

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/westminsterresearch>

**Beyond totalitarian nostalgia: a critical urban reception study
of historical drama on contemporary Chinese television**

Dawei Guo

School of Media, Arts and Design

This is an electronic version of a PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster. © The Author, 2012.

This is an exact reproduction of the paper copy held by the University of Westminster library.

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Users are permitted to download and/or print one copy for non-commercial private study or research. Further distribution and any use of material from within this archive for profit-making enterprises or for commercial gain is strictly forbidden.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch:
(<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

BEYOND TOTALITARIAN NOSTALGIA:

A Critical Urban Reception Study of Historical Drama
on Contemporary Chinese Television

DAWEI GUO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the University of Westminster
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 2012

ABSTRACT

From the mid-1990s a wave of dramatic serials featuring the legendary figures of China's bygone dynasties has emerged in dramatic programming on Chinese primetime television. The commercialization of mass media and the rise of media consumerism in China since the early 1990s have fostered the emergence of these historical dramas on television. Set during the dynasty era, these television historical dramas have been at the forefront in articulating political and legal principles based on the Confucian-influenced traditional Chinese culture. Although media scholars have interpreted the popularity of the television historical dramas as a revival of Confucianism, virtually no empirical research has been done to explore how Chinese audiences relate their viewing experiences to the revival of Confucianism according to their own social and cultural conditions. This thesis presents a qualitative audience study of how the historical dramas are understood and socially and culturally valued in contemporary China, taking into account personal, social, historical and cultural issues that relate to viewers' engagement with this television genre.

Between late September 2007 and early April 2008, the author carried out his fieldwork audience research in two urban settings in China, the city of Beijing and that of Changsha. 10 focus groups and 11 in-depth interviews were conducted involving more than 60 respondents from young adult and middle-aged audience groups. According to the author's fieldwork data analysis, the ways that the Chinese audience engages with the historical drama are far more complex than generally thought; rather than insist on a literal interpretation of the drama text, the audience engages with the historical television drama in quite a divergent way due to his or her age, gender, life stage and socio-cultural status. Meanwhile, informed by the Grounded Theory, the author identified two text-based interpretive frameworks that are adopted by the respondents across all the focus groups and in-depth interviews in their understanding and evaluation of the historical drama text. These two interpretive frameworks include the framework of fact/fiction and that of 'classic-ness'. To conclude, the author argues that the Chinese audience's response to the historical drama goes beyond a literal, political sense of totalitarian nostalgia; it is characterised by an increasingly more liberal, diverse and indeed open-ended engagement with the historical drama text. Nevertheless, a critical re-evaluation of Maoist revolutionary classic literary works is manifested within that engagement process.

CONTENTS

Abstract 1

List of tables and figures 5

Acknowledgements 6

Author's declaration 8

Chapter 1 Introduction 9

1.1 The background context of the research 9

1.2 The aims of the research and its proposed contribution to knowledge 13

1.3 Thesis outline 15

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and the Rationale of the Research 20

2.1 Introduction 20

2.2 Theoretical approaches to the analysis of contemporary Chinese television 21

2.3 Genre issues concerning contemporary Chinese television historical drama 25

2.4 Changing paradigms in critical Chinese television reception studies 31

2.4.1 James Lull's *China Turned On* and British Cultural Studies in the 1980's 34

2.4.2 A revised cultural approach and Anthony Fung and Eric Ma's *Satellite modernity* 38

2.4.3 The theories of cultural citizenship and Anthony Fung's fandom and youth studies 43

2.5 Concluding remarks: towards the relationship between the historical and the
post-socialist Chinese audience-hood 48

Chapter 3 The Rise of 'New Historical Drama' on Contemporary Chinese Television 50

3.1 Introduction 50

3.2 The governmental-ideological sphere: the rise of traditional culture 'fever' 51

3.3 The literary sphere: the emergence of new historical novel 56

3.4 The television media sphere: anti-corruption television drama and new historical
drama 61

3.5 Summary 68

Chapter 4 Methodology and Methods 70

4.1 Introduction 70

4.2 Research methodology 70

4.3 The use of the research methods 72

4.3.1 Cultural genre analysis 72

4.3.2 Focus group 74

4.3.3 In-depth interviews 78

4.4 Data analysis 79

4.5 Summary 83

Chapter 5 Contemporary Chinese Historical Television Drama as a Cultural Genre 85

5.1 Introduction 85

5.2 A brief introduction to three historical dramas 87

5.3 Television industry 94

5.4 Television scholars 100

5.5 Concluding remarks 109

Chapter 6 Engaging with History 112

6.1 Introduction 112

6.2 Historical accuracy and the public attitudes 113

6.3 The myth of totalitarian nostalgia 119

6.4 Historical resources and contemporary use 124

6.4.1 Learning 125

6.4.2 Reflection 127

6.4.3 Suspicion 130

6.5 Concluding remarks 131

Chapter 7 Fact/Fiction 133

7.1 Introduction 133

7.2 Genre definition 136

7.3 Chinese historiographical tradition and its three types of television interpreters 143

7.3.1 Conservatists 146

7.3.2 Culturalists 148

7.3.3 Realists 150

7.4 Concluding remarks 152

Chapter 8 Classic 154

8.1 Introduction 154

8.2 The classic television drama: a reappraisal 157

8.3 The new ‘classic’ discourse and the audience’s reflexive attitudes 167

8.3.1 The middle-aged adults 168

8.3.2 The young adults 171

8.4 Concluding remarks 176

Chapter 9 Conclusion 178

9.1 Introduction 178

9.2 Political and cultural forces at work in the production of historical dramas 179

9.3 The historical drama and its audiences: articulating and disarticulating state power 182

9.4 Towards Chinese television culture beyond totalitarian nostalgia and future research
directions 185

References 189

Appendix One: List of focus group and in-depth interview participants 202

Appendix Two: Glossary of Chinese characters 204

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

| | |
|----------|---|
| Table 1 | The detailed focus group features |
| Table 2 | The detailed in-depth interview features |
| Figure1 | DVD cover for <i>The Bronze Teeth</i> (2000) |
| Figure 2 | DVD cover for <i>The Great Emperor Hanwu</i> (2005) |
| Figure 3 | DVD cover for <i>The First Emperor</i> (2006) |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a long list of people and institutions that I wish to thank for helping me to finish this long academic training. Unfortunately, I can only mention the most prominent few of them here to keep this acknowledgement to a reasonable length.

Firstly, my Director of Studies Professor Jeanette Steemers deserves a big hug from me. I know that I have been such a headache in her working life since she became my DoS in September 2010. Thanks to her great sense of responsibility and excellent supervisory skills, I managed to overcome terrible writing hurdle and regain self-confidence in continuing with this project. Without her unstinting support and care I could not have had come this far. Being an amazing example herself, she has taught me that an educator should never easily give up on any student. Special thanks also go to my previous Director of Studies Professor Annette Hill and my second supervisor Dr. Roza Tsagarousianou. It is a great pity that I could not go on working with Annette as she had to leave for a new post in the University of Lund, Sweden. Annette provided me with invaluable help in determining the scope of this project as well as conducting my fieldwork research. She had acted so well as, in her own words, ‘a vigor booster’ at the early stage of my research. Roza has been hugely supportive and encouraging for me since the beginning of my doctoral studies. Her wonderful comments on my Transfer documents reassured me that my attempt of using Durkheimian ideas was worthwhile.

