likely to engage in revolution. However, the whole family works for the CCP: the Ming brothers – including Ming Tai, who chooses to join the CCP after Yu Manli's death – lurk around the Japanese intelligence agency for military information; the eldest sister, Ming Jing, is a secret patron of the Communist revolutionary movement. Commenting on why his family embarks on this road, Ming Lou stresses that only when the foreign invaders are driven away will his family's happiness be restored. It is apparent that Ming Lou and his siblings are portrayed as altruistic Communist role models who prioritise national interest over personal and family happiness. By contrasting the Ming's upper-class status with their risky choice, the drama embeds a nationalist discourse and collective ideal of defending 'our' country in the life story of the Ming siblings. Furthermore, in portraying Shanghai capitalists as Communist activists, the drama also reflects the political and social changes of the 1990s and 2000s and especially the Three Represents, which paved the way for capitalists to become CCP members.

The depiction of dilemmas around the leading characters – between family and duty, between personal choice and collective mission – also brings this drama closer to the audience, in the sense that audiences can imagine themselves struggling with similar choices, for instance, between family and career, or between personal ideals and institutional pressure. Particularly, Ming Lou is portrayed as a powerful figure who can resolve any problems emerging from his (espionage) work, quite excelling in disguising his true identity and thereby accomplishing the challenging work assigned by his superiors. In this plot design, the collective revolutionary movement is used as more of a backdrop to display the personal abilities of Ming Lou. In this regard, the personalised spy stories validate the argument made by Ni Wei (2013): contemporary spy dramas are inclined to acclaim individual problem-solving skills in the workplace, which concurrently weakens the significance of the collective power in revolutionary movements.

However, there is more to *The Disguiser* than that. This drama draws on the internal conflicts in personal lives, in conjunction with popular aesthetic forms, to invite contemporary audience to participate in the reimagination of the collective aspirations of the revolutionaries. Such aesthetic forms particularly show a hint of bourgeois comfort, demonstrated through the lifestyle of the Ming family, which makes this drama vastly different from CCTV-1's revolution-themed dramas with their rural setting, and even from *Struggles* – the Red-Classics drama broadcast on the same channel ten years earlier. The urban setting in this drama provides ample room for imagining the 'glamourous' side of revolutionary struggles, containing exquisite clothing, various cocktail parties and grand ceremonies which are interwoven into

the social life and intelligence work of the leading characters. These representations not only satisfy contemporary audiences' curiosity about the 'invisible' war in occupied Shanghai, but also coincide with their cultural tastes. As noted in chapter 3, an important trend of Chinese television entertainment in the new century has been the growing interest in celebrating an affluent lifestyle and satisfying the cultural aspirations of urban consumers. Popular narratives have thus turned to worshipping the rich and the powerful, as well as material comforts associated with them. The image of Ming Lou actually resembles the character type of successful entrepreneurs in popular romantic dramas. Besides, although *The Disguiser* is set in the 1940s, the costume of the leading characters seems remarkably contemporary (see Fig. 7.3 and below), which is also designed for satisfying the taste of contemporary audiences. While such a narrative trend was not yet evident in the 2005 drama *Struggles*, representing the posh life of urban dwellers has become a key narrative device in *The Disguiser*. More details on this narrative trend will be revealed in my subsequent analyses of love dramas (chapters 8 and 9). At this point, I will limit myself to emphasising that the complex identities of the Ming family not only set a backdrop for the intelligence war, but are also useful for absorbing contemporary popular aesthetic elements into the spy story.

The second aspect of the distinctiveness of *The Disguiser* lies in its depiction of KMT *Juntong* spies. This drama is quite nuanced in the way it portrays the KMT government and avoids consistent deprecation and condemnation of their motives and operations. Indeed, the KMT, particularly its *Juntong* spies, is depicted in a more positive way when compared with other earlier film and TV productions. Prior to this drama, *Juntong* spies were invariably portrayed as vicious, devious enemies, bent on assassinating CCP agents and undermining the Communist revolution. Such representations include the notorious Mao Renfeng in the state-sponsored blockbuster *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), and Li Ya in the popular drama serial *Lurk* (2009). In *The Disguiser*, however, a group of *Juntong* spies, consisting of Ming Tai, Yu Manli and led by Wang Tianfeng, frequently cooperate with CCP agents and actively fight against the Japanese forces. Wang Tianfeng is an extremely patriotic soldier, who initiates a suicidal plan, attempting to make the Japanese intelligence agency believe the false information he has disseminated. Although his plan puts lots of people, including himself, in great danger, it eventually proves to be effective, leading to the defeat of the Japanese Army on the battlefield. Because of this, Wang Tianfeng, a *Juntong* spy, receives praise and gratitude from the CCP undercover group, an almost unprecedented scene in Chinese television or cinema. It is without doubt that the KMT agent Wang Tianfeng is categorised as belonging to the patriotic 'national Self'. But looking further into this character, it is also obvious that compared with the powerful Ming Lou, who is more considerate, Wang Tianfeng seems too radical and reckless. Through this contrast, the drama clearly signals the superiority of the CCP over the KMT in terms of military strategy and care for human lives. This is in line with

the attitude shown to KMT patriotic forces in other contemporary cultural products, including the CCTV-1 revolutionary dramas.

Apart from the powerful Communist hero and the problematic KMT spy, three female characters are worthy of attention as well. A comparison of the trio demonstrates how CCP female warriors are depicted differently to women from other political camps in the intelligence war. The three extraordinary female characters are Wang Manchun, director of Department 76 – the intelligence centre of the Shanghai collaborationist government; Yu Manli, a former killer trained to be a *Juntong* spy; and Cheng Jinyun, a Communist undercover agent who has romantic connections with Ming Tai. In *The Disguiser*, women no longer appear exclusively in subordinate roles. As in *Struggles*, they become specially trained agents who master combat skills that enable them to engage in intelligence missions like men. Moreover, in *The Disguiser*, these female fighters are assigned tasks that require them to use their sexual attraction as a way of gathering intelligence. The historical record bears this out. As Edwards (2016) has noted, due to the 'natural talents' associated with sexual characteristics of women, the Japanese intelligence agency, the KMT and the CCP all adopted strategies of employing female spies to infiltrate each other's organisations during the war: by setting 'honey traps', these female special agents could access classified information comparatively easily from male authorities. *The Disguiser* represents these intelligence strategies in dramatic form: the above-mentioned female characters are portrayed as having a variety of skills essential to carry out their intelligence missions. They possess not only explicitly feminine qualities, such as having attractive faces and bodies, being kind and sometimes sentimental which makes them look vulnerable and thus easily trusted by men, but also strength and ability traditionally associated with men, such as assertiveness, courage, and being competitive, which enable them to complete their missions in more efficient ways.

Figure 7.5: Feng Yulan, a Communist warrior in the CCTV-1 drama, *Eighth Route Army* (2005)

Figure 7.6: Cheng Jinyun, the Communist undercover agent in *The Disguiser* (2015)

Figure 7.7: Yu Manli, a KMT *Juntong* spy *The Disguiser* (2015)

Figure 7.8: Wang Manchun, Director of Department 76. *The Disguiser* (2015)

In many ways, these depictions are quite unlike CCTV-1's women warriors, who are often designed to be discreet, asexual, and devoid of female characteristics. For instance, they normally wear the same military uniforms as men, without attractive makeups or hair styling (see Fig. 7.5). By contrast, *The Disguiser* introduces the image of the sexy female spy, which has largely extended the narrative space for female characters. If Cheng Jinyun's outfit remains aligned with the image of Communists as morally decent and sexually pure (Fig. 7.6), Yu Manli and Wang Manchun represent the '*femme fatale*' – quite literally deadly women who are sexually attractive and master the art of killing. During her missions, Yu Manli wears various fancy dresses with guns hidden underneath, as she needs different identities to cover herself as a spy (Fig. 7.7). Wang Manchun, the villain in this drama, is a cruel spymaster who often tortures her prisoners to death. In order to present her 'professionalism' and cruelty, she often wears uniforms and trench coats, coupled with delicate hairstyles and makeups. Particularly, her red lips signify that she is sexually attractive but harmful, deceptive and brutal (Fig. 7.8).

The difference between the images of the Communist female warriors and other fighters coincides with Edwards's (2016: 158) observation that the post-war popular representations of Chinese history often depict 'our side' as immaculate fighters and 'their side' as the source of 'dirty tricks'. This assertion is partially true in the aspects that the Communist agent Cheng Jinyun is depicted as a morally upright fighter, maintaining a 'clean' romantic relationship with Ming Tai and remaining devoted to the revolutionary cause, whereas the collaborationist spymaster Wang Manchun is a counter-revolutionary schemer who uses her sexuality to both undermine Ming Lou's loyalty to the revolutionary cause and make him loyal to herself. However, it would be imprecise to simply label any KMT member as 'us' or 'them'. As we can see from Yu Manli, she has a 'dirty' past (as a cold-hearted murderer and prisoner), often uses her seductive and enchanting appearance to distract the enemy, hence appearing to be

morally degraded; but, judging by her anti-Japanese stance, she still tends to be on 'our side'. In addition, Yu Manli's undeclared love for Ming Tai and the courageous sacrifice of her life invite the sympathy of the audience. This once again reflects the changing attitude towards the KMT in the popular representations of the Anti-Japanese War. Moreover, the female characters fight in a spy war dominated by men, but demonstrate their distinctive feminine techniques and traits. They have thus become increasingly important elements in the popular representations of the revolutionary war. As noted by Edwards (ibid.: 9), depictions of female wartime spies as seductive agents have become an effective way to 'eroticise war for consumers of popular culture products'.

To summarise, by depicting a group of secret agents with complicated identities and personal dilemmas, *The Disguiser* presents espionage as an important part of the revolutionary war. Instead of focusing on dispersed revolutionaries and underground guerrillas fighting around the big city (as depicted in *Struggles*), this drama provides another perspective on the urban anti-Japanese struggle, which features a capitalist family in Shanghai. Whereas the 2005 series captures audience attention through dramatic physical intimacy (fights, chases, crude comic behaviour etc), its 2015 counterpart commands attention through the portrayal of far more complex emotional intimacy. Through depictions of the Ming family's devotion to the dangerous espionage work, their excellent disguising skills, as well as their sacrifice of personal feelings, lives and family interests, the producers have managed to integrate individualising plotlines with the collective agenda of fighting against the enemy, thereby delivering the message that only the Communist Party can lead Chinese people to victory. Apart from depicting the Communist heroes and patriotic KMT spies, *The Disguiser* also introduces attractive female spies in order to popularise the revolutionary narrative. The representation of their femininity is dramatically different from those of Communist female fighters in the CCTV-1 dramas, yet still displays variations in accordance with their political affiliations. Notably, the Communist female agents in this drama are depicted as morally upright and chaste, whereas the villain in the 'puppet' regime is portrayed as seductive, evil and deadly harmful. This differentiation is indicative of the CCP's moral code that Communist heroes/heroines are seen as chaste. Nevertheless, these female characters, as well as their romantic entanglement with male protagonists, have greatly illuminated the murky world of intelligence war for the audience.

7.4 Conclusion

The two dramas aired on Hunan TV tell a new kind of story about the revolutionary past, which entails complex revolutionary identities, urban environments, and abundant excitement. As we find from the diachronic comparison of the two TV serials, fictionalised revolutionary narratives have evolved from relying on earlier PRC revolutionary classics to favouring more

complicated, thrilling and inviting stories. Taking the popular 2015 drama – *The Disguiser* – as an example, recent productions have placed the narrative focus on exploring internal conflicts and emotional dilemmas of the revolutionaries. What is central to this change is a strategy of emotionalising the revolutionary past, by which these dramas make concessions to the viewers' living experiences, particularly their emotional life and working experience. In addition, popular aesthetic forms favoured by contemporary audiences are also used in *The Disguiser*, which feature the depiction of a powerful capitalist family and the posh lifestyle of urban dwellers. This combination of affluence and revolution has provided a new narrative formula for the collective agenda of constructing nationalism. These new narrative traits were relatively absent in the TV adaptations of Red Classics which were popular a decade earlier. The 2005 serial *Struggles* demonstrates that due to many political restrictions and reactions from the audience, the Red-Classics TV serials could only rely on stereotypical characters (e.g. stupid traitors, immature young female agents), as well as some intense fighting scenes, to attract the audience. These are rather limited narrative techniques, judging by today's standards.

With the advent of multi-screen viewing patterns in China since 2013 (Zhang, 2014), as well as with Xi Jinping's call for achieving the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', Chinese TV producers are faced with more challenges when trying to make the revolutionary legacies both popular and politically useful. Apart from the twisted plot and personal dilemmas of main characters, *The Disguiser* relies on a variety of visual and potentially entertaining elements, such as sexy (female) spies, glamorous upper-class lifestyle, and romantic interest involving the Communist couple Ming Tai and Cheng Jinyun. It might well be the case that the addition of these elements to the narrative of revolution will complicate debates over the 'authentic' revolutionary ethos in the past and its relation to the new representations in the present. However, these approaches have revitalised the past revolutionary legacies, thereby facilitating current propaganda work.

Despite the development in narrative strategies, what has remained the same is the omnipotent images of Communist heroes and their sacrifice in achieving the revolutionary goals. As Yang (2012) has argued, the Communist authorities' consistent promotion of revolutionary heroes serves to provide legitimacy for the regime. On the one hand, the omnipotence of the heroes symbolises the CCP's efforts and abilities in achieving victory in the Anti-Japanese War; on the other hand, the success of the Communist regime is worthy of the sacrifice of the heroes, especially the female revolutionaries. Both *Struggles* and *The Disguiser* have revealed the necessity of revolution by depicting the sacrifice (of personal life or emotional interests) of the revolutionaries. In the nationalist discourse of resisting foreign enemies, they implant a clear propagandistic message desired by the political authority: only the CCP is the legitimate ruling party of China. This propaganda content not only exists in

dramas aired on Hunan TV, but more extensively prevails in CCTV-1's revolution-themed dramas, which offer a more mainstream revolutionary narrative.

At the same time, there are clear differences in the narratives of revolution on CCTV-1 and Hunan TV. While CCTV-1's historical dramas pay more attention to the achievement and leadership of political leaders, the treatment of fictional characters on Hunan TV allows a more diverse exploration of (fictitious) individuals' revolutionary stories, and bolder imaginations of their emotional experiences. In general, the revolutionary stories retold here are in line with the trend in revolution-related cultural works towards turning to the personal dimension by focusing on individual emotions and experiences. This turn reflects the compromise between propaganda strategies, the market, and popular culture. Yet within the politically permitted realm, Hunan TV has been allowed more freedom to adopt various aesthetic elements and plot types, so as to popularise Communist doctrine of heroism and devotion.

Chapter 8

Soap Operas for Social Education and Political Propaganda: Love Themes in CCTV-1

In the previous two chapters we saw how contemporary TV dramas represented the politically important theme of revolution on two differently oriented channels. In chapters 8 and 9, I shift the focus towards a theme that is not explicitly political, and examine how propaganda and entertainment play out in love-themed TV dramas. As the quantitative results suggest in chapter 5, the past twenty-six years have seen a rising trend in the percentage of TV dramas treating the subject of love on both CCTV-1 and Hunan TV. Love-themed dramas hence comprise an integral part of domestic TV drama production in recent years. They mainly focus on domestic living spaces and explore the emotional life of contemporary ordinary citizens. Yet, in the previous chapters we have also found that in representing a political issue, namely the revolution, personalised narratives became increasingly prevalent. This involved closer examination of personal feelings and dilemmas in the revolutionary past. In this chapter, I analyse three love-themed serial dramas selected from CCTV-1, in an attempt to examine how the politically important TV channel promotes seemingly personal issues, and how the subjects of love, romance and family have been integrated into the political framework of Party propaganda and social education, while at the same time catering to the interest of contemporary audiences.

8.1 Soap Operas in China: 'A blend of entertainment and education'

The theme of love, or in a broader sense, people's emotional relationships, did not become a popular subject for Chinese TV drama producers until the 1990s. Prior to 1990, the small screen was dominated by either imported TV dramas from the US, Brazil, Mexico, Hong Kong and Japan, or domestically produced TV serials reflecting on the revolution, past political turmoil and social change (Yin, 2002). Narratives regarding domestic space and personal relationships were absent from this period. Kong (2008: 75) explains that the absence of personal narratives was due to the cultural legacy of socialist realism formulated since the late 1940s, a process when the socialist state had sought to 'appropriate and erase private space from social imagination and artistic representation'. As discussed in chapter 7, the suppression of individual aspirations for the sake of the collective good can also be seen in the revolution-themed works created during the highly politicised socialist period (1949-1976) as a result of the politicised national culture. However, a decade after the beginning of economic reform, the rapid expansion of television nationwide and the increased broadcasting time urged

Chinese TV producers to open up new topics to satisfy the audience demands for more TV programmes.

Media scholars (Wang and Singhal, 1992; Rofel, 1994; Zha, 1995; Yin, 2002; Keane 2005; Kong, 2008; Zhu, 2008) and Chinese television practitioners alike have generally agreed that the huge popularity of the 1990 drama *Yearnings* marked the starting point of domestic TV dramas centred on the love experiences of ordinary people, and thereafter encouraged the soap-opera style on Chinese TV screen. The success of *Yearnings* was not a chance occurrence. This fifty-episode serial drama depicted the joy and sorrow of two couples living in Beijing's winding alleyways. It drew special attention to their life changes between the late 1960s and 1980s, a period when the influence of the Cultural Revolution was penetrating the daily life of ordinary people, causing suspicion and estrangement in human relationships. *Yearnings* was released to widespread acclaim from the public, allegedly receiving an audience share of up to 90%.[31] The sensational success of this TV serial was not only due to its proximity to real life, which helped the audience reflect on and release the negative feelings accumulated during the political turmoil. Equally important was its creation of a role model, Liu Huifang, which led lots of audiences to emulate her and cherish the beauty of traditional cultural values, such as selflessness and social harmony (Wang and Singhal, 1992). The latter point was particularly pertinent for the Chinese society which had just experienced the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The drama's focus on the resolution of family conflicts and its promotion of pro-social values and behaviour were also considered highly important by the Chinese government for promoting social harmony and stability. For this reason, Li Ruihuan, a Politburo member in charge of propaganda at that time, praised the production team of *Yearnings* in person, for their embedding of a 'traditional Chinese view of human relations in a socialist context' (Wang and Singhal, 1992: 184). He called on national media workers to imitate this drama and insert 'socialist principles and moral virtues' into artistic creation, making the entertainment genre speak to the broad masses and thereby educate them (Zha, 1995: 28). The praise from the political leadership indicated that Chinese government recognised the pedagogical function of soap opera and was determined to exploit this genre more. Based on these facts, Wang and Singhal (1992) argue that *Yearnings* initiated a unique kind of soap opera in China that is characterised by a blend of entertainment and education, with an underlying purpose of political propaganda.