Besides my supervisory team, there are some other faculty members from the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) here at University of Westminster to whom I owe many thanks. I thank the CAMRI for offering me a three-year China Media Centre Fee Waiver Scholarship. Professor Hugo de Burgh, the Director of the China Media Centre (CMC), has been always ready to help me with my thesis. I had also had great honor to work for the CMC in organizing a seminar series between May 2008 and July 2009 and its annual Chinese media conference in July 2009. Professor Colin Sparks, Dr. Peter Goodwin, Dr. Anthony McNicholas and Dr. Xin Xin were very concerned with my progress. For all their support I stand in grace and gratitude.

Apart from the CAMRI, there are two other academic institutions to which I remain tremendously thankful. I am so grateful of the School of Television and Journalism at

Communication University of China (CUC), Beijing where I had had worked as a lecturer between July 2002 and August 2004 and then between July 2005 and August 2006 for its ever-lasting love, care and trust. The CUC has been such an important part of my life! I express my most sincere thanks to the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) for inviting me to attend their visiting scholar programme for one week in January 2012. Having been away from China for all these years, I had a wonderful opportunity at the CUHK to present my research project in front of some leading media scholars from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. This opportunity strengthened my confidence to finish my thesis and to conduct further research based on my thesis.

Within the last five years my lovely friends both in the UK and back home in China have been so generous in their support of my studies and my life in general. Some of them are worthy of a special mention here, in the UK are Lee Hsiao-wen, Philip Tzu-Lung Lin, Yuan Yan, Yik-Chan Chin, Zeng Rong, Tong Jingrong, Kiki Tianqi Yu, Sun Xiaoxiao, Xiao Yang, Neil Jeffery and Brendan Green and in China include Sophie Guo, He Wei, Cao Shule, Fang Jackie Yin, Shi Liyue, Wang Yuqing, Zhang Lei, Cui Xi, Gu Jie and Xu Guiquan.

Last but not the least, I am deeply indebted to my dearest parents Guo Jianyin and Liu Haiyan who are thousands of miles away in China but always there giving me love and care wherever I am and whatever I do. To have them as my parents has been nothing but an amazing blessing to me!

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Westminster. The work is fully original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the thesis has been submitted for any other degree. The thesis has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED: _____

DATE: _____

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The background context of the research

This thesis looks at Chinese audiences' response to historical drama on contemporary Chinese television (*dianshi lishiju*). *Dianshi lishiju* here refers to a specific type of contemporary historical drama. In the mid-1990s a wave of dramatic serials featuring the legendary figures of China's bygone dynasties began to dominate dramatic programming on Chinese primetime television. The trend reached its height in the late 1990s and the early 2000s with saturation programming of palace dramas set in the *Qing* Dynasty (1644-1911), what Chinese critics term '*Qing* Drama'. From the early 2000s to date more dramas like these dealing with historical figures and events from a range of periods in ancient Chinese history have been produced and aired nationwide in China.

According to the Report on Development of China's Radio, Film and Television in 2006 (Li 2007), the historical drama genre has topped the list of Chinese audiences' favourite television genres. In the meantime, the Report shows that television historical dramas are the highest selling prime-time programmes on China Central Television (CCTV), the leading national television station in China. These historical dramas have a significantly different look from those of the 1980s; being more diverse in theme and style and more concerned with mass entertainment. Most importantly, they have popularised a rewriting or representing well-known historical events and figures driven by the commercialization process of Chinese media.

Although the ways of defining the historical television drama are diverse, 'the historical' has become an umbrella term in contemporary China, referring to television fiction concerning treatment of history (mainly pre-modern), explorations of key pre-modern events and figures as well as adaptations of classic novels. At the same time, the use of 'the historical' as a term is not currently stabilized. 'Serious drama' (*zhengshuo ju*) versus 'popular drama' (*xishuo ju*) is still the most common dichotomy made within Chinese popular press and academia about this rather broad genre of 'historical television'; the serious dramas refer to those representing historical figures and events in a more historically accurate way, whereas the popular ones are judged to feature a dramatic

representation loosely based on historical facts.

The popularity of these television historical dramas has attracted the attention of both critics and audiences in China. Most media scholars in China mainly ascribe the popularity of television historical dramas to two reasons (e.g. Li & Xiao, 2006; Yin, 2002; Zeng, 2000, 2002). First, the commercialization of mass media and the rise of media consumerism in China since the early 1990s have fostered the emergence of the popular historical drama on television. Although China's television production and transmission began in the late 1950s, it was not until the Deng-launched Economic Reform (starting in 1978) that the number of television stations as well as the number of television sets proliferated. According to Chinese media scholar Qingrui Zeng (2005), by the end of 2002 nearly every Chinese urban household had had its own set, with China's television network estimated to reach 78 percent of the population. At the same time, the widespread use of the satellite television technology has encouraged a boom in the television content industry since the early 1990s. In the 1980s, China's broadcasting system was operating on the county, city, provincial and national levels. The aim of this so-called 'Four Tier Operation of Radio and Television and Overlapping Coverage' (*siji ban guangbo dianshi*), which came as a result of the authoritarian politics, was to ensure that economy and political power would remain intact on the local level. At the time, CCTV One was the only satellite television channel.

With the urbanization movement taking increasingly faster steps since the early 1990s, conflicts emerged between the old television broadcasting system and the rapidly growing market demand for popular culture products. In response to the conflict, Chinese government then adopted the 'Get on Board the Satellite' (*shangxing*) policy in 1990. Under this policy, the major provincial television channels are permitted to be broadcast through satellite transmission. That is to say, each province has one television channel whose signal is able to reach the whole country through satellite technology. By the end of 2003 there had emerged around 50 satellite television channels in China. Thus, the introduction of the 'Get on Board the Satellite' policy has led to the construction of a nationwide satellite television-broadcasting network in China.

The establishment of the satellite television broadcasting network has been claimed as a milestone in the development of the Chinese television industry (e.g. Yin, 2002; Zeng, 2005). On the one hand, it resulted in the rise of television consumerism, and on the other

hand, it allows us to witness the multifarious televisualization of the socio-cultural changes taking place in every corner of this post-socialist country. According to a survey conducted in 2002 (Zeng 2005), the average television viewing time of a Chinese audience amounts to three hours in a day and one hour is spent in watching television dramas. Thus, watching television drama has become a significant leisure activity for ordinary urban households in contemporary China. In the meantime, the fragmentation of television audiences as the consequence of the television consumerism has been stimulating the diversity of television drama productions.

According to Yin (2002), the emergence of the television historical dramas reflected the rise of the popular culture in contemporary China which was the result of the decline of the Communist ideologies and the public desire for mass entertainment. Nevertheless, as he claims, 'historical dramas provided intellectuals with a mean of expression and certain rhetorical strategies' (Yin, 2002, p34). For example, the forty-four-episode serial *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1998), produced by Beijing Tongdao Cultural Development Company, used more than one hundred characters in over more than 600 scenes to narrate the political struggles in the Qing Dynasty from the period of *Kangxi* (1662-1722) to *Yongzheng* (1723-1735). It drew upon historical allegories and historical rewritings to explore the history and power relations of contemporary Chinese society. Using the past to mirror the present, and drawing upon the past to satirize the present are complementary historiographical traditions in China. These dramas clearly inherit this intellectual tradition; they are not a rewriting of existing historical accounts as such, but their significance lies in the fact that we can shed light on the present by reviewing the past. It can thus be argued that these historical dramas offer audiences a dramatised account of the past and traditional Chinese society at a time when major change is going on in contemporary China.

Second, the popularity of the television historical dramas should be considered as a revival of Confucianism. Confucianism (*rujia sixiang*) is a Chinese ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551BC-479BC). The origin of Confucianism dated back to China's Spring and Autumn Period (771BC-476BC) when an ethical-sociopolitical teaching emerged. Following the abandonment of Legalism (*fa jia*) in China after the Qin Dynasty (221BC-207BC), Confucianism became the official state ideology of China. It developed metaphysical and cosmological elements in the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD). As it is widely accepted, the

dominant strain of Confucianism stresses avoidance of conflict, a social hierarchy that values seniority and patriarchy, a reliance on sage leadership that locates its safeguards against the abuse of power not in political situations but in the moral commitment of leaders, an anti-commercial attitude that disparages trading for profit, an emphasis on moderation in the pursuit of all forms of human pleasure that subordinates entertainment to moral enlightenment, and finally the overarching notion of humanity.

Over the last two decades, many Chinese cultural scholars in China and abroad have pointed out that Confucianism owed its revival to the intellectual and general public's responses to the great changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society and culture (e.g. Bell, 2008; Liu, 2004; Wang, 1996; Zhang, 2008). The end of the Cold War not only greatly eased the political and military stand-off between China and the western world; it also witnessed increasing Chinese-related human, cultural and economic mobility at both regional and transnational levels. China, as one of the longest continuous civilizations, re-emerged into the international community after nearly a century of impotence, frustration and humiliation. The most prominent change within China's political landscape in the post-Tiananmen era has been the revival of Confucianism. The tragedy and controversy of the Tiananmen Protests resulted in the Chinese public's strong distrust of Chinese government. Unlike the Maoist period, where the Party-state ideologies forcefully served as the moral standard in the public realm, the post-Tiananmen era witnessed the crisis of the Communist ideologies in ordinary people's lives. In the last two decades, this moral crisis has been solved in some cases by other belief systems and ideologies such as Christianity, Falun Gong and popular nationalism of all kinds. But, as Daniel Bell (2008), a Canadian born professor of political philosophy at China's Tsinghua University rightly observes, Chinese government worries that such moral alternatives 'threaten the hard-won peace and stability that underpins the country's development, so it has encouraged the revival of China's most venerable political tradition: Confucianism'(p8).

The media scholars holding this opinion argue that these television historical dramas set during the dynasty era have been at the forefront in articulating political and legal principles based on the Confucian-influenced traditional Chinese culture (Li & Xiao, 2006; Yin, 2002; Yin & Ni, 2009; Zeng, 2000, 2002; Zhu, 2008). US-based Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu (2008b), in her book *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market*, argues that in their effort to

engage audiences who detest rampant political corruption and society's loss of moral grounding, the historical dramas have presented exemplary emperors of by-gone dynasties. In her view, the search for model leaders is rooted in Chinese cultural tradition that has been dominated by Confucianism from the second century to the late Qing Dynasty and the early twentieth century.

Although these scholars have interpreted the popularity of the television historical dramas as a revival of Confucianism, virtually no empirical research has been done to explore how Chinese audiences relate their viewing experiences to the revival of Confucianism according to their own social and cultural conditions. Media scholars have failed to closely investigate how these television historical dramas are perceived, discussed and criticised by the audiences. American media scholar Robert Allen (1985), in his discussion of soap opera in the western world, claims that the study of soap operas had been conditioned within two related supervisory discourses: 'criticism (aesthetic discourses) and sociological research' (p10). For an extended period, the media scholars in China have interpreted these historical dramas mainly by using textual analysis, but little academic effort has been made to explore the meaning of these dramas from a sociological perspective. The chronic lack of sociological consideration for television dramas in China, in my opinion, is because that most of the media scholars in China come from literature background and so give more attention to the textual elements of television drama than its contextual meaning. For this reason, this thesis tries to fill this knowledge gap by looking at the Chinese audience response to the historical drama.

1.2 The aims of the research and its proposed contribution to knowledge

As has been introduced so far, research on historical dramas has mainly focused on the drama texts themselves. As far as the existing research literature on Chinese television is concerned, there is nearly no empirical data about how viewers value these dramas and how this relates to their interaction with social changes. Furthermore, there are no audience studies in this field that provide knowledge of how television historical drama as a cultural category can be deconstructed based on the social and cultural situations in China. Within this thesis, I thus present a qualitative audience study of how television historical dramas are understood and socially and culturally valued in contemporary China, considering personal, social, historical and cultural issues that relate to viewers' engagement with this

television genre. The thesis intends to address three crucial questions concerning the reception of the historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television. The three questions are as stated below:

- 1) How do Chinese audiences respond to the issues of ancient Chinese history represented within the selected drama texts?
- 2) To what extent do audiences, through their viewing practice, relate the historical representations to the tremendous socio-cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society?
- 3) How do the audiences evaluate the historical dramas as a popular culture phenomenon?

In a general sense, this thesis provides empirical research that can contribute to a broader understanding of contemporary Chinese television audiences. Specifically speaking, its original contribution to knowledge involves three aspects. By looking at an East Asian local television phenomenon and how it is received in its nation-state context, this thesis, first of all, provides a case study for the field of East Asian television studies; it generates many thoughts on how the Chinese viewing public deal with mediated forms of ‘traditional culture’ in a globalizing world. Second, it tests the constructionist approach of audience research suggested by Finnish media scholar Pertti Alasuutari (1999) in the Chinese context. According to Alasuutari (1999), ‘one of the gradual developments in cultural and media studies has been to reflect upon and to take distance from the cultural concerns embedded in the way we conceive of contemporary society and its characteristic new phenomena’ (p9); it will be fascinating to see how this increased reflexivity is practiced by the Chinese audiences in contemporary Chinese society. I shall return to this constructionist approach of audience research in my methodological discussion in Chapter 4.

Third, the last ten years has seen the maturing of critical Chinese media studies in an international context (see Zhu 2008b); for nearly all the scholars of Chinese media, the most central problem confronted with mass communication in China involves the ambiguities and contradictions arising from the relationship between continued state

control and economic reform (e.g. Lee 2000, 2001; Pan, 2009; Sparks 2008; Wang 2001; Zhao 1998, 2008). It therefore takes a great deal of empirical effort and in-depth analysis to study the ambiguities and paradoxes of Chinese media in relation to the Chinese state. In my opinion, that is also an important goal for a critical Chinese media studies. This thesis wishes to make some contribution to the achievement of that goal as well.

1.3 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter Two conducts a literature review on the key themes and theories in relation to this project. The literature review is focused on three strands of scholarship; first, theoretical approaches to the analysis of contemporary Chinese television, second, genre issues concerning contemporary Chinese historical television drama, and finally, changing paradigms in critical Chinese television reception studies. Each aspect will be discussed in a separate section. Within each section, an attempt will be made to critically examine relevant themes and approaches drawn from both Chinese and non-Chinese academia. An integrated review on both Western and Chinese literature on television communication like this, as I argue, serves two purposes. On the one hand, it creates a dialogue between many Western-originated media and communication theories and the issues concerning contemporary Chinese television. On the other hand, it puts both the Western and Chinese theories under scrutiny discussing their feasibility in a global-local field of knowledge production about contemporary television culture. The expected fulfillment of these two purposes should lead to the formation of a more nuanced theoretical framework for dealing with my research subject.