This argument is certainly evident, because ever since the success of *Yearnings*, the early 1990s saw a boom of soap operas on Chinese TV screen. These displayed not only the

[31] The specific figure of the audience share gained by *Yearnings* around 1990 is still debatable, in that there were no reliable measurement methods in the early 1990s. However, what can be sure is that the reactions triggered by *Yearnings* were unprecedented. Numerous newspaper articles of that time could confirm the overwhelming audience response to this first-of-a-kind soap opera.

themes of love, romance and family, but also socially and politically relevant content. Looking at the hit dramas of the 1990s, such as *Love It to the Limit* (*Guobayin*, 1994), *Beijinger in New York* (*Beijingren zai niuyue*, 1994), *Love on the Pearl River* (*Qing man zhujiang*, 1994) and *Holding Hands* (*Qianshou*, 1999), we find that in narrating the love relationships between leading characters, these dramas also offered implicit social commentary on market reform, cultural collision, unemployment, generational conflicts etc. Some of the content in these dramas are directly linked to justifying government policies – as we shall see in my detailed analysis of *Holding Hands* below. This feature of Chinese TV soaps to a great extent differs from soap operas made in the western context.

Originally broadcast as daytime radio programmes to fill the free time of stay-at-home housewives, Western soaps frequently picture a fictional reality by portraying characters 'getting into trouble and out again' (Herzog, 1941: 66). By picking topics that match women's quotidian concerns, soap operas provided the audience with an emotional release, remedies to adjust their life, and help them overcome the dullness in their everyday life and work (ibid.). Because of this inherent closeness to the emotional needs of women, Harrington (2016) maintains that the foci of TV soaps are predominantly occupied by familial and romantic relationships, as well as their corresponding subjects, gender and sexuality; compared to these, other socially relevant identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, are largely marginalised from the narratives. But this does not mean that personal issues depicted in Western soaps have nothing to do with social or political relevance. As Harrington (ibid.) went on to state, feminist scholars have sought to establish the connection between women's consumption of soap operas and female empowerment. They tend to highlight the significance of soaps by asserting that soap operas have provided a significant site which brings women's concerns and pursuits to the central stage of public awareness. In this process, women, on the basis of traditional female principles disclosed through soap operas, are empowered to confront the patriarchal order (see Brunsdon, 1995; Rapping, 2002). However, the politics indicated through Western soaps have little in common with the political function prescribed for Chinese soap opera, particularly in those ones created by state-sponsored production units.

In the Chinese context, soap-opera-style TV dramas have opened up 'a cultural forum for various social groups and ideological agents to make sense of dramatic social changes and to address the everyday emotional concerns of Chinese viewers' (Kong, 2008: 77). In this respect, Chinese soap opera actually undertakes the role of a mediator, connecting personal experience to wider social, economic and political changes. Kong (2008) argues that modern cultural values (e.g. individualism, materialism, cosmopolitism) have brought unprecedented challenges to traditional family values, which at times shake the love and marital relationships built on revolutionary socialist ideals in China. Dramas depicting the contemporary life of ordinary Chinese people appear to offer solutions to individual pains, sorrows, and family

conflicts resulting from the socioeconomic reforms. In a similar vein, Li (2011) states that Chinese soap operas provide the (not necessarily female) audience with a superficial pleasure of satisfaction regarding the past and present by showing them happy endings or providing social criticism on issues that have failed to draw public attention in reality. This resembles the function of Western soap opera in the sense of helping people 'get out of trouble'. In the analysis in this chapter, I want to show that in the Chinese context, the 'trouble' people get into is directly or indirectly associated with the Party-state's economic reforms, its relevant policies, political movements or historical developments. In the process of offering life advice on personal issues, the Chinese soap-opera-style TV dramas have sought to help the audience understand and adjust to the social and political changes occurred since the 'reform and opening'.

In the following sections, I draw on three cases to illustrate how Chinese soap operas since the 1990s, revolving around the emotional dimension of individual life and produced to entertain TV audiences, have exercised their educational and propagandistic functions. The three dramas were chosen from CCTV-1, so as to facilitate a comparison to Hunan TV (dealt with in chapter 9) in representing the theme of love: *Holding Hands* (*Qianshou*, 1999) depicts the marriage crisis and emotional experience of an urban couple; *My Youthfulness* (*Wo de qingchun shui zuozhu*, 2009) focuses on the lives of three female cousins, representing their attitudes to love, family and work; *My Year of 1997* (*Wo de 1997*, 2017) traces the love entanglements between a hard-working young man and two girls, set against the background of Hong Kong's colonial history. The former two dramas are both *Feitian* Award winners and were well received when aired on CCTV-1. *My Year of 1997* was broadcast in June 2017 in tandem with the national campaign for the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's 'handover'. Hence this drama was endowed with great official expectations and political significance. All three dramas have gained official approval in different ways regarding their depiction of the lives of ordinary Chinese people. While I am interested in finding out how the development of narrative elements across the three dramas have responded to consumerist trends as well as the changing socio-political context, I also aim to highlight the narrative conventions in the CCTV-1 love dramas that are potentially different from Hunan TV.

8.2 *Holding Hands*: Regaining love and success through self-improvement

Holding Hands is an eighteen-episode serial drama, centring on the emotional experience of an urban middle-aged couple. The drama was jointly produced in 1998 by China International Television Corporation – a state-owned television production enterprise founded in 1984, and a private production company – Beijing Jinse Chitang Media Company Limited. It began airing at CCTV-1's prime-time evening slots from 9 April 1999 on a daily basis, achieving an average of 9.2% audience share (CCTV, 1999). This figure is among the highest

with respect to TV dramas focusing on realistic themes. As one of the first few TV dramas touching upon the topic of extramarital affairs, *Holding Hands* became a hit and later in the same year as it was broadcast, garnered both *Feitian* and *Jinying* awards for, among others, Best Director and Excellent Drama. The success of this drama is partly attributed to its officially recognised production team led by Yang Yang, a multi-award-winning director who works for CCTV's China TV Series Production Centre[32] (CTPC). More importantly, the drama provided a reflection on the marriage and family crisis of urbanites, which resonated profoundly with contemporary audiences, in terms of their feelings and confusions accumulated since the reform era. Focusing on the plot and main characters of this drama, particularly personal dilemmas and conflicts, I will subsequently identify the narrative strategies that account for this TV serial's sensational success. Based on the textual content analysis, I will examine how the personal narratives disclosing the protagonists' internal emotional experience have been integrated with the interpretation of social changes. I will thereby illustrate the emotional impact, educational function and political implication associated with this drama.

Set in a big city in the 1990s, the story traces the marital life and emotional predicament of a middle-aged couple, Xia Xiaoxue and Zhong Rui. At the beginning of the story, the wife, Xiaoxue, finds herself stuck in the dullness and repetition of day-to-day life. With no ambitious goals for career advancement, she develops an increasingly bad temper. As the story unfolds, Xiaoxue reveals that many years ago she had a chance to become a professional woman with a promising career ahead, but in order to better take care of her family, she sacrificed her career and chose an undemanding library job. She thinks her husband should cherish her for the sake of her sacrifice. However, her loving husband, Zhong Rui, a talented software engineer caring more about work than family, gradually loses interest in and patience with her. Instead, he falls for a female colleague, Wang Chun, who is younger and more attractive than Xiaoxue. After experiencing many fights and quarrels, Xiaoxue accepts that Zhong Rui is leaving her. After the divorce, Zhong Rui becomes increasingly successful in running his own company, whilst Xiaoxue is made redundant as a result of the market-oriented reforms in state-owned enterprises, becoming unemployed. In striving to raise her son and manage the single-parent family, Xiaoxue starts to acquire new knowledge and adapts herself to a competitive working environment. Having eventually become a self-reliant woman, Xiaoxue receives love and respect from her ex-husband again. The drama ends there, indicating that Xiaoxue and Zhong Rui stand a chance to get back together. It is also indicative of the success of the self-realisation of women, which corresponds with the TV trope of modern women in the

[32] China TV Series Production Centre, founded on 18 October 1983, is a CCTV-owned production unit focusing on the creation and production of TV serials/series. In China's 2009 television reform aimed at separating production and broadcasting, CTPC transformed from a public institution into an enterprise, and is owned, managed and controlled by CCTV. See CCTV (2010).

socialist state being more than capable at both workplace and household level (see Mihelj and Huxtable, 2018: 184-189; Imre, 2016: 200-217). But this seemingly clichéd happy ending is insufficient to explain why this drama became a hit in the late 1990s.

Unlike the revolutionary themes, which are remote from the living experiences of urban audiences mostly born during the PRC period, divorce and extramarital affairs were comparatively more familiar and, to some urbanites who were experiencing difficulties in marriage, had become an urgent issue. As discussed in previous chapters, the post-reform emphasis on economic development greatly released individualistic aspirations. The shift in Party line also provided conditions for the reconfiguration of family, marriage, and gender relations, which can be exemplified by the 1980 revision of China's marriage law, with the new version for the first time permitting divorce as the result of a breakdown of mutual affection (Xiao, 2009). In the Mao era, the official ideology encouraged women to participate in social production as men, as part of the strategies to achieve women's liberation in China. This empowerment of women simultaneously downplayed gender differences and emphasised the masculinisation of women, thereby leading to a lack of individuated female consciousness (Leung, 2003). However, with the advent of the market economy, the reconfiguration of gender politics has further reinforced gender differences. The new articulation of masculinity was based around economic success and political power; the new identity of women involved more feminine, sexual qualities, as well as obedience to traditional patriarchal order (Leung, 2003; Xiao, 2009). This remodelling of gender relations has therefore posed threats to established family structures and marriage relationships. As noted by Kong (2008: 78-79), existing Chinese families and marriages based on 'revolutionary socialist ideas' have become 'even more vulnerable to the various temptations and challenges of an increasingly materialist and individualistic society'. Those middle-aged housewives growing up in the 'ungendered' Mao era suddenly became unattractive to their husbands, and particularly disadvantaged in a society increasingly favouring young femininity. As a result, divorce rates have grown since the 1980s; many urban families suffered from extramarital affairs, as well as other illegal sexual practices and relationships.

Another important socio-political background for *Holding Hands* is the market reforms in the 1990s. The rapid marketisation also induced reforms in the state-owned sector – including public libraries where Xiaoxue works. As a result of the market-oriented restructuring, a large number of workers were laid off. According to China's Ministry of Labour and Social Security, during the reforms between 1998 and 2002, at least 26 million state workers lost their job, accounting for one third of the total number of unemployed (Shi, 2017). Among the unemployed, women made up a bigger proportion than men (Kong, 2012). In both the job market and emotional relationships, middle-aged, unemployed women found it difficult to compete with young professional women. Many of the former therefore faced the risk of

becoming double victims of unemployment and divorce (Wang, Z., 2003). Against the backdrop of these problems, *Holding Hands* in many aspects provided a reflection of and a response to the social reality.

The airing of *Holding Hands* largely echoed with the issues and concerns faced by many TV viewers, which to a great extent accounted for the popularity of the drama. Through non-judgmental depictions of the main characters, its makers invited TV audiences to reflect on their emotional lives and allowed for identification with the drama's characters. As a newspaper article (Fu, 1999) suggests, the success of *Holding Hands* largely resided in its realistic attitude, which depicted life as it is and avoided moralistic lecturing, but rather let the audience develop their own judgement. The proximity to real-life situations and the neutral stance in depicting characters indeed made this drama stand out from its counterparts. There are no dramatic binary opposites between 'good' and 'evil' among the leading characters. The narrative focus tends to be placed on neither praising the self-sacrificial wife nor condemning the cheating husband, but on displaying the complexity of people's emotional world. No character is perfect, and everyone is faced with internal and external conflicts. At the beginning, Xiaoxue is depicted as an ill-tempered housewife who is eager to be loved but cannot stop being resentful to her husband's frequent absences. In the first episode, where Zhong Rui forgets about their wedding anniversary, Xiaoxue starts a fierce argument with him. In turn, Zhong Rui is increasingly annoyed by Xiaoxue's temper. Meanwhile, with the obligation to support the family placed mainly on him, he needs to balance his personal life and job duties. Pressures at work provide him with an excuse to get away from family life, which gradually leads to his infidelity. While the 'good people' often show their flaws, the ostensibly 'bad guys' have their reasonable side. For instance, Wang Chun, the 'third party' in Xiaoxue and Zhong Rui's marriage, is portrayed as sensible and calm. Aware of the traumatic experience she has brought to Xiaoxue, she decides to leave Zhong Rui for good. Before returning to her hometown, Wang Chun passes on a letter to Xiaoxue to apologise. In this letter, she also suggests Xiaoxue review her role as a wife, in particular the faults that have led to Zhong Rui's betrayal. After reading the letter, Xiaoxue initially refuses to face up to her own problem. Later, she listens to her mother's opinion on marriage as a process of compromise and gradually becomes less stubborn and open to changing herself. This shows that instead of simply blaming 'the third wheel' or the unfaithful husband for the failure of the marriage, *Holding Hands* seeks to present multiple perspectives on not only the couple themselves but also the mistress and the wife's mother. In this way, each person involved in the failure of the marriage is justified and valorised in different ways, so that viewers find it easier to imagine themselves as one of the characters, thereby sympathising with their feelings. This potentially provided psychological relief for TV viewers going through similar emotional and moral dilemmas in a transitional society.

By presenting the emotional concerns of contemporary audiences in a sympathetic way, *Holding Hands* sought to offer life advice to the Chinese families which encountered family/marriage crisis in the 1990s. In this drama, guidance is given primarily by a supporting character, Xiaoxue's mother (Fig. 8.1). This character resembles the prototype of 'donor' in Propp's (1984) narrative theory, which is set to provide protagonists with valuable advice on how to restore their life balance whenever they feel confused and need help. As the only character from the older generation, Xiaoxue's mother is portrayed as an insightful and respected figure, an embodiment of lifelong wisdom, who therefore has much advice to offer.

Figure 8.1: Xiaoxue's mother
Holding Hands (1999)

In her seemingly random talk with Xiaobing (Xiaoxue's younger sister), she expresses that marriage is a series of compromises between couples, and that what love can do is to bind two loving people together and then let communication and compromises help sustain the marriage. When Xiaoxue hits rock bottom, her mother urges her to stop complaining or playing the victim. Instead, she advises Xiaoxue to regain her self-esteem and continue to pursue her career, so that her daughter will feel less unbalanced in her relationship with Zhong Rui. The mother's position as an elder in the family makes her advice trustworthy. After accepting her mother's advice and finding a new job, Xiaoxue feels confident, enthusiastic and gradually understands the efforts Zhong Rui has made to support the family. In turn, when Xiaoxue is completely taken up by her new job and cannot spare time to look after their son, Zhong Rui takes over. After messing up every day with their breakfast and laundry, Zhong Rui understands the difficulties in looking after a child and a family. The exchange of roles allows the two people to rethink their self-worth, identity and gender roles. It also gives them a chance to know each other better. This subsequently helps rebuild mutual respect and love between the couple, as the final two episodes show. Through these plot sequences, and particularly the lines of the respectable mother, the producers attempted to convey that the main source of conflict between a couple might not only stem from a third party, but is most likely the result of a lack of communication and confidence. More importantly, the revelations of urban couple's confusion and self-identity dilemmas provided an opportunity for the audience to reflect on and reconfigure their own life.

As Herzog's (1941) research shows, audiences enjoy soaps not only because these stories can offer them an emotional release but also due to audiences' preference for potential advice obtained from the stories. This practical use of soap operas as remedies for adjusting lives is

also seen from Chinese TV audiences, particularly so in the case of *Holding Hands*. For instance, a viewer (Douban, 2015) posted on the Douban[33] page of *Holding Hands*, recalling that her life had in many ways resembled Xiaoxue's life, and that watching this drama at the time let her realise how risky it was to live in a marriage lacking mutual understanding, communication and equality. Consequently, the viewer decided to quit her mediocre job, moved to her husband's city and worked there, which in her view saved her marriage. In this way, we can find the potential function of social education associated with this drama.

Yet, the significance of *Holding Hands* is not only limited to providing life advice in the private sphere. More importantly, through depicting the self-realisation of Xiaoxue – a former laid-off worker, the TV serial helped justify government policies on market reforms, especially in a period when a large scale of unemployment had led to social discontent. On the one hand, *Holding Hands* attempts to legitimise the market reforms by highlighting their positive side. In Xiaoxue's discussions with her new friend, Shen Wuyi, a successful entrepreneur, the latter states that he is very grateful to the policy of market reform because without it he would not have been able to rise from rags to riches. On the other hand, the drama also portrays unemployment, the downside of market reforms, as an opportunity for self-realisation. After Xiaoxue becomes a divorced, laid-off worker due to the transformation of state enterprises – a worst-scenario bothering many middle-aged women at the time, she embarks on a route of self-professionalisation. For instance, she attends 'evening school' – a project launched by the government to give the unemployed workers specialised trainings and thereby facilitate reemployment. Encouraged by her mother, Xiaoxue learns to embrace new opportunities brought about by the market reform, which eventually leads her to an ideal job and greater confidence in both her workplace and her relations with men. By presenting unemployment as a second chance for laid-off workers, *Holding Hands* thus supports the notion that the Party-states' market reforms are correct.

As Zhao (2002: 121) finds, official propaganda guidelines of that period instructed the media 'to acknowledge the problem [of laid-off workers], to promote non-sensational and constructive reporting', and to highlight the government's reemployment efforts. With regard to these guidelines, Kong (2012: 37) argues that the mass media's approaches of rationalising market failure were twofold: one was to conceal the social trauma caused by it; the other was to package the story of reemployment success into a myth of the liberal market, calling on unemployed workers to learn from it. These two approaches are particularly evident in *Holding Hands.* On the one hand, this drama attributes the breakdown of marriages primarily to personal reasons, such as a lack of communication and of willingness to compromise, or

[33] Douban is a Chinese online database which provides information related to world films and TV programmes. On the web page of an individual film or TV programme, there is also space for Douban users to post comments and give ratings for the programme.

incompatibilities between couples. Comparatively, it puts much less emphasis on depicting Xiaoxue's emotional and practical difficulties when she is unemployed, nor does it clearly point out the relation between her personal dilemma and the collective outcome of being laid off. On the other hand, the drama converts a story of midlife crisis to a myth of female self-realisation. Through such representations, the burden of maintaining stability in working conditions was in effect shifted to the people, in that the people were encouraged to actively adjust to the new environment, so as to eventually realise their value. It should be noted that the key character who convinces Xiaoxue to change is her mother. In many scenes, the mother acts as an educator, or a propagandist, teaching not only the family members in the drama, but also the TV viewers on how to cope with life challenges resulting from the market reform. So far, we can see that this drama was inspired by the emotional confusion in a time of social transition. In turn, it helped justify these transitions by providing life advice, and furthermore upheld the Party's polices on market reforms. In these ways, it came as little surprise this drama could win official recognition.