The third chapter moves on to look at the contextual issues concerning the rise of the historical drama on contemporary Chinese television since the mid-1990s. It consists of three independent sections where each section deals with one of the movements; these movements also cover three main areas of the transformation of contemporary Chinese popular culture. The first section introduces the wave of traditional culture ‘fever’ in China first instigated by overseas Chinese intellectuals, notably the Harvard scholar Wei-ming Tu, and then overseen and promoted by Chinese government. In this case, historical drama as a whole television genre often performs a controversial ideological function in ‘building a harmonious society’ as advocated by the current Hu-Wen Administration. The second section focuses on literary transformation by revisiting the rise of the new historical novel;

it uses Chinese historical novelist Er Yuehe and his well-known Qing emperor trilogy which was turned into several successful historical television dramas, as an example to illustrate this transformation. By tracing the development of historical television drama that deals with anti-corruption initiatives, the final section discusses the transformation of contemporary Chinese television content. In this respect, it has been widely acknowledged that the hybridisation of social criticism and historical realism has contributed to the particular dramatic style of historical drama in China (e.g. Li & Xiao, 2006; Yin, 2002). It is against the backdrop of this cultural transformation that historical drama has changed into its current manifestation on contemporary Chinese television.

Chapter 4 presents a report on the issues concerning the methodology and methods of my thesis. It is comprised of four parts. In the first part, I shall briefly explain the reasons why my particular qualitative research approach is adopted to deal with my research questions. The second part provides a detailed discussion on the use of the research methods including cultural genre analysis, focus groups, in-depth interviews and document analysis. Part three concentrates on my process of research data analysis towards writing up the findings; the main purpose of this part is to highlight the significance of reflexivity in two aspects of the qualitative data analysis: on the one hand, using grounded theory informed analytical techniques (Strauss 1987), and on the other hand, rethinking the use of focus groups in researching Chinese society and culture. The last part summarises the gains and limitations of my qualitative research practice.

Influenced by American media scholar Jason Mittell's (2004) cultural approach to television genre, Chapter 5 focuses on the generic characteristics of the historical drama and deals with the category of 'the historical' itself. This chapter consists of four sections. The first section is devoted to briefly introducing three sample drama series including *The Bronze Teeth* (*tiechi tongya jixiaolan*) (2000-), *The Great Emperor Hanwu* (*hanwu dadi*) (2005), and *The First Emperor* (*qin shi huang*) (2006). The storylines and major theatrical features of the series are provided as indicative of contemporary Chinese historical television drama as a whole genre. These sample series will be used as case studies in discussions of the genre issues which arise. Section Two is focused on the Chinese television drama industry. The aim of this section is to look at how the Chinese television drama industry categorizes and evaluates historical drama through its production, regulatory, marketing and scheduling practices. The third section turns to television

scholarship on the genre issues of the historical drama. It revisits the relevant work done by four important television scholars in China. Importantly, these television scholars approach the genre issues mainly from a textual perspective. The final section summarises the whole chapter and lays the foundations for the next stage of analysis, which concentrates on audience responses to the historical television drama.

Chapters 6-8 present a data analysis based on my fieldwork research conducted between October 2007 and April 2008. My data analysis involved two stages. The sixth chapter reports on the first stage of the data analysis. This chapter analyses three important issues concerning the historical representations within the drama texts from the point of view of the audience. These issues, including the significance of historical accuracy, totalitarian nostalgia and contemporary use of the historical representations, are drawn from the long-term debate of historical dramas that can be easily found both within the Chinese television drama industry and academic debates. Standing from a perspective of reception studies, I find that the ways that the audience engages with the historical drama are far more complex than generally thought; rather than insist on a literal interpretation of the drama text, the audience engages with the historical television drama in quite a divergent way due to his or her age, gender, life stage and socio-cultural status.

Informed by the Grounded Theory, which has been discussed in Chapter 4, I conducted the second stage of my data analysis. Through manual data processing, I identified two text-based interpretive frameworks that are adopted by my respondents across all the focus groups and in-depth interviews in their understanding and evaluation of the historical drama text. They include the interpretive framework of fact/fiction and that of ‘classic-ness’. They also serve as the two most significant categories of findings from my audience research.

In the seventh chapter, the findings in relation to the fact/fiction framework are presented in two sections. The first section introduces diverse ways of defining the historical drama by my respondents. I find that their defining practices work as points of departure for my respondents to articulate a broad range of public and personal meanings from the fact/fiction complex. The second section moves beyond the ways of genre definition and concentrates on the major attitudes adopted by the respondents towards China’s historiographical traditions inherent in the historical drama text. Based upon their attitudes

towards the historiographical traditions which take their character from contemporary China's system of television historical drama production, I divide my respondents into three types including conservatists, culturalists and realists. Arbitrary as it may look, this dividing practice methodologically reflects certain cultural and social identities that potentially constitute my respondents' cultural citizenship.

Chapter 8 examines the interpretive framework of 'classic-ness'. It consists of three sections. The first section offers a reappraisal of the meanings of classic television drama based on my audience research. Against the background of commercialization and transnationalization of China's television drama production, the way a certain respondent evaluates the authenticity issues concerning the historical drama remains co-determined by his or her gender, generation as well as social position. To follow upon a reappraisal of the discourse of classic television drama, Section Two examines my respondents' reflexive attitudes towards the changing nature of the 'classic' discourse in the case of the historical drama. Within this section, an emphasis has been put on the crucial influence of a television viewer's social position on his or her treatment of popular historical representation on contemporary Chinese television. Based upon all the factors discussed throughout this chapter that determine how my respondents evaluate the discourse of classic historical drama, the concluding section refers back to American anthropologist Lisa Rofel's suggestion (1994) of taking a close look at how state power in China operates through the way the state creates itself as an imagined entity, which I have mentioned in Chapter Two.

In the final chapter I shall provide a summary of the key findings of this study. The findings are summarised in three parts. The first part reviews the major cultural and political forces behind the generic production of the historical drama. It points out that, the Party-state apparatus remains the ultimate power in historical drama production and broadcasting, as the commercial and transnational management of the Chinese television drama industry is one of the driving forces behind the evolution of the genre. Part Two focuses on how my respondents understand and evaluate the selected historical drama texts. Based on the two interpretive frameworks adopted by my respondents discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, I argue that the interaction between the audience agency and the state power means that history becomes a body of popular cultural knowledge itself to be challenged and subverted. The third part extends the Chinese audience's response to the

historical drama to a wider Chinese popular cultural arena. It identifies new tendencies in contemporary Chinese television culture that go beyond Confucianism-influenced totalitarian nostalgia. Finally, taking this study as a starting point, I shall propose a number of further research directions.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework and the rationale of the research

2.1 Introduction

Chinese media¹ has undergone tremendous changes in the past thirty years, so has the field of Chinese media studies. With the Deng Xiaoping-led economic reform affecting all levels of Chinese society since the early 1990s, the functions of Chinese mass media are changing. For nearly all the scholars on Chinese media, the most central problem confronted by mass communication in China involves the ambiguities and contradictions arising from the relationship between continued state control and economic reform (e.g. Lee 2000, 2001; Pan, 2009; Sparks 2008; Wang 2001; Zhao 1998, 2008). Briefly speaking, although the state is still highly authoritarian, it has to be compatible with market forces.

In terms of Chinese television studies, there has emerged a diversity of research subjects and conceptual frameworks since the late 1990s. The most active scholars involved in the field not only come from mainland China and Hong Kong but also from the English speaking world, mainly North America and Australia (e.g. Fung & Ma 2002; Keane, 1999, 2001, 2003; Yin 2002; Zeng, 2000, 2002; Zhu, 2008, 2009). They have addressed a wide range of prominent topics connected with Chinese television. The key examples include televisual imagination and Chinese modernity (Fung & Ma 2002), Chinese broadcasting policy and the civil society (Keane 2001a), Chinese television drama industry (Yin 2002) as well as Chinese television and Confucian leadership (Zhu 2008).

My literature review is focused on three strands of scholarship; first, theoretical approaches to the analysis of contemporary Chinese television, second, genre issues concerning contemporary Chinese historical television drama, and finally, changing paradigms in critical Chinese television reception studies. Each aspect will be discussed in a separate section. Within each section, an attempt will be made to critically examine relevant themes and approaches drawn from both Chinese and non-Chinese academia. An integrated review on both Western and Chinese literature on television communication like this, as I argue, serves two purposes. On the one hand, it creates a dialogue between many Western-

¹ In this thesis, the term 'Chinese media' mainly refers to the issues of media production, distribution, consumption and regulation in the Chinese mainland, not including those in Hong Kong and Macao unless otherwise stated.

originated media and communication theories and the issues concerning contemporary Chinese television. On the other hand, it puts both the Western and Chinese theories under scrutiny discussing their feasibility in a global-local field of knowledge production about contemporary television culture. The expected fulfillment of these two purposes should lead to the formation of a more nuanced theoretical framework for dealing with my research subject. Towards the end of this chapter, some concluding remarks will be provided to address the possibility of how that theoretical framework can help inform the research process and thereafter develop a rationale for the whole thesis.

2.2 Theoretical approaches to the analysis of contemporary Chinese television

China's Socialist Market Economic Reform² has given a post-socialist face to Chinese television. From an industry point of view, the last thirty years witnessed a commercialization process of Chinese television industry; different from a western liberal-market model, the commercialization of Chinese television is under strict control and regulation by the bureaucratic-authoritarian Chinese state. From a content point of view, Chinese television content assumes a complex outlook, which is between commercialism and propaganda, or simply, as some say, a trend towards pluralism. If one wants to study a particular phenomenon of contemporary Chinese television (within this thesis, historical television drama and its audiences), one needs to acquire some background knowledge about existing theoretical approaches to the analysis of contemporary Chinese television.

As previously mentioned, quite a few important scholars of Chinese media (some of whom are of Chinese origin) are based in North America and Australia. However, many more active ones come from China (e.g. Meng 2003; Shi 2003; Yin 2001, 2002; Zeng 2000, 2002); these mainland Chinese media scholars are under the dual influence of the domestic academic disciplinary tradition and Western-originated media and social theories. Unlike media work in Britain, media studies, particularly television criticism³, in China is not

² National Plenary Session of the Communist Party of China Central Committee held in Beijing in 1987 stated that 'the Socialist economy is a kind of planned commercial economy' and the 'state should have "macro-control" over the market, with the market guiding the production of enterprises'. As is said, though not all of these economic policies could be applied in the media and communications industries, the impact of commercial forces began to be felt (see Yin 2002).

³ Within China, television criticism (*dianshi piping*) comes out of three different but related disciplines. First, it comes out of Chinese language (*zhongwen*) and literary (and the film) studies (*wenxue he dianying yanjiu*), which feature historical and rhetorical analysis. Second, it is partly drawn from Marxist aesthetics studies (*makesizhuyi wenyimeixue yanjiu*), to do with the Marxist political and aesthetical critique of literary production. Third, it starts being developed in the recently established field of journalism and communication studies (*xinwen chuanbo xue*). It is also worth noting that journalism as a university major did not get detached from Chinese language and literature departments in most of the

grounded in a tradition of sociology and political science; it is always theoretically-based, suspicious of empiricism and obsessed with textual analysis of meaning and value. At the same time, television criticism in contemporary China, as I would argue, is derived from diverse intellectual practices in addressing the politics of ‘post-socialism’ or ‘post-reformism’ in relation to Chinese media.

Tongyu Shi (2003), for example, in his book *Television Criticism (dianshi piping)*, proposes to use relevant theories drawn from the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School and the American sociology of mass communication to critically examine the Chinese television industry. He also introduces Habermasian public sphere theory, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field and Daniel Bell's thesis on post-industrial society to a study of the commercialization of Chinese television and its consequences. In the book, he expresses a deep concern about the rise of entertainment content on Chinese television due to the Economic Reform, which encouraged the marketisation of Chinese television. Although he does not argue for social science research to evaluate post-Reform television culture, he calls for more effort to be made by Chinese intellectuals to criticize the rise of commercial culture in the media.

Coming from a neo-Gramscian position, Fanhua Meng (2003), in his book *The Media and Cultural Hegemony (chuanmei yu wenhua lingdaoquan)*, discusses the challenges facing contemporary Chinese popular culture. He claims that ‘the end of the Cultural Revolution’⁴ in 1976 witnessed a restructuring of Chinese socialist cultural hegemony, a restructuring from a strong pursuit of socialist morality to an accumulation of material wealth’ (Meng, 2003, p26). He observes that the Communist Party of China (CCP) gained tight control of literary production in the PRC from the 1950s, but it has failed to stop the rise of consumer culture in the wake of the Economic Reform; as far as Chinese television industry is concerned, Meng argues, that celebrity culture and the advertising industry have turned television into a hegemonic institution, which ‘has not only become the dominant force in the Chinese public's cultural lives, but also created a new life politics’ (ibid. p196). As a

Chinese universities until the mid 1980s. Communication Studies was not recognized as a university major by the Chinese Ministry of Education until the late 1990s.

⁴ The Cultural Revolution was a period of widespread social and political upheaval in the People's Republic of China between 1966 and 1976. It was launched by Mao Zedong, the then chairman of the Communist Party of China, on May 16, 1966. Mao alleged that ‘liberal bourgeois’ elements were permeating the party and society at large and that they wanted to restore capitalism. He insisted that these elements be removed through post-revolutionary class struggle by mobilizing the thoughts and actions of China's youth, who formed the Red Guard groups around the country.

conclusion, he suggests looking for ‘a new cultural approach which neither belongs to the past nor to the west through criticising any form of injustice in the globalisation process’ (ibid. p264). Interesting as this suggestion is, he does not point towards any particular direction to investigate or achieve it.

Although television criticism within China is somewhat ambivalent in addressing the relationship between state control and television communication, a much more radical voice can be found within the field of international Chinese media studies (e.g. Berry 2009; Keane 1999, 2001; Sun and Zhao 2009; Zhao 2008; Zhu 2008). These scholars explicitly raise the problems of Chinese television in relation to state power.

Wanning Sun and Yuezhi Zhao (2009), in their provocative article *Television Culture with ‘Chinese Characteristics’*, take China Central Television’s (CCTV) ‘emotionally powerful and morally lifting’ coverage of the Sichuan earthquake⁵ that took place in 2008 as their starting point (p96); they view that kind of ‘television storytelling and subject making’ as something that ‘articulates with the broad political economy of China’s ongoing social transformation during the era of a worldwide “neoliberal revolution”’ (ibid. p97). It is the production of the neoliberal subject in the current Chinese socio-political climate that they find deeply problematic here. They point out that Chinese television always treats ‘human tragedies as either incidental or inevitable’, and avoids touching upon ‘the social and political causes of individual’s suffering’ or the flaws of China’s social welfare system (ibid. p104).