8.3 *My Youthfulness*: Maintaining harmonious relations through communication

Focusing on a different age group to *Holding Hands*, *My Youthfulness* portrays contemporary urban youths' attitudes to love, marriage and work. The 32-part serial drama was directed by a prestigious Chinese TV drama director, Zhao Baogang, who gained fame as the co-director of *Yearnings* in 1989. Aside from the famous director, *My Youthfulness* also stars a group of youth idols, such as Lu Yi, Wang Luodan, Zhao Ziqi, Bai Baihe, some of whom became well-known stars in recent years. *My Youthfulness* was produced in 2008, primarily by Zhao's Xinbaoyuan Film & TV Investment Cooperation. It began airing daily on CCTV-1 from 12 to 28 April 2009, receiving an audience share as high as 9.8% on a single day (Renminwang, 2009a). After the first round of broadcasting, it was rebroadcast on several provincial satellite TV channels during daytime or prime-time slots. Regardless of the extent to which the rebroadcasts were driven by genuine audience interest, the drama has in effect led to a breadth of discussion regarding life pursuits of the young generation, family relationships and generational conflicts. In a seminar organised by the producers of *My Youthfulness*, media commentators highly praised this drama for its social relevance and educational function (Sina Entertainment, 2009). In the 28th *Feitian* Award ceremony, *My Youthfulness* also garnered a *Feitian* Award as the First Place, suggesting official recognition of this drama. How could a serial drama focusing on young people's love story be socially and politically so significant? What kind of educational messages has it delivered? In this section, I shall analyse the leading characters and main conflicts represented in this drama, aiming to explore the relations between personal narratives of youth and the changing socio-political contexts.

Although framed as a family drama, *My Youthfulness* largely adopts the storytelling strategies of the 'urban love-affairs' drama (*dushi aiqingju*) and the 'idol' drama (*ouxiangju*) by focusing on the love story of youngsters. Set in contemporary Beijing, the drama traces three young women, Zhao Qingchu, Qian Xiaoyang and Li Pili, in particular their conflicts with their parents. The three characters are maternal cousins, having the same grandmother who is a retired Professor of Law (See Diagram 8.2). Their mothers are the Yang sisters, who were born and grew up in the Mao era. Qingchu's and Xiaoyang's mothers, Yang Yi and Yang Shan, both became 'rusticated youth'[34] during the Cultural Revolution, being sent to rural areas near Shanghai and Yinchuan respectively. The two mothers' fate after the political turmoil was terminated in 1976 resembles that of other rusticated youth, in that they have to live in the place they were sent to, far away from their hometown, Beijing. In the post-reform era, such people often regretted that they could not return to their native cities, but their children had more flexibility. In *My Youthfulness*, Qingchu has gone back to Beijing to study and since then has been living with their grandmother. Inspired by her example, Xiaoyang has quit her job, left her parents in Yinchuan and also moved to Beijing, wishing to start a new life there. The youngest cousin, Li Pili, has grown up in Beijing with her parents but is sent to the UK for education.

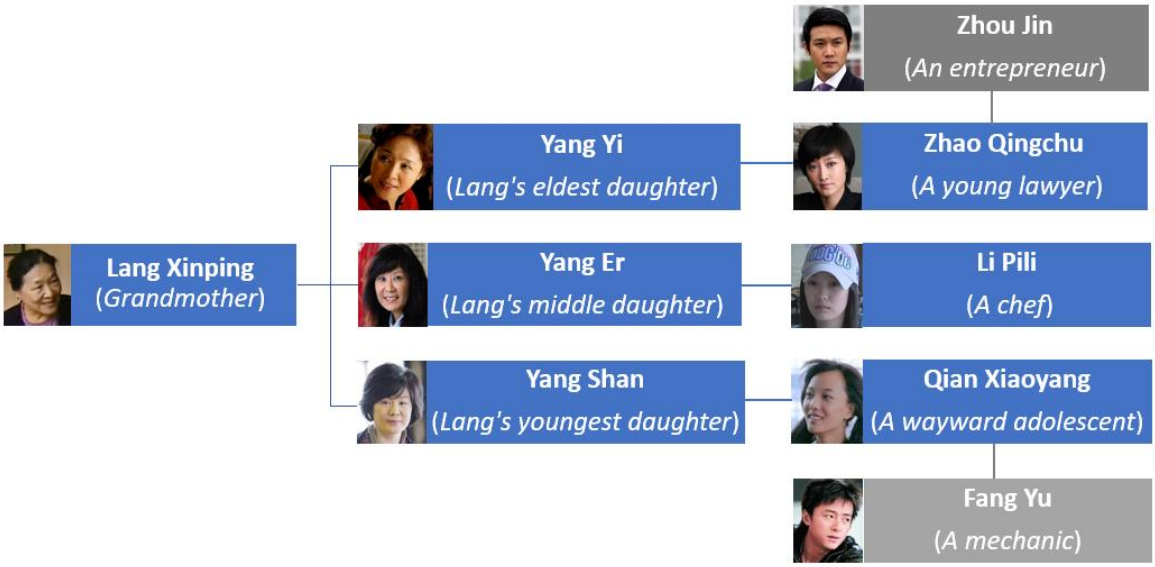

Diagram 8.2: Character relationships in *My Youthfulness* (2009)

[34] The rusticated youth, also known as sent-down or 'educated' youth, refers to young people who were sent to remote areas of China from the 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution. This movement was initially designed to ease employment pressure in the big cities, and later echoed Mao Zedong's call for the 'Up to Mountains and Down to the Countryside' (*Zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang*) movement. The latter was initiated partly as a countermeasure to bourgeois thinking, which Mao believed to be prevalent in cities. As a result, around 12 to 18 million of urban youth were relocated to mountainous or farming areas to engage in agricultural labour in this period.

Despite having been raised at different places, the three young characters share a similar dilemma: they want to take control of their own lives but are subject to different degrees of objection or intervention from parents. Xiaoyang falls in love with Fang Yu, a mechanic living in Beijing's winding alleys. Considering Fang Yu's job unstable and thus impossible to support a future life as a couple, Xiaoyang's mother strongly disagrees with their relationship. Instead, she wants to match Xiaoyang with Gao Qi, a medical doctor, who according to Xiaoyang's mother is able to provide a stable life for Xiaoyang. Qingchu's boyfriend, Zhou Jin, is a successful young entrepreneur owning a real estate company, and therefore, from the perspective of the older generation, a perfect husband. However, as a promising, young lawyer, Qingchu thinks her current focus of life should be on advancing her career rather than entering into marriage. For this reason, she wants to keep independent from Zhou Jin, both financially and mentally. But this plan at times clashes with the will of her mother, who often seeks to take advantage of Zhou Jin's power and wealth for the benefits of herself (e.g. to buy a flat from Zhou Jin's company at a discount). Although Pili is not involved in any love relationship, her conflicts with her parents are also intense. Firstly, she stays secretly in Beijing, opening her own restaurant, which runs counter to her mother's plans for her to study at Cambridge University; secondly, she meddles in her divorced father's new romance with a waitress and works towards the remarriage of her parents, even though they have not got along with each other for many years. Different socio-economic status, living experiences and opinions thus set the backdrop for the subsequent arguments and conflicts among the members of three interrelated families across three generations.

We have seen in previous chapters that the conflicts in revolutionary serials often take place between binary opposites of good and evil, brave and cowardly. In *My Youthfulness,* however, the narrative is primarily organised around the conflicts between young and old, a topic not only limited to the personal and private dimensions of individuals, but with a profound social significance. Generational conflicts between parents and adult children are not a unique topic to Chinese TV dramas, but rather a common theme in East Asian TV soap operas where the ideology of Confucian filial piety takes effect (Kang and Kim, 2011). The traditional virtue of filial piety rests upon a reciprocal relationship, in which the youngsters show respect and obedience to the elders, often because of the latter's support when they were young. In film and TV representations, such traditional values result in paternalism or an 'authority-submission' mode of communication between parents and their children (ibid.: 315). This creates lots of frictions between the generations, with adult children's marital and career options becoming the primary issues of contention (see Lü, 2007; Kang and Kim, 2011).

In *My Youthfulness*, conflicts among main characters also reflect different attitudes to love and career. Moreover, family issues are often interwoven with certain historical experiences of the older generation. This is especially true of the Cultural Revolution, which deeply

influenced the lives of the three Yang sisters. Having experienced the collectivist enthusiasm in the Mao era, they find it difficult to understand their self-centred, post-1980s (*balinghou*) children, who were born into and grew up in a more individualised, capitalised society. At the same time, trials and tribulation experienced by the elder generation during their adolescence make them choose a stable life trajectory for their children. However, such paternalistic arrangements of imposing a way of life on adult children often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between the two generations in the TV serial.

In order to systematically delineate the various conflicts and relate them to the real-life concerns of the audience, this drama introduces three distinct young characters from different demographic background. The three families are a microcosm of Chinese society at large. Xiaoyang is portrayed as a wayward girl from a working-class family in Yinchuan. Her aspirations to wealth and success, combined with a lack of willpower and working skills, often lead her into trouble, making her a rebellious figure within the extended family. In contrast to Xiaoyang's wilfulness, Qingchu is represented as a sensible, ambitious, well-educated young professional. Having grown up in a middle-class, single-parent family (her father died before the story begins), Qingchu understands the importance of having a career and tends to see it as the only resource that can give her a sense of security. In contrast to her two cousins, Pili was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, owing to the success of her mother's business. Better living conditions enable her to have more opportunities, but none of her choices conform to what her mother wants. The three young people and their families resemble many Chinese families off screen since the economic reforms, which enables viewers to recognise themselves in the drama.

The three main characters' conflicts with their parents unfold as a result of their choices in terms of love and work, as mentioned earlier in this section. But rather than dismissing the conflicts as trivialities of everyday life, the drama incorporates unexpected accidents and melodramatic turns into the story of each family. In Xiaoyang's case, her mother's strong objection to her love relationship with Fang Yu, prompts the two young adults' plan to elope. When they appear at the railway station, Xiaoyang's father shows up and seeks to take Xiaoyang back with him to Yinchuan. It is at this moment that Fang Yu's motorbike accidentally bumps into the father, causing spinal injury and possible paralysis. This sudden tragedy turns Xiaoyang's family life upside down. Yang Yi and Yang Er take this opportunity to conclude that 'they should not have let the children take control of their lives'. They think Xiaoyang's wilfulness has led to the father's tragedy. Similarly, Qingchu's love story encounters twists as well. When Qingchu finds herself deeply in love with Zhou Jin and prepares to get married, her lover becomes a suspect in a crime case she is working on. Although her mother asks her to keep distance from Zhou, Qingchu wants to go ahead with marrying him, but inevitably sees herself as caught up in a dilemma. According to television scholar Dai Qing (2007), the use of

sudden tragic events in Chinese family dramas is a tool to create dramatic tension, so as to better reflect the development of characters from being immature to becoming a sensible and responsible adult. This is certainly applicable to, for example, the character development of Xiaoyang, who changes dramatically through her father's accident, developing from a carefree girl into a responsible young adult.

However, it is more likely that such dramatisation serves to perform an educational function. By showing the negative consequences of disobedient, rebellious behaviour, the drama on the one hand tends to highlight the failure of young adults who disregard parental advice. Qingchu's insistence on taking full control of her own life means she also needs to confront her emotional dilemmas alone and without help. Pili's decision to open a restaurant and her meddling in her father's marital choices make everyone in her family unhappy. On the other hand, depicting tragic outcomes of generational conflicts demonstrates the failure of parents through ineffective, inappropriate intervention in their children's lives. For instance, Xiaoyang's parents insist on taking her to Yinchuan so as to force a breakup of her relationship, which eventually leads to her father's physical injury. In a similar manner, Pili's mother forces her daughter to vicariously realise the former's dream of studying at a prestigious university abroad, which deepens the rift between the two. The traumatic experiences of the characters suggest that none of the parents' decisions or advice really works. The drama therefore delivers the educational message that these unilateral actions are not helpful and that an effective strategy of communication and negotiation between different generations is needed.

Figure 8.3: The three generations are having a family meeting. *My Youthfulness* (2009)

To alleviate the conflicts between family members, and thereby depicting these people 'getting out of trouble', this drama also relies on the authoritative figure, Lang Xinping, a senior intellectual, grandmother of the three cousins, and mother of the Yang sisters. As in *Holding Hands*, the grandmother is portrayed as a respected figure having lifelong wisdom. In contrast

to her daughters' discouraging attitude and ineffective guidance, the grandmother is supportive of the youngsters throughout the drama, and always provides insightful advice to the granddaughters. For instance, when the Yang sisters express their opinion that one should marry for material advantage, the grandmother heavily criticises them for interfering in Qingchu's emotional world and approves Qingchu's decision of marrying for love. She thus appears to be the only competent educator in the extended family. More importantly, she acts as a mediator, working towards alleviating the family conflicts between her daughters and their adult children. She suggests having family meetings as a necessary way to communicate equally. Following the dramatic changes in their lives, we finally see the three generations sitting around a table, each family member expressing their views in meaningful and more respectful ways (see Fig. 8.3). In the end, all characters have become calm and sensible, which indicate that the core value expressed in Chinese family dramas is harmony within the family.

So far, we have seen that this drama starts off as a youth drama that centres on young peoples' love relationships and career struggles, but ends up a hybridised family drama, dedicated to family problem-solving. Also, rather than encouraging the individualities of youngsters, the drama puts more efforts into promoting the value of family harmony. Maintaining harmonious family relationships is not only socially important but politically correct in the Chinese context, especially in the mid-2000s. As discussed in chapter 3, 'building a harmonious society' was a political slogan promoted by the Party-state during President Hu Jintao's tenure. Borrowing from Confucian thinking on social harmony, this political vision strove to maintain stability and stressed sustainable development in every aspect of society, despite concurrently obscuring problems such as social inequality and corruption. In Confucian thought, families are considered the basic unit of social structure; and the stability of the family becomes a prerequisite for maintaining social stability. In this context, Chinese family dramas, which are often formulated within the framework of Confucian family ethics, play the role of a mediator linking official ideology to ordinary people's family lives (Peng, 2007).

First, they pick up the political vision of the Party and insert it into the private lives of the characters. In *My Youthfulness*, the word 'harmony' or 'harmonious' often appears in conversations. In a scene where Pili and her father are exchanging views on marriage, the father maintains that people at his age still considering remarriage would search for a partner capable of maintaining a harmonious relationship with them (*xingge hexie*), paying less attention to educational level or romantic feelings. In the same episode, when Xiaoyang is sneaking out of Fang Yu's house, she is caught by a staff member of Resident Committee (*juweihui*) who regards this as a violation of public order. The head of the Resident Committee requests a written guarantee from Xiaoyang stating that, she will never again violate shared

norms by working with the committee towards building a harmonious society. These are two examples illustrating the embedding of political ideologies in ordinary people's everyday lives.

Second, by providing useful tips of dealing with conflicts between spouses, parents and children, as well as between young people and their employers, these family dramas emphasise the importance of harmony in people's domestic and social lives (ibid.: 26). In *My Youthfulness*, this is achieved through the character of the insightful grandmother. Even though the advice in relation to mutual respect, equal dialogues and negotiation, might seem to underestimate the complexity of human relations and the internal emotional worlds of individuals, they nevertheless have the potential to reinforce the ideology of familial harmony, thereby contributing to social harmony and stability. The generational conflicts depicted in *My Youthfulness* have therefore reflected the issues faced by lots of Chinese households caught up in the confusion of the transitional period between socialism and reform. It has also demonstrated the distinct Chinese characteristics of the soap-opera-style dramas, informed by both traditional Confucian culture and the mark of China's socio-political transition.

8.4 *My Year of 1997*: Embracing the 'Chinese dream' through a personalised story

Compared with the former two TV dramas, *My Year of 1997* demonstrates a case of stronger correlation between personal success and economic and political reforms. Framed as a period drama, it depicts the life story of Gao Jianguo, particularly the emotional vicissitudes that he and his family experience between 1976 and 1997, a period in which both Hong Kong and mainland China were undergoing drastic transformations. The 32-episode TV serial was jointly produced by CCTV, Xinhua Winshare Publishing and Media Co. Ltd, and other independent production companies. It began filming in 2016 and aired on CCTV-1 from late June to July 2017. As mentioned at the outset, broadcasting this drama was to echo the national celebration on 1 July 2017, the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's 'return' to China. Therefore, the authorities placed high expectations on showing this drama. Official newspapers noted that this drama showcased the new era created by the 'reform and opening' policy, as well as reflecting the vitality and prosperity of Hong Kong society brought by the principle of 'one country, two systems'[35] (Renminwang, 2017). Thus, at first sight, *My Year of 1997* has a more explicitly propagandistic meaning compared to the two dramas discussed earlier in this chapter. The previous two sections have also made us aware that CCTV-1's prime-time serial dramas show a social and political alignment with the periods that saw their

[35] 'One country, two systems' is a constitutional principle formulated by Deng Xiaoping, former political leader of the PRC. He suggested after the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to the PRC, Hong Kong would retain its own economic and administrative systems for a period of 50 years, while the rest of China would adhere to the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.

creation. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that, even though *My Year of 1997* is set in a comparatively distant past time, it still aligns itself with the political ideology at the present time, namely, with regard to the 'Chinese dream' promoted by the current paramount leader, Xi Jinping. By focusing on the narrative devices, as well as the plot and character developments, I shall examine how a personal life story is inscribed into the Communist Party's reform discourse, thereby establishing the link between a seemingly nostalgic story of individual development and the Party's present political goals.

As indicated by its title, *My Year of 1997* adopts an individualistic approach of narration, tracing the life story of the male lead character, Gao Jianguo, from his youth. In 1976, Jianguo and his girlfriend, An Hui, also belong to the generation of 'rusticated youth' and work in a remote area of Inner Mongolia. When they take a holiday to their hometown, Beijing, they decide to announce their love relationship to the parents. But this relationship is strongly rejected by An Hui's family, especially her brother, An Guoqing, because Jianguo's father was a purged 'rightist' intellectual. Instead, An Hui's parents want to match her with Wang Le, the son of a political commissar. In a violent altercation, Jianguo accidentally breaks An Guoqing's skull, leaving the latter in coma for months. For fear of being sentenced to jail, Jianguo flees to British-governed Hong Kong. The plot then becomes more twisted as Jianguo's mother, Yue Fangying, an upright police officer who has absorbed the revolutionary ethos and belief in the collective, seeks to bring Jianguo to justice, ending up in Hong Kong as well. In the late 1970s, fleeing to Hong Kong was a capital offense in the PRC. Mother and son therefore have no other option but to stay in Hong Kong and start over again. However, this is no easy task in a society totally different to Beijing. Constantly blackmailed and threatened by corrupt police officers, they are determined to integrate into the new environment. Encouraged and supported by his mother, Jianguo is admitted to the University of Hong Kong. During this process of self-improvement, he becomes acquainted with a Hong Kong real estate magnate, Li Jiansheng, who appreciates Jianguo's talent and agrees with his daughter marrying Jianguo. Sponsored by his father-in-law, Jianguo launches his real estate company and becomes a businessman. When Hong Kong is approaching to the date of 'handover', many rich Hong Kong residents prepare to transfer their property and migrate abroad. But Jianguo chooses to stay in Hong Kong, because he has faith in Hong Kong's future led by socialist China.

On the surface, this is a typical story of 'rags to riches', in that it depicts the individual tale of Jianguo from absolute obscurity to wealth and influence. What makes this drama more than a soap opera is primarily the narrative technique of combining a fictional story with the style of a documentary, which features archival footage and voice-over commentaries. The story

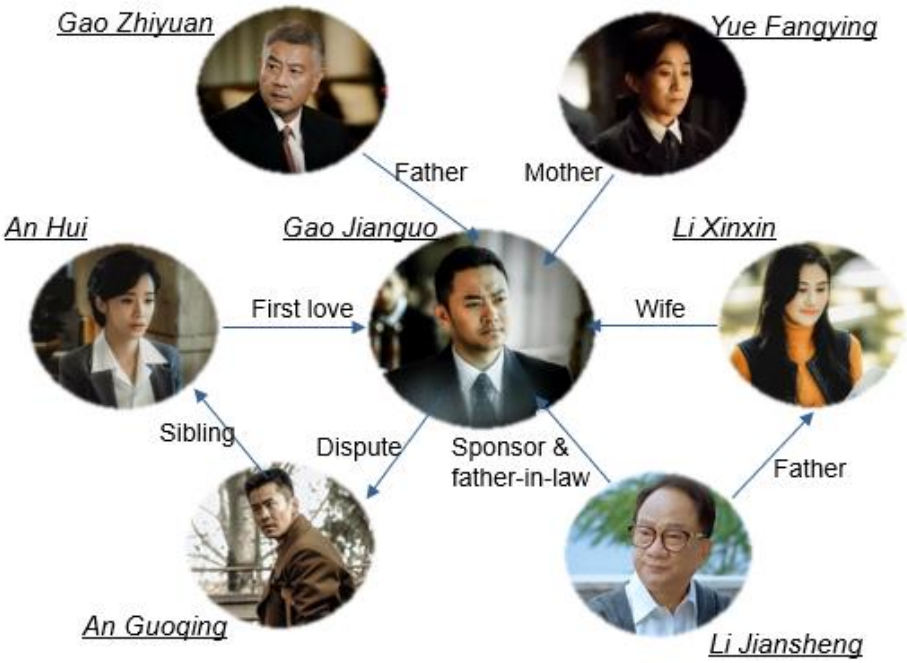

Diagram 8.4: Relationship of main characters in *My Year of 1997* (2017)

follows two narrative threads. In addition to presenting Jianguo and his mother's life in colonised Hong Kong, it also depicts the changes in Jianguo's father's, brother's, and ex-girlfriend's lives on the mainland. In doing so, historical footage and voice-over explanations are occasionally inserted into the narration of mundane life situations. As the director explained, the use of archival footage reflects a realistic approach to displaying the major events that emerged from the Party's economic and political reforms, thereby immersing the audience into the time frame and narrative space of the drama (Yang, 2017). Basically, the director wanted to highlight the positive impact of the Party's reforms, particularly the 'return' of Hong Kong to China, on ordinary people's lives.

Therefore, from the fifth episode onwards, we can see the somewhat obtrusive insertion of historical events into the sequence of plots about main characters' life struggles. These events include the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the resumption of university entrance examinations in 1977, the holding of the Third Plenary Session of the CCP's Eleventh Central Committee in 1978 (that marked the beginning of the 'reform and opening' policy), the 15th meeting of the Fifth National People's Congress in 1980 (that agreed on developing five special economic zones on the southern coast of China, close to Hong Kong), the 1982 meeting between British Prime Minister Thatcher and China's political leader Deng Xiaoping on the sovereignty of Hong Kong after 1997, and the formulation of the Basic Law of Hong Kong in 1990. As stated above, these segments appear in the form of archival footage and voiceovers. The historical footage, such as people marching in the streets to celebrate the termination of the Cultural Revolution (Fig. 8.5), and parliamentary representatives attending the National People's Congress (Fig. 8.6), is taken from news reports from past periods. They

are accompanied by voice-over commentary specially created for this drama, which first introduces the events and then emphasises their impact on both mainland China and Hong Kong. These documentary-style segments constantly remind the viewers how these social and political events have created turning points for China and Hong Kong, and brought life-changing opportunities to the Chinese people.

Figure 8.5: People march in the streets to celebrate the termination of the Cultural Revolution. *My Year of 1997* (2017)

Figure 8.6: National representatives are attending a meeting of the National People's Congress. *My Year of 1997* (2017)

To better represent the positive impact of the economic and political reforms, the drama establishes causal relations between the reform policy and the emotional fulfilment of the characters. For instance, before the revival of university entrance exams, An Hui is stuck in an unsatisfactory library job and a violent marriage with Wang Le. An Hui's route of self-realisation starts from her admission to Beijing Normal University. While receiving higher education, An Hui terminates her unhappy marriage with Wang Le and decides to leave for Shenzhen, one of the five special economic zones created by the Party-state, to pursue her career. Her new professional life enables her to once again meet Jianguo, who by this time has become an established entrepreneur and runs a factory in Shenzhen, also benefitting from the policy of reform and opening. This reunion provides an emotional release for the two individuals, who have been separated for nearly two decades.

The relationship between Jianguo and his father and younger brother follows a similar path. Uncertain whether their flight to Hong Kong will cause trouble to the family members remaining in Beijing, Jianguo and mother do not dare contact them until the Cultural Revolution has ended and the question of sovereignty over Hong Kong has been settled. As a result of the political reforms after the Cultural Revolution, the conviction of Jianguo's father is revoked. The father is then assigned to the newly established Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council, which provides him with opportunities to meet Jianguo. Notably, Jianguo's father is portrayed as a representative of the lucky few surviving intellectuals – despite having

been subjected to political prosecution in the past, they continue to have faith in the Party and its government, ready to devote themselves to building a new China. *My Year of 1997* has indeed put much effort in depicting these people's emotional predicament resulted from separation, such as the father's sorrow over the news of Fangying and Jianguo's alleged death, the mother's hesitation about starting a new marriage, and her disappointment knowing that Jianguo's father is remarried to another woman. However, the emotional predicament serves more as a backdrop to emphasise the cheerful reunion of the Gao family. Based on this, the drama suggests that it is because of the 'reform and opening' policy that mainland China regained sovereignty over Hong Kong, and it is this that enables the Gao family to become reunited. The archival footage and voice-over explanations of historical events, combined with character development, have worked together to illustrate the positive impact of the Party-state's reform policy on ordinary people's lives.

In addition to portraying an increasingly prosperous society in mainland China, that offers the people career advancement and emotional fulfilment, the drama also depicts the other side of the binary opposites, a deteriorating Hong Kong society. If the progression of the story on the mainland indicates hope and prosperity, the other thread of the drama is concerned with conspiracy, fraud, uncertainty and risk. Jianguo is portrayed as a witness who personally experiences this deterioration. He encounters villains who keep stirring up trouble for him. Prominent among these is Long Hua, a corrupt detective. His corruption and greed come out especially in a scene where he frames Jianguo for stealing money from the workplace. In the following sequence, Long Hua puts Jianguo in custody and blatantly asks Fangying for 5000 HKD, indicating that he will release Jianguo only upon receiving the money. Believing that Hong Kong is a law-abiding society and Jianguo is not guilty, Fangying employs a lawyer to confront Long Hua. However, the lawyer is threatened by Long Hua to drop the case; otherwise, Long will expose Jianguo as an illegal refugee. The lawyer subsequently admits to Fangying that British-governed Hong Kong tolerates this unlawful behaviour of Long Hua, even though this often leaves the poor people no place to find justice. Knowing this, Fangying, an upright former police officer, decides to accuse Long Hua of corruption. But the letter she has submitted to a British chief of police is soon passed to Long Hua himself. It appears that the chief and Long Hua collude with each other. Through these events, the drama alleges that Hong Kong's police system is corrupt, and implicitly denounces the inaction and incompetence of the British governors. Such a depiction of Jianguo's life struggles in Hong Kong is filled with dramatic tension and evil schemes. In the narrated world, Hong Kong in the last years of colonial rule shows stark contrast to the development in the mainland. In juxtaposing the two different environments, the drama suggests that Hong Kong needs a new government, which must be picked by the PRC. The transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to mainland China is

accordingly represented as expected and needed by the public, for the public good of the Hong Kong society.

As the above analysis shows, the primary goal of *My Year of 1997* was to showcase the Party's achievements in the reform within the 20 years from 1976 to 1997, in particular relation to the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China. By selectively inserting a series of historical events into the personal life story of Jianguo, the drama presents the 'handover' as a predetermined, necessary process. This propagandistic tone is obvious. What is also salient is the feeling of national pride this drama seeks to evoke. Each episode starts with a theme song titled *A.D.1997*, and this is accompanied visually by the image of a flying red flag that later transforms into to the flag of Hong Kong. The symbolism of opening centres on the colour

Figure 8.7: Gao Jianguo and his family and friends are watching the live broadcast of the Hong Kong 'handover'. *My Year of 1997* (2017)

red, which is reminiscent of the Communist rule of China and indicative of the Party's achievement of regaining Hong Kong. Furthermore, the main characters in the drama are portrayed as proud and loyal PRC citizens, who are keen to watch television news related to the 'return' of Hong Kong. These news programmes range from the holding of milestone meetings to the live broadcast of the ceremony of the Hong Kong handover. In the last episode, when the ceremony is live on TV, every character is dressed up, sitting in front of the TV to watch the programme. The rooms are decorated with lots of little red flags. When China's five-star red flag is raised in Hong Kong, as seen in the live broadcast, everyone seems so excited that they stand up and celebrate the greatness of the motherland, China (Fig. 8.7). The drama ends with people's cheerful voices, a passionate commentary from the off-screen speaker and the drama's theme song. These details not only reinforce national pride and evoke the audiences' emotional identification with the drama, but also echo the Party's current political vision of realising the individual and collective 'Chinese dream'. What is central to the

articulation of the ‘Chinese dream’ is the emphasis on connecting individual aspirations to the prosperity of the Chinese nation, ‘with the twin goals of reclaiming national pride and achieving personal well-being’ (China Daily, 2014). In this sense, Jianguo’s life story embodies this political vision, in that the success in his personal life is paralleled and enabled by China’s achieving prosperity. This story thus visualises the current official ideology.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter compares three CCTV-1 drama serials broadcast in a twenty-year period. Even though these dramas centre on the emotional dimension of people’s domestic lives, the personal experiences depicted in them are intertwined with wider social, economic and political changes. This means that these mainstream soap operas are framed within a broader social and political space, recording and embodying dominant ideologies at the respective time of production. *Holding Hands* (1999) seeks to persuade the viewers to embrace the market reforms, so as to minimise the possibility of dissent at a time when unemployment became a primary social concern in the late 1990s. *My Youthfulness* (2009) proposes using effective communication and patient persuasion to ease family conflicts, thereby constructing family harmony, which was in conformity to the political vision of building a harmonious society. In *My Year of 1997* (2017), the focus has shifted to glorifying the ‘return’ of Hong Kong and to proving the greatness of the Chinese state. This TV serial on the one hand contributes to state celebrations around 1 July 2017, and on the other, aligns with the contemporary political vision of realising the Chinese dream.

Although their narrative foci relate to different periods, the dramas discussed above share similarities and continuities. First, they all demonstrate aspirations to stability, harmony and prosperity in either the private or public space. This is partly in line with Confucian thinking on family stability and harmony, but more importantly, conforms to the Party’s desires for social stability in the country. In this regard, dominant ideologies and official visions have a prominent presence in mainstream cultural products to the extent that these provide legitimacy for the Party’s rule.

Secondly, in order to solve the problems emerging within a family environment or a changing society, a respectable female character is introduced in each of the three dramas. In the narrative space, they help the protagonists overcome difficulties, acting as moral and ethical mentors. They represent the ideal motherhood, being not only patient and sensible to the children, but also helpful to the community. Furthermore, they disseminate educational or propagandistic messages to the audiences on behalf of the authorities. The function of these female roles resembles Imre’s (2016: 200) observation of the central female characters in the socialist TV series made in Eastern Europe who act as problem solvers, linchpins between the private and public worlds.

Finally, all the three dramas regarding human emotions and love have depicted a heterosexual world, where a financially successful husband is depicted as necessary for a happy marriage. This is exemplified by Zhong Rui (*Holding Hands*), Zhou Jin (*My Youthfulness*) and Gao Jianguo (*My Year of 1997*). All three are successful entrepreneurs, some of them experiencing a development 'from rags to riches'. This type of character on the one hand shows the Party-state's recognition of capitalists as one of the achievements of economic reform; on the other hand, they represent a popular narrative device widely prevailing in contemporary – not exclusively Chinese – TV and film fictions. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. As for the leading female characters, the above dramas tend to portray them as both financially independent and competent in housework. But such double burden of women often poses extra difficulties for them, especially at domestic space, where the male is used to be positioned in centre and dominance. This socialist model of 'gender equality' portrayed in these state-sponsored dramas has in fact served for the reinforcement of a patriarchal social structure, where women are eventually expected to return to the domestic space. Overall, the three love-themed dramas discussed in this chapter are correlated with the grand narratives of the nation and social change, showing a propagandistic and educational function. In the next chapter, we will look at love dramas that are primarily associated with providing pleasure and entertainment to audiences.

Chapter 9

Soap Operas for Entertainment: Melodramatic Formulas and Fantasies in Hunan TV

In the discussion of love-themed dramas aired on CCTV-1 in the previous chapter, we have seen how narratives of love, romance and family within the domestic space have been integrated with Chinese television's functions of social education and propaganda. In this chapter, we look at a different set of romantic TV serials, this time screened on Hunan TV. Given that Hunan TV came to mainly target the young generation after its rebranding in 2003, it can be hypothesised that both the programming and content afterwards would reflect this change. By focusing on three love-themed dramas broadcast in different periods, *Women in Beijing* (2000), *Meteor Shower* (Season 2, 2010) and *The Interpreters* (2016), I aim to take a comparative approach to examining the unique traits of popular narrative forms provided by Hunan TV in telling love stories, and their development over the last two decades. Special attention is given to the investigation of the difference between Hunan TV and CCTV-1 in terms of both programmes' political orientation, pedagogic commitment and entertainment production.

9.1 Making popular TV soaps: From imports to clones to domestic innovations

As mentioned in chapter 8, the success of *Yearnings* in the early 1990s inspired a series of Chinese-style soap operas that offered social comfort and helped to make sense of the economic and political transformation. These dramas often tackle emotional and familial issues that were encountered by Chinese people in a transitional society. While many of the soap-opera-style, romantic-themed Chinese TV serials indeed demonstrate realistic concerns with socio-political issues, there are also alternative types of TV soaps not intentionally tied to educational or propaganda purposes. Claiming to have been the first genuine entertainment provider in mainland China, Hunan TV has developed its own distinct types and genres of soap opera. As shown in the quantitative results in chapter 5, the proportion of love-themed dramas broadcast by Hunan TV during the last twenty-six years was almost sixty percent more than that of revolution-themed ones. This larger proportion suggests where this TV channel places its main interest.

Subject to less political control but driven by more blatant commercial imperatives, such as striving for novelty and audience attention, Hunan TV has embarked on a different route of programming since it was launched in 1997. Unlike its peer provincial satellite TV channels, which were still satisfied with propaganda delivery and education by entertaining at the time, Hunan TV departed from this path and began stepping into the imitation and appropriation of

international TV programmes (Keane, 2002). Following this strategy, the soap operas broadcast by Hunan TV, notably those on urban romantic themes, caught up with the transnational media flows in East Asian countries from the late 1990s, represented by the wide circulation of the Korean 'trendy drama' and the Taiwanese 'idol drama'. Characterised by 'beautiful settings, idolised characters, melodramatic romances, unrequited love which necessitates tragic endings', Korean TV drama successfully made its way into East Asian markets, including mainland China, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Leung, 2008: 60). It has been recorded that in 2002, there were 67 Korean TV dramas aired on various Chinese satellite and terrestrial TV channels (ibid. 59). A notable reason for the popularity of Korean dramas in mainland China is the fascination they exert on the young generation, which includes capitalism, urban lifestyle, romance, modernity, as well as a new standard of beauty and fashion (Kim, 2007: 127).

Almost in the same period, Taiwanese imitations of Japanese 'idol drama' – that was often adapted from well-known *manga* (comic stories), likewise achieved great success in East Asian TV markets. Among these productions, *Meteor Garden* (*Liuxing huayuan*, aired on Taiwan's Chinese Television System from April to August 2001) was the earliest and most successful.[36] Based on a Japanese *manga* series – *Hana Yori Dango*, it traces the lives and romances of several college students. Notably, the Taiwanese remake effectively blended key elements of Japanese 'idol drama', such as employing pop idols to play the leading characters and Western pop music as background music, featuring Japanese-style filming locations, with unique Taiwanese narrative conventions, such as the introduction of rustic elderly characters, generational conflicts and a hint of folk religion; it thereafter initiated a distinctly Taiwanese style of 'idol drama', which found markets in Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China (Liu and Chen, 2004). The second drama I analyse in this chapter – *Meteor Shower*, is an exact if unauthorised copy of *Meteor Garden* by Hunan TV. The transnational popularity of these imported dramas has provided both ready-made formats and inspiration for Hunan TV to make a profit out of its prime-time slots.

In general, Hunan TV enjoys more flexibility in programming than CCTV-1, which allows it to explore the profitability of imported TV programmes. Although CCTV was the first mainland TV station to import and broadcast Korean trendy dramas and thereafter initiated the 'Korean Wave' – a term used to describe the spread of Korean popular culture overseas since the late 1990s (see Kim, 2007; Leung, 2008), its evening prime-time slots remained strictly confined to airing domestically produced dramas and serving a propaganda function. This conservative programming strategy prevented CCTV from maximising the financial returns generated by

[36] Following the sensational success of the 2001 TV series *Meteor Garden*, CTS released a sequel of this drama in March 2002.

popular Korean dramas. It should be noted that such a prohibition of foreign TV programmes appearing at prime time also applies to provincial satellite TV channels, including Hunan TV. However, it did not diminish the determination of Hunan TV to broadcasting imported dramas, even if it had to allocate them a later prime-time slot at 10pm. In 2005, Hunan TV successfully purchased the exclusive rights to broadcast the 2003 Korean hit drama, *Jewel in the Palace* (*Dae Jang Geum,* produced by MBC of South Korea). This operation generated enormous financial returns, both in terms of advertising revenue and market share (Wang, 2005). It further encouraged Hunan TV's investment in other popular TV dramas from East Asia, including Korean trendy dramas, Taiwanese idol dramas, as well as a certain number of Japanese and Hong Kong melodramas. Among these, high-rated ones include Taiwanese idol drama, *Romantic Princess* (*Gongzhu xiaomei*, produced by GTV in 2007 and aired on Hunan TV in 2008), and Korean TV series, *My Fair Lady* (first released on KBS of South Korea in 2009 and then on Hunan TV in 2010). These dramas helped Hunan TV to obtain an unrivalled market share in those years.