Chris Berry (2009), in his work on Shanghai Television’s Documentary Channel, interrogates the Documentary Channel as a specific kind of public space in the culture of Shanghai and China. He argues that Chinese televisual public space exists under the conditions of the party-state apparatus and global marketization. On the one hand, there has been much effort made by the journalists of the Documentary Channel to make the channel a public space using their programming, but the party-state apparatus still ‘has ultimate control over what gets aired’ and ‘the collaboration between the journalists and

⁵ On Monday, May 12, 2008, a deadly earthquake that measured at 8.0 Ms and 7.9 Mw occurred in Sichuan province of China, killing an estimated 68,000 people. It is also known as the Wenchuan earthquake, after the location of the earthquake’s epicenter, Wenchuan County in Sichuan province. The epicenter was 80 kilometres west-northwest of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, with a focal depth of 19 kilometres. The earthquake was also felt in nearby countries and as far away as both Beijing and Shanghai—1,500 kilometres and 1,700 kilometres away—where office buildings swayed with the tremor.

viewers must fit in with its values' (Berry, 2009, p83). On the other hand, like the United States and the United Kingdom, as Berry comments, 'the reconfigurations pursuant upon the new multi-channel environment and the increased emphasis on market dynamics and the trading in audience-as-product' have become the same important factors 'in shaping the ways in which both journalists and viewers can participate in televisual public space' as the state (ibid. p86).

Similarly, in his 2001 work on broadcasting policy and civil society in China, Michael Keane has pointed out that the model of the Habermasian public sphere is inadequate for contemporary Chinese society. He argues that 'Whereas citizens in liberal democracies seek to influence the formulation of policy by force of ideas, by interest group activities and ultimately through the ballot box...Under the Chinese socialist tradition, we find...the balance shifts towards interpretation of policy' (Keane, 2001a, p783). That is to say, in western societies, cultural policy is manifested and enforced as law, which is inflexible, whereas in China the tendency is for regulation, which is not ironclad law but subject to negotiation that takes place between Chinese Party officials and cultural producers in an interpretation of the administrative language of policy. In order to understand the complexity of quasi-commercialized culture in Chinese broadcasting, in his previous work, Keane (1999) has suggested that Foucauldian notion of governmentality could provide the methodological tools. According to him,

the notion of governmentality was used by Foucault to critique 'reason of state', a form of government rationality that predated the birth of liberalism in 19th-century Europe...a modern type of government exemplified by liberalism, came to displace the utopian idea that the social body could be penetrated, known and directed by political authorities (Keane, 1999, p248).

Using Chinese television drama production and reception as an example, Keane suggests that an application of the notion of 'governmentality' could be useful for understanding the policy ramifications that impact on Chinese television.

However, using this western-originated approach to study Chinese cultural policy is challenging. US-based Chinese cultural studies scholar Jing Wang (2001), for example, casts much doubt that 'the Foucault effects' (see Bennett 1998) happen in China in the same way as they do in the modern liberal state and neo-liberal state in Europe and

America. She reminds us that the Chinese state has ‘its 50 year old tradition of state monopoly socialism on the one hand’ and ‘its deeply ingrained Confucian prototype of “state-family” on the other’ (Wang, 2001, p44). For this historical reason, she believes that a western paradigm that emphasises the ‘elimination of the family as a model’ (Foucault, 1991, p98) for the development of the art of government from the eighteenth century onward is incompatible with the Chinese context. She goes on to argue that the Chinese state apparatus remains the ultimate power in Chinese cultural production and its rationality is the real art of Chinese government. Instead, she proposes ‘critical policy/culture studies’ to ‘anticipate an alternative model emerging out of socialism’s utopian character while remaining vigilant over the contemporary variations of post-socialism’s Medusa persona’ (ibid. p49).

From the above-mentioned, it can be seen that a wave of post-socialist television criticism has emerged in the field of Chinese media studies. The main argument of the media scholars involved in this wave of television criticism is concerned with the negotiation between market forces and the Party-state power. A study of the historical television drama should primarily engage with as well as make a contribution to this wave of television criticism. Having introduced the theoretical approaches at the macro-level, I now move on to examine the genre issues concerning the historical television drama.

2.3 Genre issues concerning contemporary Chinese television historical drama

US-based Chinese scholar David Der-wei Wang (1992), in his work *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, argues that one of the most remarkable literary phenomena in the Post-Mao China is the resurgence of historical fiction. As he points out, compared to the historical novels of the Maoist period, which were characterised by an old belief in official historiography in the new guise of Communist ideologies, the Post-Mao historical fictions⁶ demonstrate four new tendencies in historical interpretation.

The first tendency, represented by Dai Houying’s novels, is an emergence of ordinary

⁶ The works that Wang mentions include Dai Houying’s *Ren, ah, ren!* (Man ah, man!, 1981) and *Shiren zhisi* (Death of a Poet, 1982), *Feng Jicai’s Yihequan* (The Boxers, co-authored with Li Dingxing, 1977) and *Yibairen de shinian* (One Decade, One Hundred People, 1987), A Cheng’s 1984 three ‘king’ novellas, *Qi Wang* (Chess King), *Shuwang* (Tree King) and *Haiziwang* (Child King), Han Shaogong’s 1986 novellas *Bababa* (Papapa) and *Nununu* (Woman women women), and Yu Hua’s *Yijiu bailiu nian* (Nineteen eighty-six, 1987), *Shishi ruyan* (The Past is like smoke, 1987) and *Wangshi yu xingfa* (Past and Punishment, 1990).

people in a narrative format; it is focused on ‘ordinary people’s changing consciousness and behavioral patterns over a tumultuous time span’ while openly questioning “the nature of what is history’ (Wang, 1992, p294). The second and third tendencies can be found in Jicai Feng’s novels. In the early 1980s, a series of novels were published on late Qing political events led by Feng; the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) went through tremendous chaos and devastation as the last Chinese feudal empire, so it provides a rich selection of uncertainties and doubts not only similar to but also associated with those of contemporary China. At the same time, using fictionalised individual interviews or testimonies, Feng became a pioneer in writing novels on the Cultural Revolution;⁷ through his novels, he attempts to make a confession about the ‘fanaticism, cruelty and irrationality shaped by people in the Cultural Revolution’ (ibid. p298).

The fourth tendency lies in the writer’s more ‘radical and self-reflexive’ attitude towards history than that which existed before the Cultural Revolution (ibid. p300). This kind of attitude is manifested in two literary styles. On the one hand, it features a root-searching movement (*xungen yundong*); the writers involved in this movement, represented by Cheng A and Shaogong Han, try to avoid an immediate historical interpretation and shift their attention to trivial, mysterious and even primitive parts of history. On the other hand, this attitude entails an experimental style. As Wang comments, this experimental style, of which Hua Yu’s work is a great example, not only places doubts on ‘the epistemological basis of traditional writing’, but also ‘questions the very linguistic medium with which history makes itself intelligible’; it treats history as something distorted, illogical and full of ‘abrupt and irreparable disappearance and loss’ (ibid. p300). From Wang’s observation, it can be seen that at least three new literary modes are embedded in the Post-Mao Chinese historical fictions: individualization, trivialization and experimentalization. These literary modes constitute a new way of writing history; whatever genre or subject this new way of writing history concerns, these three literary modes provide a basis for the construction of History as a fictional reality that awaits to be demystified.