It is worth noting that the import of TV dramas was not the only way to maintain an advantageous position on the national market. Alongside the transnational and transregional flows of East Asian popular TV dramas, Hunan TV's programming strategy was also informed by the rise of female consumers on the domestic TV market from the early 2000s. Facing an increasingly differentiated market, Hunan TV also demonstrated a strong awareness of the consumer power of female audiences. Aside from purchasing female-centred TV dramas from South Korea and Taiwan, it attempted to make its own 'idol dramas' featuring central female characters by either cloning or copying successful TV productions. The first round of prominent experiments included four seasons of *Ugly Wudi* (*Chounü wudi*, 2008-2010), adapted from a Colombian telenovela and its more recent American version *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010, broadcast on ABC). This was followed, as mentioned earlier, by an imitation of Taiwanese 'idol drama' series, *Meteor Garden*. Having no license from either Taiwanese TV producers or the authors of the original Japanese *manga*, Hunan TV changed the name of the leading characters and produced two seasons named *Meteor Shower* (2009-2010).[37] These productions inevitably stirred extensive public debates involving either comparisons between the remake and the original (see Fung and Zhang, 2011), or criticism for the violation of intellectual property and the poor quality of the imitation. Despite the controversies, Hunan TV's ownership and exclusive broadcasting rights to these dramas ensured a relatively high market share, which would have been reduced if other provincial satellite TV channels had been allowed to simultaneously air the same drama.

[37] It is worth noting that as I write this chapter, Hunan TV is broadcasting a 2017 remake of *Meteor Garden*, which has the same title as the original Taiwanese drama. This time, however, it has obtained a license agreement and produced the TV drama in cooperation with Angie Chai, the chief producer of the Taiwanese version.

From 2010 onwards, Hunan TV continued to follow this logic and invest in domestically created dramas that embody its branding strategy of providing entertainment for young people, as well as obtaining the exclusive right to broadcast them (Zhang, 2013). The advantages of this strategy were evident. It not only distinguished Hunan TV from its provincial competitors, thereby securing a firm foothold in national TV market, but also proved to be an effective way of enlarging the audience and increasing the ratings of individual TV programmes (ibid.). In recent years, therefore, a growing number of original love-themed trendy/idol dramas have been customised or jointly produced by Hunan Broadcasting System and then exclusively broadcast on Hunan TV at prime time. In 2013 for instance, 73.3 percent of the TV dramas aired on Hunan TV's prime-time slot fell into this category, signifying Hunan TV's extensive interest in this dramatic genre.

Mostly set in contemporary urban environments, these romantic dramas invariably focus on a group of young people and typically depict the romantic love between a courageous, innocent, hard-working female protagonist of lower social status and a male character of higher social status and often greater wealth and power. This narrative pattern, which was already evident in Korean and Taiwanese trendy/idol dramas, bears much resemblance with the melodramatic formula described by Cawelti with regard to the popular literature prevailing in the nineteenth-century England and America. Specifically, this narrative formula centred on the melodramatic triangle between a virtuous lower-class heroine, a noble hero and a dastardly villain (Cawelti, 1991: 34-35). Cawelti also holds the view that the evolution of social melodrama is continually shaped by new social conditions, ideas and in particular the social values and moral standards embraced by the middle class in those periods (ibid. 47). This suggests that the melodramatic plots in popular cultural texts cannot be fully understood without situating them in their historical and social contexts. However, contemporary Chinese media scholars (see Yin and Yang, 2014: 17) tend to argue that urban romantic dramas, especially those targeting the younger generation, have only created illusions of romantic love by telling a fairy-tale-style story between 'a prince and a Cinderella', but failed to honestly relate to the real-life experiences of young audiences. It may be true that the melodramatic plots in popular narratives, whilst emphasising suspenseful excitement and intensity of emotion, show comparatively less interest in addressing social concerns compared to the more 'serious' romantic TV dramas aired by CCTV-1. Yet, if we take into consideration the long-established tradition of TV propaganda in China, the state ownership of Hunan TV and the realistic frame of the urban romantic theme, it remains to be explored to what extent Hunan TV's romantic dramas are indeed detached from the socio-political reality. Especially when taking into account that after 2002, a new middle-class discourse and the citizen-consumer society have been constantly promoted by the Party-state, it is worth investigating whether the

melodramatic elements in popular Chinese TV serials carry the marks of new class identities and cultural imaginations.

In the following parts of this chapter, I shall draw on three TV serials selected from Hunan TV's evening prime time in different periods to identify how the narratives of romantic love have evolved over time in the light of the changing political, economic and social context. The first serial, *Women in Beijing*, was produced in the late 1990s when the accelerated market reforms were sweeping through China. With a similar storyline to *Holding Hands*, it also enables a comparison between Hunan TV and CCTV-1 in the era prior to Hunan TV's rebranding in 2003. The second drama, *Meteor Shower*, as mentioned earlier, is HBS's unauthorised imitation of the Taiwanese series *Meteor Garden*. Produced in the late 2000s, when television entertainment increasingly targeted young female audiences, it provides insights into the adaptation of an original format to the tastes of these audiences. The last TV serial, *The Interpreters*, embodies the recent domestic innovation in 'idol dramas' during the early 2010s, and many of them were based on popular novels and network literature. Overall, the three dramas cover a range of different issues of different time, while all dealing with the emotional lives of urban residents in contemporary settings. Next, I turn to an in-depth analysis of the main characters, plots and conflicts in each drama. I then explore whether the narrative world in each drama is detached from or reflects the changing socio-political context. Finally, I examine if and to what extent the seemingly 'detached' melodramatic productions still propagate state ideologies and seek to educate the audience.

9.2 *Women in Beijing*: Vengeance of the boss, and redemption of Love

Women in Beijing is a twenty-episode TV serial jointly produced in 1998 by the state-run Chinese International Culture and Arts Company (CICAC), together with CCTV's Film and Television Department, and other two private media companies. It was aired daily on Hunan TV from 9 to 22 March 2000. Although the audience rating is hard to determine for this drama, it won two *Jinying* Awards for Excellent Drama Serials and Best Actress later in the year, suggesting both official recognition and audience success. The drama tells the story of a complicated love relationship between laid-off worker Fang Xiaoyu and her ex-boyfriend Feng Xiao, a successful entrepreneur, set against the background of China's market reforms in the 1990s. As one of the few domestically produced urban romance TV dramas broadcast on Hunan TV in this period – Hunan TV's evening prime time was also considerably occupied by historical/costume dramas and imported romantic TV dramas at the time, *Women in Beijing* provides a platform to examine the narrative formula of romances offered by Hunan TV. Starting from a textual analysis of the main plots and characters, I will illustrate the difference and similarities between Hunan TV and CCTV-1 in treating the same romantic theme.

The story begins with Xiaoyu's betrayal of her love relationship with Feng Xiao ten years ago. At the outset of the story, the female protagonist is heavily influenced by her mother's opinion that marrying into the family of a government official will pave the road to success. Persuaded by the mother, Xiaoyu decides to marry Peng Dongdong, the son of a government minister, rather than Feng Xiao, the son of a butcher. Ten years later, after Feng Xiao has made a fortune and become a successful businessman in Shenzhen – China's first Special Economic Zone, he returns to Beijing, seeking to take revenge on Xiaoyu. It is at this time that Xiaoyu is made redundant amid the market-oriented restructuring in state-run enterprises. Feng Xiao takes this opportunity to offer Xiaoyu a new position as a 'white collar' worker in his Beijing company. To vent his resentment toward Xiaoyu, Feng Xiao gives Xiaoyu a hard time at work. Faced with difficulties from both her boss and a malicious colleague, Xiaoyu gradually learns her lesson and transforms from an obedient figure, who is remarkably forbearing and even suffering, to a tough, confident career woman who still retains traditional feminine traits, such as gentleness and kindness. When she eventually excels in the workplace, her marital relationship with Peng Dongdong becomes fractured, leading to a divorce. At the same time, owing to the trust and understanding built through their shared work, Xiaoyu and Feng Xiao fall in love again. However, when Feng Xiao discovers he has a brain tumour that will kill him any time, he immediately cancels the plan to marry Xiaoyu and then leaves the city, leading to an open ending.

Evidently, the main plot of this drama reflects several topical, and even thorny, social issues, such as unemployment, divorce and extramarital affairs, which immediately marked its difference from other historical/costume/parody dramas aired by Hunan TV. As a realistic theme revolving around the emotional and marital life of urbanites in the reform period, *Women in Beijing* demonstrates plenty of similarities with *Holding Hands*: both trace the evolution of a middle-aged, divorced woman who is laid off in the fast-changing era; in depicting the female protagonists' emotional predicament, both highlight the impact of external factors, such as increasing working pressure mounting upon the nuclear family, and a sudden job loss owing to the market reforms. All of these reflect the social reality at the time. Specifically, Xiaoyu's misfortune in *Women in Beijing* much resembles that of Xiaoxue in *Holding Hands*: at the start of the serial, she is a care-free working mother, employed by a state-run publishing house, doing her work leisurely; yet the market-oriented reforms affect the publishing house and bring about drastic changes to her life. This situation becomes worse when not only she becomes unemployed, but her husband, son of a former minister, also faces personnel changes. In this situation, Xiaoyu has no choice but to accept the job offered by former lover, Feng Xiao, even though she will need to endure Feng's resentment and potential vindictive acts on his part.

When tracing Xiaoyu's development from a junior 'white collar' to a competent manager, *Women in Beijing* likewise seeks to repackage unemployment as a second chance for the

laid-off women. This TV trope of the self-realisation of the unemployed, as in *Holding Hands*, was in line with the authorities' call for promoting reemployment as a vehicle of the liberal market. Xiaoyu is thus represented as a role model who not only survives being unemployed but also becomes a successful professional woman. A commentator from CICAC (Gao, 2000) states that Xiaoyu embodies the ideal image and spirit of modern Beijing women, who are not afraid of changes, but bravely embrace the opportunities brought about by the economic reforms. In other words, this character has both propagandistic and educative functions. Furthermore, the drama also valorises Feng Xiao, the successful businessman, who takes full advantage of the market reforms by transforming from an underestimated butcher's boy to a successful and wealthy businessman. On the contrary, those who continue to rely on the state's administrative power for personal gain, such as Dongdong and another character, Lao Wu, are portrayed as villains in the dramatic plots. It thus becomes obvious that the drama attempts to highlight the benefits of the economic reforms in general, and to praise the qualities and values embodied by Xiaoyu in particular.

Although the two dramas both tend to emphasise the importance of modern women having a professional career, *Women in Beijing* offers a more liberal interpretation of female independence and individualism than does *Holding Hands*. Throughout the drama, the emphasis is on the need for women to obtain an independent, equal status both at home and in the workplace. For instance, Xiaoyu repeatedly tells her female colleague and friends that women should not rely on men, either emotionally or financially, but need to become independent. In line with this view, she also encourages Ms. Shan, a successful entrepreneur trapped in an unhappy marriage, to leave her ungrateful husband and pursue her own happiness. Following this individualistic tone, *Women in Beijing* discards the traditional 'happy ending' that entails a reunion of divorced couples, as indicated by the romantic ending of Xiaoxue and Zhong Rui's story in *Holding Hands*. Rather, it encourages divorced or unhappy women to make choices on the basis of their own feelings, not of familial obligations such as getting back together for the sake of children. Moreover, as the romantic relationship between Xiaoyu and Feng Xiao indicates, *Women in Beijing* portrays divorce as a 'second chance' for the divorcees to embrace new opportunities. In these ways, the female protagonists in *Women in Beijing* reflect a higher degree of individualism that values personal happiness and a liberal outlook. This nevertheless accords with the individualistic aspirations released by the liberalisation of economic markets since the 1980s. Based on these representations, we can conclude that the romantic dramas broadcast by Hunan TV in this period were by no means insulated from the wider social reality; on the contrary, they were highly attuned and responsive to the changing economic and political context.

While set against the same historical background and telling a similar story, it would be misleading to interpret *Women in Beijing* as an equivalent of *Holding Hands*. In many ways, *Women in Beijing* bears the imprint of melodramatic formulas adapted from various foreign imported TV dramas, particularly Korean ones. After all, the melodramatic features are most likely the ones that match audience expectations best. Typically, the climax of the drama is dedicated to the romantic entanglement between Feng Xiao and Xiaoyu. The original intention of Feng offering Xiaoyu a job is to humiliate her. To his surprise, Xiaoyu accepts the challenge and endures all difficulties, including the sabotaging behaviour of a malicious female subordinate, Lingzi, which constantly leads to Feng's misunderstanding of Xiaoyu. However, when Feng sees Xiaoyu actively engage in her work and swallow all the difficulties thrown in her way, he is moved and spontaneously wants to protect her (see Fig. 9.1). Feng's affection for Xiaoyu has been twisted by Xiaoyu's choice ten years ago, and this twisted, unrequited love leads to the trials and tribulations encountered by Xiaoyu at work, but at the same time rekindles affectionate feelings between the two. These are typically melodramatic elements used in Korean trendy dramas, where the main storyline always revolves around the romantic love between a lower-class woman in a secondary role at work and a bossy, authoritative male character who rescues the heroine whenever she encounters trouble (see Lin and Kwan, 2005).

Figure 9.1: Feng Xiao (right) stands in the rain alongside Xiaoyu (left) to support her. *Women in Beijing* (2000)

Moreover, the tragic ending of Feng and Xiaoyu's love story adds another layer of tension to this drama's melodramatic narrative. As Ang (2007: 28) states, the depiction of 'a tragic structure of feeling' seems to be the source of popularity of the Japanese and Korean trendy dramas from the 1990s to early 2000s. Depicting an ideal of 'true love' that is constantly disrupted by fate and various circumstances creates a sympathetic feeling among audiences, especially young females, and make them feel sorry for the melodramatic characters (ibid.). Although there is no direct evidence showing that Feng's fatal disease or Xiaoyu's unfulfilled love are based on certain Korean dramas that were popular in China at that time, the melodramatic appeal of *Women in Beijing* is still obvious: it creates a role model in Xiaoyu, who endures everything and eventually acquires an independent and professional status, while the final twist destroys the possibility of a happy ending in marriage; likewise, Feng Xiao, after waiting for ten years, still cannot marry Xiaoyu

due to his illness. This unabashedly sentimental narrative resembles the characteristics of the Korean trendy drama, which is known for 'melodramatic romances, unrequited love which necessitates tragic endings' (Leung, 2008: 60). Arguably, these narrative traits are not commonly seen in CCTV-1's urban romantic serials, which shows the particular narrative conventions adopted by Hunan TV in order to appeal to audiences.

Set in the same historical period as *Holding Hands*, *Women in Beijing* reflects the emotional, marital and social issues encountered by Chinese urban dwellers living through this transitional period. It promotes the feminist view that modern Chinese women should invest in their professional career, particularly in a fast-changing society, in order to obtain an equal and independent status in both the domestic sphere and the workplace. In so doing, this drama aligns itself with official ideology by advocating the state's reform project and reemployment scheme, and educates the audience by establishing a role model. At the same time, this drama also utilises melodramatic characters, plots and narrative devices to appeal to the female section of the audience. The extensive use of melodramatic formulas in depicting a realistic theme demonstrates Hunan TV's pronounced difference to CCTV-1 in narrating romantic stories.

9.3 *Meteor Shower*: Amnesia, conspiracies and unforgettable youthful Love

As mentioned earlier, *Meteor Shower* is a remake of the enormously popular Taiwanese 'idol drama' serial, *Meteor Garden*. Following the structure of the model, Hunan TV likewise produced two seasons for the remake. What I analyse in this section is the second season of *Meteor Shower – Yiqi youkan liuxingyu*, which was broadcast daily at 10pm on Hunan TV from 9 to 30 August 2010. Benefiting from the heated discussion and controversies raised by the first season,[38] the second season's ratings exceeded the previous year's figures soon after its debut, achieving an average viewership rating of 2.03 percent and a market share 9.04 percent (Tencent Entertainment, 2010). Despite the mixed feedback from the public, *Meteor Shower* has gained phenomenal popularity among young viewers. Its leading actress, Zheng Shuang, was nominated for two *Jinying* Awards for Best and Most Popular Actress of the year, signifying public recognition of her performance. Since these dramas all revolve around the love pursuits of young people, the following analysis of *Meteor Shower* (Season Two) not only provides insights into format adaptation in Chinese TV, but also a horizontal comparison to the CCTV-1 youth drama, *My Youthfulness,* mentioned in the previous chapter. The analysis

[38] *Meteor Shower* season 1 (*Yiqi laikan liuxingyu*) was screened from 8 to 29 August 2009 during Hunan TV's late evening prime-time slot. Since it went on air, it has stirred widespread public discussion and criticism for 'extensive product placement', 'poor quality of adaptation', its 'copycat' character, and 'the awful hairstyle of the male protagonist'. Yet, such extensive public attention in turn contributed to the high rating and market share. The first episodes achieved an average audience rating of 1.9 percent and a market share of 7.73 percent, which allegedly ranked first among the TV programmes broadcast at the same time slot. See Hunan TV (2009a).

will particularly illustrate the unique narrative devices adopted by Hunan TV in promoting its 'idol drama', as well as commitment and constraints on entertainment production.

Although the producers emphasised the originality of this series by highlighting the difference in the main characters' names (Hunan TV, 2009b), the main plot and characters of *Meteor Shower* still largely resemble those in *Meteor Garden.* They both focus on the romantic love and life of a group of students at a prestigious college, tracing their emotional ups and downs. The sequel of *Meteor Shower* follows the first season's ending, where Murong Yunhai, leader of the little 'gang' made up of the four richest students at Elliston Business School, has lost his memory and cannot remember his girlfriend, Chu Yuxun, a hardworking girl coming from a poor family background. At the beginning of the new season, he remembers everything but Yuxun. This situation worsens as Murong mistakes another girl, Jiang Yuan, daughter of the principal of Elliston, for his long-lost girlfriend (see Fig. 9.2). The subsequent plot revolves around the ensuing melodramatic triangle: when Murong struggles to reunite with Yuxun, Jiang Yuan joins Murong's mother in creating obstacles for them; Jiang Yuan becomes paralysed as a result of an accident happening while she is trying to save Murong; she therefore demands that Murong accompany her to Europe for treatment, to which Murong agrees but which leads to another separation from Yuxun. Aside from this narrative thread, subplots depict the respective love triangles of the other three members of the 'gang'. In the end, the drama mostly has happy endings for the main characters, who become more mature in coping with challenges from school and life.