These literary transformations, to a large extent, set the scene for the rise of the ‘new’ historical drama on Chinese television in the mid 1990s; the textual properties of Post-Mao historical fiction have greatly influenced the television historical drama. According to

⁷ The well-known novel of Feng’s on the Cultural Revolution is the unfinished *Yibairen de shinian* (One Decade, One Hundred People, 1987), which is a combination of reportage literature and historical fiction.

Chinese media scholar Hong Yin (2002), the emergence of the ‘new’ television historical drama, as part of popular culture in contemporary China, should be seen as a result of the collapse of Maoist ideologies and the public yearnings for mass entertainment. In the example of the forty-four-episode serial *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1998), Yin claims that, ‘historical dramas provided intellectuals with a means of expression and certain rhetorical strategies’ (2002:34); produced by Beijing Tongdao Cultural Development Co., *Yongzheng Dynasty* used more than one hundred characters in over more than 600 scenes to narrate the political struggles in the Qing Dynasty from the period of *Kangxi* (1662-1722) to *Yongzheng* (1723-1735). It drew upon historical allegories and historical rewritings to explore the history and power relations of contemporary Chinese society. For Yin, using the past to mirror the present, and drawing upon the past to satirize the present are complementary historiographical tradition in China.

On the other hand, the popularity of the television historical drama is considered as a revival of Confucianism. Over the last decade, many Chinese cultural scholars in China and abroad have attributed the revival of Confucianism to the intellectual and general public’s responses to the great changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society and culture (see Bell 2008); media scholars holding this opinion argue that these television historical dramas set during the dynasty era have been at the forefront in articulating political and legal principles based on the Confucian-influenced traditional Chinese culture (e.g. Wang, 1996; Zhu, 2008). US-based Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu (2008a, 2008b), in a series of discussions on the popularity of the Qing drama, points out that in their effort to engage audiences who are fed up with rampant political corruption and society’s apparent loss of moral grounding, these historical dramas have presented exemplary emperors of by-gone dynasties.

For an ideological critique of the Qing drama, she (2008a) suggests that one examine ‘the symbolic link between Neo-authoritarianism’s justification of the Tiananmen crackdown and the drama’s ideological positioning’ (p30). By that, she reminds us that, the revisionist Qing drama emerged at a time when Chinese society was undergoing rapid economic growth due to the Xiaoping Deng-led economic reform in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989; as the Chinese people were fed up with ‘corruption and the society’s perceived loss of its moral grounding’ along with the economic development, these dynasty dramas attempted to ‘present exemplary emperors from bygone dynasties

and ‘capitalize on the popular yearning for models of strong leadership’ on Chinese television (ibid. p32). According to her, the search for model leaders is rooted in Chinese cultural tradition that has been dominated by Confucianism dating back to the second century and down to the late Qing Dynasty and the early twentieth century.

Although contemporary Chinese television historical drama shares similar literary characteristics with Post-Mao historical fiction, the relationship between the writing of history and historical television drama programmes is far from simple. A historical television drama is shaped primarily within the categories of television rather than the needs of historical knowledge; it is an institutional media phenomenon, which is associated with a specific set of regulatory, production, distribution and scheduling practices. In the meantime, the writing of history and the production of historical television programmes are not completely autonomous activities; according to British film and television scholar Colin McArthur (1978), they ‘take their character from the system of production relationships in the social formation they inhabit’ (p15).

Here, the question of social formation is an important one; it reminds us that looking at the issues concerning the particular political, social and economic context in which the television historical drama exists is central to an understanding of what kind of historical interpretation this televised historical genre constructs. For example, the ways of defining the television historical drama are diverse, but ‘the historical’ has become an umbrella term in contemporary China, referring to a full range of television dramas connected with the treatment of history (mainly pre-modern), explorations of key pre-modern events and figures as well as adaptations of classic novels. At the same time, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, the use of ‘the historical’ as a term is highly unstable; ‘serious history’ (*zhengshuo lishi*) versus ‘popular history’ (*xishuo lishi*) remains the most common dichotomy made within the Chinese popular press and academia towards this rather broad genre of ‘historical television’.

Chinese media scholars Shengli Li and Jinghong Xiao (2006), for instance, in their book *Researching into television historical drama*, critically examine the distinction between the serious and popular historical drama. According to them, this distinction not only concerns the extent to which a historical drama is based on historical record; it is also a matter of artistic style. They go on to claim that, the serious type mostly refers to normal serious

drama in a historically realistic fashion, whereas the popular type always incorporates comedian elements. I shall return to this when I analyse the generic characteristics of the historical drama later in Chapter 5.

American media scholar Jason Mittell (2004) provides an inspiring cultural genre approach to addressing the question of social formation in relation to the tele-history. According to Mittell, television genre is 'a process of categorization'; it is 'not found within media texts, but operate across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts' (ibid. xii). Within traditional genre studies, exploring textual assumptions is the key to an understanding of the formation and operation of a given genre; an interpretive textual analysis is considered as a primary critical practice in a study of the genre. Although a genre is a category of texts operating within a given context, it is the text not the category that is treated as the point of departure for traditional genre studies. Following Foucault's historical model of genealogy, however, Mittell's cultural genre analysis represents an analytical focus shift. According to Foucault, genealogy is:

a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness through the course of history (Foucault, 1980, p117).

For Mittell, therefore, discursive formations of genres should not be studied through 'interpretive readings or deep structural analysis'; rather, they should be studied 'in their surface manifestations and common articulations' (ibid. p13). Meanwhile, the categorical rubric, not the textual property of a given genre, should be the primary site and material for genre analysis. By re-focusing on the category, not the individual text, Mittell reconceptualizes the relationship between a single text and its social context; that is, in my understanding, to situate the single text into a larger system of power relations. In this system, a given genre is surrounded and characterised by a group of discourses, which constitute generic categories; those discourses, as Mittell argues, are 'the practices that define genres and delimit their meanings, not media texts themselves' (ibid.). That is to say, one has to rely on a grasp of particular generic discourses to make sense of and categorize a given genre. Also, if we accept that genres are constituted by generic discourses, we need to acknowledge that these discourses are circulating around within larger systems of power as well as located within 'the common process of generic evaluation' (ibid. p27). For

Mittell, these larger systems of power can be also understood as systems of ‘cultural hierarchies’ (ibid. p26) or ‘hierarchies of cultural value’ (ibid. p27). A cultural genre analysis is incomplete without taking the value issues into account; the evaluation process is, therefore, crucial to an understanding of a given cultural genre.

In my opinion, a re-examination of the value issues in the example of Mittell’s approach also represents two important theoretical moves within international media studies in the last decade or so (see Alasuutari 1992; Brunsdon, 1990, 1997; Corner, 1999, 2007a; Geraghty, 2003; Gray, 2003, 2008). On the one hand, largely due to the influence of Pierre Bourdieu, the tension between the popular and the elite which enjoys a strong tradition within media studies has become much eased with an extended consideration of the socio-political context that produces a given media text. On the other hand, greatly inspired by Michel Foucault, instead of looking at it in isolation, media scholars perceive the media as a component of power relations.

In his discussion on the new trend of television criticism, Corner (2007a) rightly observes this emergence of value judgment; he terms the judgments on television programmes themselves as ‘primary judgments’ and those on ‘the broader culture and politics that the programmes evidence and perhaps support’ as ‘secondary judgments’ (Corner, 2007a, p367). As far as the audience is concerned, Corner points out that he or she ‘might be regarded as variously wittingly or unwittingly affiliated to’ those second judgments within a new round of television criticism (ibid.). Corner’s mention of the audience provides me with a useful position on the relationship between television genres and the audience response; audiences’ ‘various witting or unwitting affiliation’ to the value judgment on a particular television genre can be seen as the way(s) that they may contribute to the discursive formation of the genre as a cultural category.