Figure 9.2: Yuxun and Murong get back together, which stimulates Jiang Yuan's (in the distance) jealousy. *Meteor Shower 2* (2010)

One might be tempted to interpret this drama as a timeless love story, reliant on a clichéd love triangle and which can be applied to any social, cultural background, hence with no specific reference to the socio-political reality of Chinese society. Indeed, this youth drama is different to *My Youthfulness*, which is set against the background of the historical experiences from the Cultural Revolution. In *Meteor Shower*, there is so such explicitly social contextualisation. However, this does not mean this drama has neither a connection to the wider social context, nor propagandistic and educative implications. In many aspects, it is still tied to the official ideology of the time and automatically committed to promoting the official Party-state discourse. As discussed in previous chapters, from 2002 onward until the early 2010s, the state had devoted itself to building a socialist harmonious society, and central to this new political line was to expand the middle classes and foster social aspirations towards a stable and prosperous middle-class lifestyle (see Anagnost, 2008). Part of this plan included accepting capitalists as socialist citizens, as well as state endorsement of entrepreneurship and promotion of consumption, in order to boost the national economy while at the same time masking social inequality resulting from the widening income gap (Goodman, 2016). Produced in this context, *Meteor Shower* also integrates the middle-class aspirations and the recognition of entrepreneurship into its melodramatic plots.

The story is set in a fictional business school in China which excels in training business students and sending the students abroad to the world's leading business schools. The school's foreign-sounding name implies its background of established collaborations with foreign universities. Its main pedagogical aim is to give the students essential skills to become successful entrepreneurs. Following this narrative framework, the central female character, Yuxun, is portrayed as a studious girl and a talented young entrepreneur. She not only obtains highest grades in her courses, but also successfully launches her own business through an internship programme, thereby winning praises from the principal. Even though she comes from a working-class family, that struggles to pay her tuition fees, the drama suggests that because Yuxun works hard, she has the chance to transcend her current social status and have a promising future. It is reasonable to speculate here that Yuxun embodies the dreams of the working-class people in Chinese society, who yearn for better living conditions and work hard to advance their social status.

In contrast to Yuxun's lower social position, the male protagonists from the little 'gang' are identified as the second generation of wealthy families, their family background including entrepreneurs, doctors and IT elites. This character design also reflects the wider social reality at a time when the admiration for entrepreneurship and successful middle classes became increasingly evident. In the drama, the four characters' parents are also members of the school board. Hence, the four students become the most powerful and influential people on campus. Almost all the other students see them as idols, which in turn makes them arrogant, rebellious

and ready to challenge school regulations. Whilst delineating class differences among the main characters, the drama also seeks to ease the tensions deriving from the class difference and wealth gap, as required by the official ideology. To this end, the drama highly praises the studious and diligent female protagonist with her working-class identity; more importantly, it introduces an authoritative figure, the principal, who curbs the unruly behaviour of the 'gang' and thereby reins in the privileges with which their class identity appears to have endowed them. Responding to the controversy about the representation of class/wealth difference in the drama, the screenwriter, Wang Hailin, claimed that the producers had wanted to highlight the importance of personal effort and hard work when touching upon wealth inequality, but had had no intention to 'show off wealth' (*xuanfu*), as they had been accused of doing by some viewers (Renminwang, 2009b).

While it becomes evident that this act of self-censorship points to the producers' conscious alignment with the official ideology, the production team also seem to have paid attention to the educational function of this serial. As one of the screenwriters recalled, they wanted to deliver not merely entertainment content, but also meanings and values, so as to provide guidance for the young audience on how to deal with complicated love relationships and friendships (Tencent Entertainment, 2010). It turns out that by juxtaposing several modes of love affairs, including Jiang Yuan's insistence on Murong's physical presence by her side, and Yuxun's understanding and support of Murong, the screenwriters expected the young audiences to make their own moral judgement as to which mode is better. This shows the producers' educational intentions of preparing young viewers for emotional challenges, as well as to promote the value of altruistic love. In this sense, this drama demonstrate a similar commitment to 'educating' the audience as was seen in CCTV-1's *My Youthfulness*.

Yet what obviously differentiates *Meteor Shower* from *My Youthfulness* is its blatant reliance on commercial sponsorship, as well as the entertainment tastes of the young audiences. As Yin (2002) has shown, commercial sponsorship started to appear in Chinese television drama production from 1987, and in the 1990s gradually replaced state subsidies, becoming the main source of television stations' revenue. Following this production strategy, product placement has become increasingly prominent in the production of TV serials, and this trend was fuelled by the state's emphasis on consumer society in the last decade. While product placement was not obvious in *Women in Beijing*, it was a salient feature of *Meteor Shower* ten years later. In the latter series, various commercial brands from clothes to luxury cars, from banks to real estates, have been integrated into the narrative. This is particularly evident in a scene where Yuxun's uncle goes to the Bank of China, seeking advice about student loans: after hearing the staff member detail the policy, he seems quite satisfied and immediately shares the good message with his sister, Yuxun's mother, that with the help of student loans provided by Bank of China, they will be able to send Yuxun abroad for further education. Through this plot

sequence, Bank of China, a state-owned commercial bank, successfully promoted its loan scheme for studying abroad, or at least made the scheme known to young TV viewers, most of whom were students enjoying summer holidays in front of TV. This is only one of many examples of product placement in this TV serial. Other examples include the franchise store Yuxun runs in the TV serial – Seven-coloured Flower (*Qi Se Hua)*, which is a real-life chain store selling girls' accessories. All these examples indicated the close linkage between product placements and television drama in recent years. Some audiences even criticised the *Meteor Shower* series for its overt product placements.

On the other hand, the production team integrated various popular elements used in Japanese and Taiwanese idol dramas, such as employing star actors, integrating tokens of affection, sweet-sounding music, branded products, comic roles and generational conflicts into the plot (Liu and Chen, 2004: 67-68). For instance, the leading actors were mainly chosen from the young stars who gained fame through Hunan TV's self-produced entertainment show, *Super Boy* (*Kuaile nansheng*, 2007). They also sing the theme song of this drama, which appears as a recurring melody to express the emotions of the main characters. Besides, a Saturn necklace given by Murong to Yuxun symbolises the love and commitment between the two. This token is broken at the beginning of season two, echoing the moment when Murong cannot remember Yuxun. While much effort has been made to depict romantic love, the drama also includes comic effects – a key entertainment element inherited from both Japanese *manga* and Taiwanese TV series. For this purpose, the production team inserted animations to the shots, as a way of underscoring the exaggerations of comic roles (see Fig. 9.3). In sum, in addition to the resemblance of storylines, *Meteor Shower* contains various narrative devices that are commonly seen in other transnationally popular TV dramas in East Asia.

Figure 9.3: When Shangguan is speaking, lots of Chinese characters come out of his mouth. *Meteor Shower 2* (2010)

However, it is noteworthy that the considerable reliance on foreign formats does not necessarily lead to a wholesale acceptance of them. Rather, as Huang (2008:110) has argued, they often 'become sites for further reproduction of local identities and meanings'. Hunan TV intentionally tailored the borrowed content for domestic consumption. This included the insertion of in-house stars, original music, domestic brands and filming locations, all of which facilitated domestic consumption of both the TV serial and related commodities. More importantly, the production of this drama has displayed conformity to the official discourse, showing ambiguities in representing the gap between rich and poor. Even though in the original story, wealth and the sense of superiority that comes with it constitute important personality traits of the main characters, especially of Murong, Hunan TV's producers sought to downplay this aspect and altered the luxurious lifestyle depicted in the original Taiwanese version. At the same time, they changed the story with an emphasis on the personal efforts of an aspiring girl. This appropriation explicitly shows the reconciliation between commercial imperatives and the impact of state censorship, as well as the negotiations between producing entertainment and adhering to the political line.

9.4 *The Interpreters*: Work hard and you will fulfil your dream

If the 'idol drama', as exemplified by *Meteor Shower*, is made to appeal to college and high school students, urban romance dramas like *The Interpreters* can be considered targeting female professionals living in cosmopolitan cities (see Zhu, 2008: 90). Focusing on a group of Shanghai-based professional French translators, *The Interpreters* is a typical example of the newly emerged hybrid genre of contemporary urban romance drama and 'workplace drama' (*zhichang ju*). Conventional Chinese workplace dramas mostly focus on the life of doctors, lawyers or policemen. *The Interpreters* was therefore allegedly the first workplace drama representing the life of professional interpreters. The drama was adapted from the best-selling workplace novel by Miao Juan, staring Yang Mi and Huang Xuan, and then exclusively broadcast on Hunan TV from late May to mid-June 2016. Despite the divided opinions expressed in viewers' comments regarding the discrepancies between the dramatic plots and real-life situations (Gu, 2016), the drama still obtained the highest viewing figures of the year, with an average national viewership of 2.63 percent and a market share of 8.74 percent. In the following part, based on the main characters and plots depicted in the drama, I examine how this hybridisation of urban romance and workplace story has achieved such popularity whilst stimulating widespread discussions. I also pay attention to the unique narrative techniques aiming at TV consumption and entertainment, and potential linkages to China's current socio-political reality.

The central female character in *The Interpreters*, Qiao Fei, in many ways resembles Chu Yuxun in *Meteor Shower*: she is portrayed as a strong-willed, self-reliant girl wanting to

advance from a humble background through hard work. Qiao Fei is a French language graduate who decides to become a professional interpreter. She comes from a poor single-parent family, her mother having suffered from a brain disease for many years. The family income depends on Qiao Fei's part-time job as a waitress and her salary as a junior interpreter at the Institute of Advanced Translation. From the moment Qiao Fei meets Cheng Jiayang, an interpreter from the same institute and later assigned as her supervisor, she not only becomes involved in a series of troubles but also gets herself into a romantic entanglement with Cheng Jiayang. In contrast to Qiao Fei, Cheng Jiayang is from a well-off elite family, his father serving as a diplomat and his mother owning a company. As with the plot of *Women in Beijing*, the romance develops in the workplace, where Cheng Jiayang initially gives Qiao Fei a hard time, but the latter proves to be a qualified interpreter, thus receiving Cheng Jiayang's respect and affection (see Fig. 9.4). However, their love meets with opposition from Jiayang's family, particularly his mother. In order to continue their relationship, the hero and heroine have to fight against various obstacles, including the brain tumour that threatens Qiao Fei's life. Having experienced emotional ups and downs and overcome their respective life challenges, the two people are eventually reunited.

Figure 9.4: A romance gradually develops between Qiao Fei and Cheng Jiayang. *The Interpreters* (2016)

At first glance, the plot and characters exhibit many of the melodramatic formulas prevailing in Chinese urban romance dramas since the late 1990s, which are particularly familiar from Korean trendy dramas popular in the late 1990s and the 2000s. The plot in *The Interpreters* is therefore reminiscent us of similar scenarios in the two dramas discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, in *The Interpreters,* the love relationship between Qiao Fei and Cheng Jiayang encounters strong objection from Cheng's mother because of their vastly different family backgrounds; in *Meteor Shower*, Murong's mother likewise becomes the main obstacle in his relationship with Yuxun. Moreover, Qiao Fei suffers from a brain disease in the second

half of *The Interpreter,* which nearly leads to a tragic ending of her romance with Cheng Jiayang. A similar plot development can be found in *Women in Beijing,* relationship between Xiaoyu and Feng Xiao comes to an end due to Feng's illness.

Most importantly, class differences between the hero and heroine are a defining feature of all three Hunan TV dramas, and the depiction of class differences is intertwined with their distinct gender roles. In each case, the heroine occupies the weaker position compared to her richer and more powerful male suitors. She is depicted as both vulnerable but optimistic, always having a hero to save her from the hardships of life. At the same time, in order to make them appear worthy the hero's love, they are represented as hard-working, self-reliant and diligent. Because of these virtues, they become exceptionally attractive to the heroes. As discussed in chapter 8, women's engagement in the workforce was characterised as a key feature of Chinese feminism in the Mao era. The subsequent economic reforms and opening to the West have brought about new feminine qualities, which reinforced gender differences but did not challenge the socialist model of 'gender equality' that still insists on women's participation in social work. As we see from the three dramas discussed in this chapter, women's excellence at work tends to be depicted as important feminine qualities in contemporary popular narratives, but these representations are largely limited within the framework of a traditional patriarchal order. This is particularly true in the aspect that the female characters are always subordinate to more powerful male characters, and their independent spirit has been portrayed as an enchanting quality to please the male.

These narrative features can certainly be attributed to the impact of Korean trendy dramas on Chinese melodramatic soap operas over the last two decades. However, this only provides a partial view. In fact, these narrative traits have in fact proved to be a widely favoured formula in both Eastern and Western contexts. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the melodramatic formulas in Korean trendy dramas found their resemblance in the nineteenth-century popular literature in the West. As indicated by Cawelti (1991), the dramatic depiction of class and gender differences between heroines and heroes in popular novels was to foreground the virtues embodied by the heroines, as well as to valorise the moral ideals that define what is right and significant in a changing society. Apart from the similarity in character design, the depiction of sudden turns of events, confrontation between good and evil, romance and tragedy in Chinese romantic dramas also embody the main features of what Brooks has called 'melodramatic imaginations', which essentially involve 'extreme states of being, situation, actions'; 'persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue' etc. (1995: 11-12). It should be noted that these elements of popular narratives can still be found in recent Western films and drama series, such as *Pretty Woman* (dir. Garry Marshall, 1990) or *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). Particularly, the representations of wealth, power and glamourous life in some American soap operas are considered having provided a fantasy world for viewers to

temporarily escape from their mundane daily life (see Livingstone, 1988: 67). Likewise, the love relationship between members of different social classes in contemporary Chinese romantic dramas invites the audience to a world full of surprises and excitement, tragedies and happy endings. These are not commonly found in the viewers' own lives. Hence, they provide an opportunity to experience another kind of life, which helps the audience to cherish or adjust their own lives.

It appears that the extensive use of melodramatic elements in *The Interpreters* has made it a typical romantic TV serial that disregards its groundings in real life and instead lets the audience indulge in romance. This is precisely what the drama has been criticised for. For instance, the Party-official newspaper *Guangming Ribao* published an article which expresses disappointment that the drama is only a romance disguised as a workplace drama, and that it fails to thoroughly present the extensive training, hidden rules and hardships associated with the profession of translation (Renminwang, 2016). It is certainly the case that *The Interpreters* spends much narrative time on depicting the emotional side of the protagonists rather than their professional side, which weakens its representation of the complex social forces and relationships in real-life working environments. However, we should not ignore the drama's realistic values and political implications simply because of its continuous depictions of romantic love.

With a melodramatic mode and the guise of a workplace TV drama, *The Interpreters* might not probe into the fields of translation or diplomacy. Nevertheless, it is reflective of recent social agendas and serves as the embodiment of official ideologies. As Rofel (1994: 706) claims, melodramas tracing back to *Yearnings*, as with all others, have their 'specific cultural and historical location(s)'. *The Interpreters* is no exception. It is closely tied to the middle-class aspirations promoted in the 2000s and the political vision of the 'Chinese dream' put forward in the 2010s. As mentioned earlier, following the state's encouragement of economic growth and consumption since 2002, there has emerged an increasingly prominent trend in popular narratives that celebrates the affluent lifestyle of the rich, and admires the privileged and powerful. This trend is reflected in the plots of *The Interpreters*: whenever the poor junior interpreter Qiao Fei fails to accomplish her tasks no matter how hard she tries, Cheng Jiayang helps her out and solves the problem, as he has easier access to various social resources and superior networks. But, as *Meteor Shower* purposively downplays the protagonists' different class identities, *The Interpreters* also attempts to mask class differences by romanticising them, instead of presenting the social gap as a serious social issue. For instance, in a sequence of plot, Cheng Jiayang expresses enormous interests in Qiao Fei's daily life and street wisdom: he enjoys taking a bus to work with Qiao Fei and eating street food – a lifestyle he is not familiar with due to his different upbringing. He also admires Qiao Fei's fighting for a better life. These qualities make her exceptionally attractive to Jiayang. As a

result, the differences between the hero and heroine, that are somehow associated with their respective family background, social status and class identity, add more romantic elements to their relationship. In these regards, both *Meteor Shower* and *The Interpreters* display high degree of conformity to official views in treating the sensitive class issue.

Moreover, *The Interpreters* seeks to guide public opinion in the way it represent the social tendency of 'hatred towards the rich' (*choufu xinli*). It portrays Cheng Jiayang's friend, Wang Xudong, the son of a rich entrepreneur, as a warm-hearted, diligent and cautious young man, who tries to change the public's negative perceptions of second-generation wealthy people. In correcting the image of the rich, the drama also makes reference to cyberspace violence and represents it as a key factor that leads to conflict between rich and poor. In the last few episodes, Cheng Jiayang falls victim to violent comments in cyberspace after he makes a mistake during a live broadcast on TV. Because of Cheng Jiayang's identity as the son of a businesswoman and a diplomat, the upper class, which involves successful entrepreneurs, Party and state cadres and their families, becomes an immediate target of public hatred and criticism. Although this event in the drama turns out to be part of a conspiracy hatched by Cheng Jiayang's mother to break her son's relationship with Qiao Fei, the irrationality embedded in this event still has its root in trends within current Chinese society that are related to the widening income gap and the increasing social stratification.

The above analysis thus suggests that a Chinese romantic drama relying on a melodramatic mode still to some extent has its political mission, namely, to contribute to resolving social contradictions through exposing them. The analysis of romantic dramas on both Hunan TV and CCTV-1 so far has shown in order to exercise their socio-political function, Chinese TV serials have normally resorted to establishing a role-model character within their narratives. As Li (2011: 340) has noted when explaining how a melodrama transforms from an emotionally grounded fiction to an ethical and educative social text: 'the virtuous characters exemplified not only moral value but correct and practical social actions.' This is also the case in *The Interpreters.* In its key melodramatic character, Qiao Fei, it softens the tensions emerging through unequal distribution of wealth and presents a role model for viewers who are dissatisfied with their current social position. To this end, the drama does not dwell on portraying the difficulties Qiao Fei encounters but leaves sufficient narrative space to emphasise the opportunities given to her. It traces her development from a naïve graduate to a professional interpreter who eventually realises her dream. In many aspects, this trope of success shows connections to the political slogan of realising the 'Chinese dream' promoted by the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, who encourages Chinese young people to 'dare to dream, work assiduously to fulfil the dreams and contribute to the revitalisation of the nation' (Global Times, 2013). While this assertion may overstate the political implications of *The Interpreters*, some core concepts demonstrated by this drama, such as the interpreters'

responsibility of ‘serving the country’ and ‘defending national honour’, still remind us of the alignment with the official political line.

Evidently, the seemingly unrealistic, sentimental TV melodrama has shown its groundings in reality and its potential to facilitate state propaganda. Yet, as a successful serial drama, its narrative also incorporates various product placements, ranging from washing liquid to medicines to real estate agents. At the same time, the commodification of the domestic space is accompanied by an extensive cosmopolitan imagination which has become a typical formula adopted in urban romantic dramas in recent years. In *The Interpreters*, the main characters frequently travel between China and Switzerland, for humanitarian rescue, personal transnational business or medical treatment. These plots and events all contributed to constructing a modern and cosmopolitan image of China, which likewise illustrated the complexity of romantic TV serials between political meaning and entertainment values.

9.5 Conclusion

The above analysis has shown that love-themed TV dramas on Hunan TV are driven by a melodramatic formula that consists the depiction of romantic love between a lower-class female and a male of a higher social class. It should be noted that the class differences between hero and heroine often serve as a dramatic catalyst that reflects commercial considerations rather than expressing social criticism. Compared to the romantic dramas on CCTV-1, the melodramatic narratives on Hunan TV commit less to the resolution of socio-political conflicts in the stories. Rather, they are dedicated to providing romantic fantasies for the audiences.

Noticeably, Hunan TV’s romantic dramas before 2003, of which *Women in Beijing* is representative, still demonstrate clear similarities with the CCTV-1 dramas in that they reflect social concerns of unemployed female workers and provide emotional release for them. However, along with the prominent transnational cultural flows in East Asia at the turn of the century, the dramas aired on Hunan TV have become increasingly influenced by popular dramas made in South Korea and Taiwan. This suggests that the narrative forms shown in Hunan TV are subject to constant change, from adhering to traditional, politically oriented programming and narratives to gradually embracing new and unprecedented narrative formulas. This change has been informed by transnational cultural influences, an increasing creative autonomy of Chinese TV producers, as well as the consumerist trend among the audience.

This is not to say these TV serials were exempted from political functions or educative purposes. Although they do not explicitly use the language of official propaganda, they still implicitly reflect the neo-liberal logic that has pervaded Chinese society as a result of the

market reforms, which were marked by the admiration of wealth and power, a commitment to material enjoyment, middle-class imaginations and the promotion of the ‘Chinese dream’. Besides, all these romantic dramas remain strictly compliant with official requirements on depicting romantic love. They generally display heterosexual love between men and women, without any other form of love relationships or overly sexual scenes, namely, any physical contact that goes beyond a light kiss or hug between lovers. Furthermore, the representation of gender relations still conforms to a traditional patriarchal hierarchy, hence continuing to reinforce existing power relations. Within this politically sanctioned discourse, we see that various social issues have been dramatised and transformed into a melodramatic formula for public entertainment, which demonstrates the resilience of Hunan TV’s romantic dramas in negotiating audience demands.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

The aim of this project was to examine the changing role of Chinese television in facilitating the Party-state's propaganda work in the new era characterised by marketisation and popular entertainment, with a focus on prime-time television dramas. Rather than giving a macro explanation of the landscape of Chinese television, this project has sought to explore the changes and continuities as exemplified by the content of selected TV programmes. Particularly, it considers the making of Chinese television programmes as a process of constant negotiation between various factors that derive from both domestic developments and global trends. Hence it has situated the analysis of TV dramas within the spectrum of two poles – propaganda and entertainment, aiming to explore how these TV programmes have related themselves to the propaganda imperatives of the Party-state, while at the same time responding to audience demands regarding entertainment.

In order to meet these aims, this project has adopted a mixed-method approach which includes a quantitative content analysis to delineate long-term trends within the genre of TV drama, and four qualitative case studies to establish a more thorough understanding of the transformations that have occurred in Chinese television. In this chapter, I will summarise the key empirical findings of this project, with a focus on the changes and continuities reflected through the chosen TV programmes over the sampling period. After this, I will reflect on the limitations of this thesis and then highlight its potential contributions to existing knowledge.

10.1 Nuanced changes in Chinese television

In chapter 3, I outlined the changing political, economic and cultural context in China since the reform era which gave rise to the transformations in Chinese television. By and large, owning to the 1978 policy of 'reform and opening', Chinese television has departed from its role as an explicit propaganda tool and evolved into a multifaceted industry that needs to balance obeying the Party's propaganda imperatives with satisfying the creative needs of TV producers and audience interest in television entertainment. That is to say, the production of TV programmes has changed from a previously top-down model to a multi-way system that involves negotiation between political and commercial interests. In order to further shed light on the complexities in China's state television and how it has changed to be popular, chapters 5 to 9 provide answers regarding these changes, which can be grouped into three sections.

10.1.1 Rise of commercial influence

The most prominent aspect of change in the post-1992 era was the rise of commercial influence in the television sector. This was evidenced by not only the quantitative trends in the content of broadcasts, but also by the detailed findings from the qualitative case studies. In chapter 5, I have shown that both central and provincial television stations have adopted commercial strategies in broadcasting prime-time TV dramas. This was demonstrated through the higher proportions of themes favoured by audiences on each TV channel over the sampling period. Despite CCTV-1 being the officially designated mouthpiece of the Party-state, it has still allocated an increasingly large proportion of its prime time to broadcasting the widely favoured romantic dramas. At the same time, Hunan TV, as the flagship TV channel of an economically less developed province, has shown more devotion to commercial operations and its programmes have been closely tied to the purpose of making profits. Hence TV dramas depicting romantic love have become the most favourable genre on this TV channel.

When looking at the results from the qualitative case studies, we find that they confirm the trend towards increasing commercial influence on Chinese television. This is notably demonstrated by the rise of production value in making TV dramas. The analysis of the politically important genre – revolutionary TV serials – in chapters 6 and 7 has demonstrated this change. No matter whether in historical war dramas aiming for propaganda, or in fictional stories of armed struggles to entertain the audience, there has been a significant growth in the use of popular elements to depict the revolutionary war. These techniques included using car chases or gun fights to increase tension and excitement, and employing well-known actors to draw public attention. Some recent productions (e.g. *On the Taihang Mountains*, 2015) have also sought to integrate global cinematic techniques into their representation of the revolution in order to increase audience appeal. These measures have made the revolutionary dramas produced in the 2010s more exciting and potentially more profitable than those made in the late 1990s.

The commercial influence brought about by the market economy has been even more pronounced in the making of love-themed dramas. As shown in chapters 8 and 9, a form of melodramatic narrative that has wide audience appeal has been increasingly adopted in the domestically produced dramas focusing on the private sphere, regardless whether these dramas were tied to propaganda, social education or entertainment. Such melodramatic formulas were marked by the depiction of romantic love between members of different social classes, tales of ‘rags to riches’ and a positive portrayal of financially successful male characters. These narrative formulas stem from popular drama genres available on the East Asian TV market and have meanwhile become an indispensable narrative device adopted by Chinese domestic TV dramas with a romantic plot, including the propaganda dramas aired on CCTV-1 (e.g. *My Year of 1997*, 2017). On the other hand, the growing emphasis on

commercial values of TV programmes has also been reflected in direct product placement in dramas broadcast by commercial channels. As seen from the case of Hunan TV, the strategy of product placement was not yet prominent in the 2000 TV drama, but has since then become a salient feature in the romantic dramas made a decade later. This has led the recent entertainment-oriented romantic dramas to become a showcase for displaying various commodities.

The commercial transformations in either the form or content of TV programmes can be interpreted within the framework of transnational cultural flows and the national boost for the development of a cultural industry. On the one hand, China's 'opening' to the world, particularly its admission to the WTO in 2001, has enabled more frequent contacts between Chinese TV producers and experts from abroad. This has introduced popular formats, narrative devices and visual effect techniques not only from the West, but also from neighbouring countries in East Asia which share similar cultural roots with China. On the other hand, since the establishment of a market economy in 1992, the Party-state has been keen on transforming the state-controlled television system into profitable state enterprises. While the state's aim has been to increase both the revenue and competitive strength of its TV stations, at the same time, the Party has sought to gain more cultural influence using popular media forms such as TV drama. This explains why the state-sponsored propaganda productions have also increasingly drawn experience from commercially successful cultural products.

10.1.2 The changing articulation of nationalism and Chinese socialism

As noted in chapter 3, the key focus of the Party's propaganda work in the post-1989 era has been promoting nationalism, patriotism and socialism. This point was directly supported by the analysis of revolutionary TV dramas in chapters 6 and 7: these dramas broadcast in different periods have all been dedicated to the discursive construction of nationalism and have highlighted the significance of the Communist revolution and the founding of a socialist China. Yet, in terms of specific articulation of nationalism and socialism, we can still detect subtle changes in the revolutionary narratives.

The first aspect of change is concerned with the content of nationalism, which was demonstrated by the changing depiction of the KMT. In both the propaganda dramas aired on CCTV-1 and the popular narratives shown in Hunan TV, the depiction of the CCP's former enemy in the civil war has become increasingly positive over the sampling period. Whereas the Japanese army remained the evil Other in nationalist discourse, the contributions made by the KMT in the anti-Japanese war have been more positively acknowledged and praised, particularly in the dramas produced after the mid-2000s. This change in TV representation was in line with the CCP's changing attitude to the KMT. In the official discourse – which has in recent years evolved into a consensus among mainland Chinese people, all the 'patriotic'

KMT members, or Taiwanese in general, are considered part of the 'national Self' if they treat the Japanese invaders as the enemy and believe in the 'one China' policy promulgated by the mainland. Hence it is reasonable to argue that the subtle shift in the official discourse has provided ideological stimulation for artistic creations.

Another aspect of change is the way key propaganda messages have been articulated in the revolutionary dramas. These changes were particularly evident in the dramas selected from CCTV-1. Even though all three dramas aim to support the legitimacy of the ruling Party by propagandising that only the CCP could have led the Chinese people to victory and prosperity, this propaganda message has been articulated differently. This changing articulation was actually aligned with the CCP's official ideological lines of constructing socialism at different times. Whereas the 1999 drama – *War of China's Fate* – still emphasised gaining victory through armed struggles, the 2005 drama – *Eighth Route Army* – attributed the success of the CCP to the 'mass line' policy which stressed representing and fighting for the interest of Chinese people. The latter was a timely response to the promulgation of Three Represents in 2002. Besides, the 2015 drama, *On the Taihang Mountains*, highlights the necessity of uniting all national patriotic forces to achieve victory, thereby realising the rejuvenation of the country. This also echoes the political vision of China's current leadership in building the socialist society. These changes in televised content have reflected transformations in the political context since the 1990s, when the Party sought to transform itself from a revolutionary party to a 'party in power' with the goal of maintaining its rule (Brady, 2008: 47).

In addition to the changes found in the revolution-themed dramas, the dynamics of televised propaganda messages and their relation to the political context are also evident in the love-themed dramas broadcast on CCTV-1. As summarised in chapter 8, the narratives of these soap-opera-style dramas were intertwined with wider social, economic and political changes. Educational or propagandistic meanings were embedded into these dramas, aiming to support dominant political ideological shifts that have emerged at different times. *Holding Hands* (1998) was shown to justify the policy of market reforms during a period when such reforms had resulted in a large-scale unemployment. *My Youthfulness* (2009) stresses the importance of maintaining family harmony and delivers the message that only when harmony in each household is achieved will the country be able to realise the goal of building a harmonious society. *My Year of 1997* (2017) uses a past historical event – the 'handover' of Hong Kong in 1997 – to eulogise the political achievement of the Party-state, thereby echoing the theme of the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. Each of these CCTV-1 dramas embodies what the political authority said at different historical periods about the route of building a socialist country. This shows the continuous political influence on the television programmes in China.

10.1.3 A growing emphasis on individualism and human interest

In the televised content sampled from different periods, there has been a trend indicating a rise of individualism and a narrative turn to human interest. This trend was comparatively more prominent in the revolutionary dramas. Set against the background of collectivist warfare, the revolution-themed dramas have seen a growing emphasis on individual abilities and human interest in the revolutionary narratives. The rising importance of individualism is particularly evident in the popular representations of the revolutionary struggles on Hunan TV. While the dramas in CCTV-1 tended to treat the collective power of the CCP and Chinese people as the most important factor in securing victory, the revolutionary narratives on Hunan TV have put more emphasis on the individual leadership, courageous actions and combating skills of the omnipotent Communist heroes. This is best illustrated by the recent hit drama, *The Disguiser* (2015), in which the collective revolutionary movement is used as no more than a backdrop to display the personal heroism of Communist undercover agents.

The rise of individualism in revolutionary stories was paralleled by a growing emphasis on human interest. Since the dramas started zooming in on individual lives, there has been a significant growth in the plot depicting the internal world of revolutionaries. As we saw in chapters 6 and 7, revolutionary dramas made in the mid-2000s and afterwards have shown a growing interest in representing the personal dilemmas, sacrifices, and wellbeing of the people during wartime. In the serials made in the mid-2000s, for instance *Eighth Route Army* (2005) and *Struggles in an Antient City* (2005), such narratives only started to emerge; those produced in the 2010s – *On the Taihang Mountains* (2015) and *The Disguiser* (2015) – focus considerably more on personalised narratives to depict the turbulent life of people living in the revolutionary era. These individualising narrative techniques have become increasingly significant in the theme of propagandising the collective victory of China.

These changes can be understood with reference to their cultural, economic and political context. On the one hand, the narrative traits that highlight individual abilities, autonomy and leadership were designed to cater for the cultural tastes of audiences living in the era of popular entertainment. As noted in chapter 3, a key feature of China's popular entertainment culture since the late 1990s lies in the aspect that it tended to simplify any kind of social and historical experiences and to remould them into dramatic plots built around 'conflict and resolution'. In so doing, this type of entertainment provided the audience with a sense of excitement and symbolic satisfaction, especially when all conflicts were resolved within the narrative space. The revolutionary stories analysed above, which were made in the new century, somehow echoed this feature of the entertainment culture. They restyle the revolutionary war as a 'conflict' that individual Communist Party members have to resolve. In this way, the revolution-themed dramas are able to link the past events to the individual lives of present viewers, thereby making the revolutionary stories more appealing.

On the other hand, the growing narrative focus on the wellbeing of people reflected the ideological stance of the Party in the last two decades and a half. Particularly, the theme of humanism was an important dimension of the Confucian ideals promoted in the mid-2000s. As outlined in chapter 3, the Party elites drew inspirations from Confucianism to articulate their political line, notably 'building a harmonious society'. This ideological stance provided political conditions for the revolutionary narratives to start focusing on the personal dimension. In the period after 2012, the political authorities put forward a new slogan – the 'Chinese dream'. In this discourse, the collective goal of realising the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is articulated as tied to individual wellbeing and success. We can see that the official discourse has continued to promote the dimension of individual wellbeing and happiness since the mid-2005s for the purpose of maintaining social stability. It was therefore not a surprise that narratives focused on human interest have become an essential part in both propagandistic and popular representations of the collective war, particularly in the dramas made around and after the year 2005.

Furthermore, the rise of individualism and the increasing focus on human interest can also be found in the love dramas sampled from CCTV-1 and Hunan TV. Actually, the growing proportion of love-themed dramas on the two TV channels was already an indicator of this trend, in that these dramas specifically focus on the personal feelings and individual lives of urban Chinese. As I have shown in chapters 8 and 9, the popularity of love themes in the post-1992 period came not only as a result of the emergence of an urban-oriented entertainment culture, but also because of the increasingly frequent cultural exchange with foreign countries. In general, these two aspects of change signify the rise of the private sphere, as well as individualistic aspirations and personal values on Chinese television screens in the post-1992 period. However, we should be wary of exaggerating the power of the private sphere by arbitrarily drawing the conclusion that state power has weakened in the meantime. As we shall see in the next section, all the agents contributing to the changes in the media sphere needed to operate carefully within politically sanctioned discourses.

10.2 Continuities in Chinese television

While the transformations in the wider context have induced the above changes in television content, what has remained consistent in this process is the general purpose of propaganda and the political bottom line set for all the activities conducted in the television sector. As summarised in chapter 2, propaganda as a form of communication can take various forms, including using popular and entertaining elements to help the propagandists achieve their intended purposes. Hence we can use the analysis of narrative techniques in television programmes to interpret the propagandistic purposes embedded in them.

10.2.1 General purpose of propaganda

As discussed in chapter 3, the central focus of the Party's propaganda work in the post-1989 period has revolved around legitimising its rule over China and maintaining the political status quo of the one-party state. For this purpose, the political authorities are keen on adapting new strategies and techniques from a wider global context to support their propaganda work (Brady, 2008). The qualitative findings of this thesis have verified this point, with particular regard to the prime-time TV dramas broadcast on CCTV-1. As this channel is closely tied to the central government, its TV programmes aired during prime time have invariably reflected propagandistic purposes. Such connections are visible not only in the explicitly political content, but also in the 'life-world content' that does not address self-evident political themes.

Chapter 6 mapped how revolutionary dramas produced in different periods have responded to the distinct ideological line promoted at the time of their production. However, an important continuity in the recurrent revolutionary narratives has been the construction of nationalism and patriotism, embodied in the propaganda message that only the CCP could have been the legitimate force to lead the Chinese people to victory. In order to make the revolutionary stories appealing, thereby effectively delivering the propaganda message, the dramas have drawn on new narrative content and forms, such as techniques of personal narratives and incorporating more fictional plot elements. Yet despite the increasingly advanced methods of propaganda, the ultimate political purpose of these dramas was to show support to the leadership of the Communist Party.

From another perspective, chapter 8 displayed the enduring propaganda effort in prime-time Chinese TV dramas. Even though the dramas analysed in this chapter are centred on the emotional and familial experiences of fictional characters, they are nevertheless tied to the above-mentioned propagandistic purposes. Particularly, all the three dramas involve a respectable female character whose role consists in helping the protagonists overcome difficulties in their private lives and work. More importantly, this female character seeks to guide not only the characters in the drama, but also the TV viewers towards appreciating stability, harmony and prosperity in both the private and public spheres. The individual hopes as depicted in each drama are in line with the Party's long-term goals of maintaining social stability and national cohesion. In this respect, the propaganda use of the 'life-world content' in China accords with existing scholarly discussions about the political potential of seemingly apolitical content (for instance, see Holbert, 2005), and also resonates well with Imre's (2016: 199-224) discussion of the propagandistic and educational function of socialist 'soap operas' in the context of Eastern Europe. This suggests that, although television propaganda has been prominent in contemporary China, it is by no means unique to the Chinese broadcasting system.

10.2.2 Operating in the sanctioned discourse

The other significant continuity seen from the televised content is that political control of the television sector has always been in place. This was explicitly proven by CCTV-1, in that TV programmes on this channel have been closely tied to propaganda. Surprisingly, however, this continued political influence is best illustrated by the commercial TV channel, Hunan TV. As revealed by both the quantitative and qualitative findings, all creative activities, commercial considerations and artistic expressions on this TV channel have had to proceed within officially sanctioned discourses. The quantitative results in chapter 5 have shown that even though Hunan TV has been granted more autonomy in its commercial operations and its programming has primarily centred on providing audience-friendly entertainment, it has also shown allegiance to the Party's propaganda work by promoting nationalist themes during politically important commemorative periods.

The qualitative case studies have provided a more detailed account of this point. In chapter 7, I analysed two dramas that drew on popular elements to represent the revolutionary past. In both the TV adaptation of the canonised Red Classics and the spy dramas based on popular novels written in the post-reform era, TV producers have made moves to popularise the revolutionary narratives. The development of narrative strategies have included emotionalising and romanticising the revolutionary past in order to make more concessions to the viewers' interests. It is notable that the efforts to incorporate increasingly dramatic plots were carried out within the politically permitted realm; and despite the development in narrative devices, the underlying political message – that only the CCP can save China – has not been changed at all. Rather, these approaches have in effect continued to revitalise the past revolutionary legacies, showing the contribution commercial TV makes to the collective agenda of constructing a nationalist discourse.

Chapter 9 featured two love-themed dramas on Hunan TV. Compared with the politically important theme of revolution, the dramas discussed in this chapter deal with a seemingly non-sensitive subject that involves romance, love and family. Given this politically safe topic, the narrative content and forms of TV romance on Hunan TV have been able to develop constantly, from obeying traditional, politically oriented programming rules to gradually embracing new and popular formulas originated in other countries. However, as the analysis suggested, the narrative content has had to be consistent with the mainstream spirit of the times by complying with official requirements on depicting romantic love and conforming to an established patriarchal hierarchy. Moreover, the exploration of new entertainment forms must stick to the bottom line given to provincial satellite TV channels, according to which they must avoid indulging in entertainment while also paying attention to the social educational function of their TV programmes. Abiding to these principles helped these TV channels run their shows smoothly, thereby avoiding unnecessary loss in commercial returns. This situation, which the

case studies have verified, evidences my central argument in this thesis: Chinese television in the post-reform era has involved constant negotiations and compromises between various forces and demands.

10.3 Concluding reflections: Limitations and contributions of the thesis

While this thesis has identified key changes and continuities in Chinese television and mapped them onto the wider political, economic and political transformations in the post-reform era, it is not without limitations. The first limitation to note is that this research is mostly based on the intersection between popular culture and political communication in China. The popular culture discussed here operates within officially sanctioned discourses, so that the in-depth analysis has not taken into account cases that were controversial. Certainly, there have been problematic prime-time TV dramas in the sampling period which were subject to censorship in the middle of being broadcast.[39] However, in-depth analyses of these dramas would have gone beyond the scope of this study, as this project is expected to provide a timely examination of the evolution of China's political communication in recent decades, with a focus on the subtle changes that occurred. This is not to valorise this broadcasting system. On the contrary, this study recognises the limit of the one-party system by highlighting the enduring political control and propaganda motives in its television.

A further limitation of this study is that the analytical approach mainly focuses on the content of television programmes rather than, for instance, production studies or audience studies. There are three reasons why I opted for the analysis of content. First, as discussed in chapter 2, to analyse the politically relevant content forms an important first step to approach to and in evaluating the political significance of any media messages. This ensures that the research on political communications does not miss any important evidence, including the seemingly irrelevant, entertaining materials. This also reminds us of the trend in which politics tends to be repackaged in the form of popular entertainment. Before venturing into making judgement about the role of entertainment media in politics, we need to capture the basic meaning and ideological stance as demonstrated in the content of the media.

Second, the content of prime-time TV drama in China is what the state wants or allows the people to watch. In another word, it is the result of negotiations between different social agents,

[39] A well-known case in point is the 2003 Chinese historical drama aired on CCTV-1, *Marching towards the Republic* (*Zouxiang gonghe*). This TV serial depicts the history of China from the collapse of the Qing Dynasty to the founding of the Republic of China (to the year 1917). Because its portrayal of key historical figures, such as the Empress Dowager Cixi, and minister Li Hongzhang, was considered having challenged the officially prescribed versions, and its reinterpretation of the struggles at the time was deemed by the CCP authorities as having the potential to promote political reforms in contemporary China not in line with the CCP's stance, this show triggered government censorship while being shown on CCTV-1. As a result, the last few episodes were reedited and shortened, and the whole serial finished ahead of the scheduled broadcast time. For further details on this issue, see Zhu (2008: 42).

including state and market players. Long-term changes and development in the content of TV programmes suggest a new round of negotiation and reconciliation. Hence an analysis of the dynamics and nuances in the content would help understand the transformation in power relations among Chinese media, the state and the audience.

Third, as we have already seen from above, the content change in Chinese TV programmes over the sampling period has still operated within the politically sanctioned discourses. If I chose production studies and interviewed Chinese TV producers in the first place, it would be unlikely that these actions can lead to subversive answers, because the Chinese TV producers know exactly what the official ideological line is. The views of producers that we can access from websites are normally what they can provide to the general public, including researchers. An insider's view is of course crucial for understanding the transformation in the propagandistic features of Chinese Television. In my case, however, the analysis of content can also achieve this purpose.

As for audience studies, this thesis does not indeed include many discussions of audiences' reception of these programmes. It has assumed a relatively homogeneous and cooperative audience that accepts the preferred meaning contained in TV programmes. Knowing what the Chinese TV viewers actually think about these programmes would be helpful in assessing the development in the Communist Party's propaganda strategies, particularly with respect to the integration of political agenda with popular agenda. However, audiences' responses might not seriously challenge or alter the official discourse. Certainly, audience studies form a fruitful approach to measure the political impact and effects of specific entertainment programmes. Future research involving reception analysis will further our knowledge of China's current political communication and give more insights into 'audience interests' in viewing TV programmes.

Despite the limitations, the thesis has made several major contributions to existing literature on the transformation of Chinese television in recent decades. First, existing studies of Chinese television seldom develop a temporal comparison that charts changes and continuities over a lengthy period. This research addresses this gap by providing a quantitative content analysis, so as to delineate the long-term transformations in the content production of TV dramas. In so doing, it illustrates how the different levels of television stations have navigated between complying with the propaganda mission and fulfilling the requirement of making profits during different periods of China's recent history.

Secondly, previous works have conducted considerable macro-structural analyses of the changing features of Chinese television and attributed change to either state control or market forces; but such research lacks nuanced studies of specific programmes from a micro perspective. This project fills that gap by providing detailed analyses of television content and its change, as well as explaining them with reference to not only domestic developments but

transnational and global cultural influences. Furthermore, this project also pays attention to important continuities in Chinese television. It provides systematic case studies that not only illustrate the enduring socialist appeals for propaganda, but also note the evolvement of state propaganda into the cultural form of television entertainment.

The wider contribution of the thesis to the field of media studies is also evident. First, this project has generated meaningful empirical results in relation to the relationship between propaganda and popular entertainment. As noted in chapter 2, existing literature on political communication has fully recognised the political function of entertainment media. My studies of Chinese television enrich this view with evidence suggesting that the prime-time TV dramas not only amuse and resonate with the audience, but more often, have acted as a propaganda tool to articulate official views. Furthermore, different levels of Chinese TV broadcasters have demonstrated varied degrees of concessions to the entertainment pursuit of the audience, striking a fine balance between propaganda, education and entertainment. This shows that in the Chinese context, television entertainment can provide fun, but it can also be transformed into politics, depending on the political imperatives of the Party-state, the operational model and branding strategies of the TV station.

Another aspect of contribution to the wider literature lies in the historical approach of this project. Existing media studies, particularly media-centric research, have tended to focus on the synchronous process in textual production and consumption. These approaches have often lost track of the social and political dynamics in media production and reception, hence having failed to understand them as diachronic processes (Deacon, 2003). This project has sought to refute this tendency by adding temporal values to political communication studies. Specifically, I consider the making of television content as the process and result of constant negotiations between political, commercial, cultural and ideological forces. The content therefore embodies temporal features of the prevailing socio-political context in which it was produced. The empirical findings have verified the two stances and demonstrated that China's political, economic and cultural transformations over decades have not only influenced the form and content of television propaganda, but provided rich sources of popular elements for the Party-state to engage in cultural propaganda. This shows the importance of historical context in shaping communication practices.

The final contribution of the thesis is the aspect that it shows the unique features of socialist television contexts. Rather than being exceptionally politicised, socialist television has enjoyed a great extent of editorial freedom and creative autonomy, as long as it operates within the ideological lines permitted by governing bodies. Meanwhile, as seen from the case of Hunan TV, the ideological requirement from the political authorities can sometimes be negotiable, for the purpose of satisfying commercial interests. An investigation of these internal dynamics and historical changes has contributed to the de-westernised approaches to studying socialist

media systems. In addition, this thesis links observations of the Chinese television system to a wider literature concerned with the state television of former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. While noting the distinctiveness of Chinese television in relation to its historical, political and cultural background, this project also seeks to map China's socialist television onto the established world system of socialist TV cultures. Guided by a similar strand of operational principles, Chinese television has shown intriguing transnational similarities with other (former) socialist television systems, including the utilisation of popular TV soaps for promoting political agendas, the idealisation of central female characters for social education, and in particular, the distinct temporalities of socialist TV broadcasting which were tied to celebrating the revolutionary achievements of communist parties. These findings suggest that contemporary Chinese television culture belongs to a global constellation of socialist media cultures.

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Appendix 1. Coding Scheme

1.1 Coding Schedule

Case No.	Year	Month	*Feitian* Award	*Jinying* Award	No. of episodes	Genre	Historical setting	Theme 1	Theme 2	Producer

1.2 Coding Manual

Year of Broadcasting

Month of Broadcasting

Recipient of *Feitian* Award?

1. No
2. Yes

Recipient of *Jinying* Award?

1. No
2. Yes

Number of Episodes

Genre

1. Long TV serials
2. Mini-series (3-9 episodes)
3. One-off single drama (1-2 episodes)
4. Sitcom
5. Other

Period setting

1. Contemporary era: 1978-present
2. Modern era: 1949-1978
3. Republican period: 1911-1949
4. Ancient times: before Xinhai Revolution in 1911

5. Other

Theme 1

1. The revolution led by the CCP before the foundation of People's Republic of China (PRC)
2. Military development – reflecting the development of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)
3. Rural life – the construction and development of the rural/remote areas in China
4. Biopics of role models recommended by the CCP – including political leaders, Party members, and other important historical figures
5. Love and romance – focusing on romantic relationships and courtships
6. Family – reflecting family ethics and the relationship between family members
7. Children/student life – focusing on school education and the growing up of children
8. Crime – including anti-corruption and cop drama
9. Economic reforms – reflecting enterprise reform and entrepreneurship in post-1978 era
10. Dynasty drama set in the imperial courts of ancient China
11. Martial arts
12. Other

Theme 2 (code if a second theme is found; code 0 if no second theme)

Producer

1. Unknown
2. Imported
3. State TV: Television station or affiliated studios
4. Independent media companies
5. Joint production between 3 & 4

Appendix 2. Filmography

General information of the eleven prime-time TV dramas selected for case studies:

1. *War of China's Fate* (*Zhongguo mingyun de juezhan*)
Director: Wang Jin
No. of episodes: 30
Broadcast time: Sep-Oct 1999
Storyline: It focuses on important historical events and political struggles taking place in mainland China from the end of Second World War to the founding day of the PRC (1945-1949). It aims to address the key question: who – the CCP or KMT – would legitimately rule China after the Japanese invaders had withdrawn from China. The story unfolds from the US intervention to support Chiang Kai-shek in establishing a democratic government in mainland China, but this financial and military support is later used by Chiang to suppress Mao's revolution. The CCP's political leaders hence need to resist the repression from the KMT, and at the same time seeks to unite various national democrats to subvert Chiang's Nationalist Government.
Original works: N/A

2. *Eighth Route Army* (*Balujun*)
Director: Song Yeming, Dong Yachun
No. of episodes: 25
Broadcast time: August 2005
Storyline: At the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the CCP's Red Army joined the KMT's National Revolutionary Army in order to establish a united front against Japan, changing its name to the Eighth Route Army whilst in practice still being led by the CCP. Set against this background, *Eighth Route Army* depicts how the Communist Party leader Mao Zedong and General Zhu De lead the Eighth Route Army and the Chinese nation to final victory, with a focus on the effectiveness of the 'mass line' policy developed by the CCP.
Original works: N/A

3. *On the Taihang Mountains* (*Taihangshan shang*)
Director: Li Wei
No. of episodes: 32
Broadcast time: August 2015

Storyline: Set against the background of the CCP' revolutionary period between 1937 and 1947, this drama traces the development of the 129th Division of the Eighth Route Army led by Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping – the commander and political commissar of the 129th Division. It recounts their guerrilla warfare against the Japanese army in the CCP's largest wartime base – Taihang Mountains. The serial also reflects the economic development in the Taihang area while it is governed by the Liu-Deng Army.
Original works: N/A

4. *Struggles in an Ancient City* (*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*)
Director: Lian Yiming
No. of episodes: 20
Broadcast time: August 2005
Storyline: Set in mid-August of 1945, when the Second World War is coming to an end in Europe, whereas in the Far East, the Japanese Army still occupies several major cities in North China. In this situation, a CCP agent, Yang Xiaodong, is secretly sent to a Japanese-occupied city in Hebei Province with the mission to promote an uprising in the local collaborationist government against the Japanese Army. With the help of Communist underground agents and guerrillas, Yang Xiaodong defeats the Japanese military advisor, and saves the city from being bombed by the Japanese army.
Original works: Novel – *Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*, by Li Yingru, 1958;
Film – *Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*, by Yan Jizhou, 1963.

5. *The Disguiser* (*Weizhuangzhe*)
Director: Li Xue
No. of episodes: 48
Broadcast time: August 2015
Storyline: Set during the Japanese occupation of China, the story centres on the powerful Ming family in Shanghai. The younger brother, Ming Tai, is a college student who has been secretly recruited to be a secret agent of KMT *Juntong*. Ming Lou, the elder of two brothers, serves as the chief financial officer of the Shanghai collaborationist government but has secret identities, devoted to eradicating traitors and collecting intelligence for the frontline battles against the Japanese army. The Ming's eldest sister, Ming Jing, is a capitalist who covertly financies the CCP-led anti-Japanese movement for years. Unaware of each family member's secret actions, Ming Tai returns to Shanghai to engage in assassinations and intelligence gathering. Through co-operation between the KMT *Juntong* and CCP undercover agents, the Ming siblings manage to bring down the enemies in the collaborationist regime and support the CCP in its frontline battles.

Original works: Novel – *Spy War in Shanghai* (*Diezhan Shanghai tan*), by Zhang Yong, 2012.

6. *Holding Hands* (*Qianshou*)
Director: Yang Yang
No. of episodes: 18
Broadcast time: April 1999
Storyline: Set in a big city in the 1990s, the story traces the mid-life crisis of an urban couple, Xia Xiaoxue and Zhong Rui. The wife, Xiaoxue, finds herself stuck in the dullness and repetition of day-to-day life. With no ambitious goals for career advancement, she develops an increasingly bad temper. Her husband, Zhong Rui, gradually loses patience with her and instead, falls for a female colleague. After experiencing many fights, they end their marriage. After the divorce, Zhong Rui becomes increasingly successful in running his own company, whilst Xiaoxue becomes unemployed as a result of the market-oriented reforms. In striving to raise her son and manage the single-parent family, Xiaoxue starts to acquire new knowledge and adapts herself to a competitive working environment. Having eventually become a self-reliant woman, Xiaoxue receives love and respect from her ex-husband again.
Original works: N/A

7. *My Youthfulness* (*Wo de qingchun shui zuozhu*)
Director: Zhao Baogang
No. of episodes: 32
Broadcast time: April 2009
Storyline: Set in contemporary Beijing, the drama traces three young women, Zhao Qingchu, Qian Xiaoyang and Li Pili, in particular their choices of love and work. The three characters are maternal cousins. Qingchu has gone back to Beijing to study and since then has been living with their grandmother. Inspired by her example, Xiaoyang has quit her job, left her parents in Yinchuan and also moved to Beijing, wishing to start a new life there. The youngest cousin, Li Pili, has grown up in Beijing with her parents but has her own life pursuits that are against her parents' expectations. Focusing on these characters, this drama reveals the conflict between these young adults and their parents.
Original works: N/A

8. *My Year of 1997* (*Wo de 1997*)
Director: Wang Weimin
No. of episodes: 32
Broadcast time: June 2017

Storyline: In 1976, 'rusticated youth' Gao Jianguo and his girlfriend, An Hui, return to their hometown, Beijing, to announce their love relationship to the parents. But this relationship is strongly rejected by An Hui's family, especially her brother, An Guoqing. In a violent altercation, Jianguo accidentally injures An Guoqing, leaving the latter in coma for months. For fear of being sentenced to jail, Jianguo flees to British-governed Hong Kong and seeks to start a new life there with his mother. Having lived in Hong Kong for twenty years, Jianguo expects the 'return' of Hong Kong to China in 1997 and has strong faith in Hong Kong's future led by socialist China.
Original works: N/A

9. *Women in Beijing* (*Beijing nüren*)
Director: Li Sanlin, Yin Dawei
No. of episodes: 20
Broadcast time: March 2000
Storyline: The story begins with Fang Xiaoyu's betrayal of her love relationship with Feng Xiao ten years ago. At the outset of the story, Xiaoyu decides to marry Peng Dongdong, the son of a government minister, rather than Feng Xiao, the son of a butcher. Ten years later, Feng Xiao has made a fortune and returns to Beijing, seeking to take revenge on Xiaoyu. It is at this time that Xiaoyu is laid off in the market reforms. Feng Xiao takes this opportunity to offer Xiaoyu a new position in his Beijing company. To vent his resentment, Feng Xiao gives Xiaoyu a hard time at work. Faced with difficulties, Xiaoyu gradually transforms from an obedient figure to a tough, confident career woman. This change also leads to a romantic reunion of Xiaoyu and Feng Xiao.
Original works: Novel – *Beijing nüren,* by Liang Ni, 1997.

10. *Meteor Shower: Season 2* (*Yiqi youkan liuxingyu*)
Director: Ding Yangguo, Song Yang
No. of episodes: 35
Broadcast time: August 2010
Storyline: This sequel of *Meteor Shower* follows the first season's ending, where Murong Yunhai has lost his memory and cannot remember his girlfriend, Chu Yuxun. At the beginning of the new season, he remembers everything but Yuxun. This situation worsens as Murong mistakes another girl, Jiang Yuan, for his long-lost girlfriend. The subsequent plot revolves around the ensuing melodramatic triangle. Aside from this narrative thread, subplots depict the respective love triangles of the other three members of the 'gang'. In the end, most of the main characters have happy endings and become more mature in coping with challenges from school and life.

Original works: Japanese *manga* series – *Boys over Flowers* (*Hana Yori Dango*), by Yoko Kamio, 1992-2008;

Taiwanese drama series – *Meteor Garden* (*Liuxing huayuan*), produced by Angie Chai, 2001-2002.

11. *The Interpreters* (*Qin'ai de fanyiguan*)

Directors: Wang Ying

No. of episodes: 44

Broadcast time: May-June 2016

Storyline: Qiao Fei is a French language graduate who decides to become a professional interpreter. She comes from a poor single-parent family, her mother having suffered from a brain disease for many years. The family income depends on Qiao Fei's part-time job as a waitress and her salary as a junior interpreter at the Institute of Advanced Translation. From the moment Qiao Fei meets Cheng Jiayang, an interpreter from the same institute and later assigned as her supervisor, she not only becomes involved in a series of troubles but also gets herself into a romantic entanglement with Cheng Jiayang. In contrast to Qiao Fei, Cheng Jiayang is from a well-off elite family. Their love relationship meets with opposition from Jiayang's family. In order to continue their relationship, the two people have to fight against various obstacles.

Original works: Novel – *The Interpreter* (*Fanyiguan*), by Miao Juan, 2006.