From this, it can be seen that Mittell mainly argues for an open rather than a closed analytical attitude towards a given television genre and its generic function, whereas Corner proposes to bring the value judgment into that analysis; therefore, a juxtaposition of Mittell’s television genre theory and Corner’s idea of second judgment on television programmes would lead to a multi-dimensional analysis on the audience response to television genres. Back to my own study, adopting a cultural genre analysis on the historical television drama would generate a full range of social, cultural and political

discourses; at the same time, it would provide the audience with many more interpretive opportunities than could a closed textual approach. As for the existing theories of audience activity, it is the task for the next section.

2.4 Changing paradigms in critical Chinese television reception studies

The debate about the historical television drama within the Chinese popular press has covered many political and aesthetical issues, but the issue of audience engagement with this particular television genre has been largely neglected. American media scholar Robert Allen (1985), in his discussion of American soap opera, claims that the study of American soap opera had been conditioned within two related supervisory discourses: ‘criticism (aesthetic discourses) and sociological research’ (p10). In China, however, aesthetic criticism (see 2.2) serves as the main theoretical discourse for those media scholars who study the historical television drama (e.g. Li & Xiao, 2006; Wang, 2008); there are few studies that explore the meaning of these dramas from a sociological perspective.

The lack of sociological consideration of television drama in China, as I have noted earlier, is due to the very fact that most of the media scholars in China come from a literature background and they tend to give much more attention to the textual assumption of television drama than its contextual meaning. At the same time, the last twenty years have seen a boom in audience research in China’s media and communications studies. Chinese media scholar Baohua Zhou (2006), in an analysis of three major Chinese journalism and mass communication journals from 1985 to 2002, reveals that Chinese media scholars have begun ‘to use scientific theories and methods to study Chinese audience other than political analysis or rhetorical studies’ (p129); during this period of 18 years, according to him, Chinese media scholars to a significant extent inherited ‘structural and behaviorist traditions’ from the American sociology of mass communication to study the Chinese audience (e.g. Liu & Meng, 1999; 2007; Womack, 1986), but the important theoretical approaches, such as literary criticism, cultural studies, and reception analysis, which are commonly used in the field of international media research, are generally absent in Chinese journals (*ibid.*). In order to develop theories of media and communications in an increasingly globalized media environment, Zhou suggests that Chinese media scholars ‘could employ western theories to analyse Chinese audience’ as well as ‘develop their own theories to explain and predict the media use, media effects, and audience understanding of

meaning of texts' based on 'China's illustrious history and cultural traditions' (ibid. p130).

Here, Zhou rightly emphasises two potential theoretical areas that could help in developing a better understanding of the Chinese television audience under the current climate of globalisation of knowledge. First, as China gains an increasingly significant status within global geo-politics, it becomes equally significant for Chinese media studies not only to apply a western-originated approach to the study of the Chinese audience, but also to take both the global/local or western/China theoretical and epistemological issues into consideration in the study.

Second, there is a great need for critical television reception studies to deal with the rapid changes taking place in contemporary Chinese culture and society in relation to television communication. As I have argued elsewhere (2010), in contemporary Chinese society, any kind of social and economic reform is illegitimate unless it is ultimately approved or led by the Communist Party of China, even though there may exist disagreement and conflict about it among the senior Party officials; the 'party-state' plays a dominant role in controlling and mobilizing political, social and economic resources. Pervasive as it is, party-state intervention is becoming increasingly complex and tactical in China; this is often reflected in the mass communication sphere. I, therefore, propose that it takes much empirical effort and critical engagement to study the ambiguities and paradoxes of Chinese media in relation to the Chinese state, which is sustained by both socialist legacies and neoliberal strategies; that is also where my thesis intends to make some original contribution. In the field of Chinese television studies, a critical study of production-consumption relationship can offer an insight into those ambiguities and paradoxes, as the individual has gained more cultural autonomy in the marketplace than before.

When speaking of this, I need to introduce Hong Kong media scholar Eric Ma's article *Rethinking media studies: the case of China* (2000) here. The last section of this article highlights the possibilities of applying the concept of the active audience to contemporary Chinese society. According to Ma, first of all, the Chinese audience at home and abroad has learnt the skills of reading between the lines when he or she deals with the censored media text under a long-term ideological control; this was proved to be the case during the 1989 Tiananmen Protest, where many Chinese newspaper readers adopted an oppositional reading strategy towards the propagandist message conveyed by the government. Second,

the Chinese media's commercialization process has endorsed all sorts of active decoding practices along with the emergence of the civil society in China. Here, Ma (2000) identifies two kinds of discrepancies in terms of how media content is perceived; on the one hand, 'the discrepancies between mediated and social discourses', and on the other, 'a differentiation between the reading zones in office and at home' (p30); that is to say, although media content is subordinated to strict censorship by the party-state, the Chinese audience knows how to understand and talk about them under different social circumstances.

Third, Ma believes that the rise of the Internet society will provide the Chinese audience with more freedom of speech in the near future. Nevertheless, based on his observation, Ma claims that the Chinese audience shows a more skeptical attitude towards political news than entertainment content in the media. Therefore, he questions if popular communication will have any political consequence in China; referring back to the 'benign market capitalism thesis' discussed in the earlier part of his article, he argues that 'whether the reorientation towards the personal and the domestic of the Chinese media can foster political demands for a more participatory polity is a theoretically and politically significant issue for further empirical investigation' (ibid. p31).

Ma's arguments on the application of the theory of the active audience in China surely deserve much academic attention, but what he fails to mention in this particular article is the fact that the theory itself has been used, contested and renewed in the field of international Chinese media studies since it started being circulated as academic discourse; the three milestones in the field, as far as I am concerned, include James Lull's work *China Turned On* (1991), Anthony Fung and Eric Ma's research article *Satellite Modernity* (2002), and Anthony Fung's recent studies on fandom and Chinese youth (2009). It needs to be pointed out that all of these scholars drew theoretical inspiration from 'western theories', but they made great attempts to bring China's social and cultural specificities into their discussions. In the next part of this section, I shall revisit these three 'milestones' in critical Chinese television reception studies as well as three important paradigms of reception studies, as each work has more or less built upon a paradigm respectively. The aim of concentrating on these paradigms is to provide background knowledge for an up-to-date investigation of the Chinese audience-hood using the historical television drama as cultural resource. As David Morley (2007) recently argues, in his discussion on the question of

intellectual progress, 'it is always necessary to appreciate the value of previous analytical work in the context in which it was produced' (p33).

2.4.1 James Lull's *China Turned On* and British Cultural Studies in the 1980's

American media scholar James Lull's book *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance* (1991) is an ethnography of culture and communication in contemporary urban China. The analysis presented in the book is developed from detailed discussions during two phases of the ethnographic research. The first phase was in 1986, when Lull and his research partner, Se-Wen Sun had interviewed nearly 100 urban Chinese families altogether in four big cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Xi'an as well as television executives. The second phase was in October 1989, four months after the Tiananmen Protest; in this phase, from similar contacts to the first phase, they had interviewed scholars, students, citizens and broadcasters.

It is worth noting that Lull has captured an interesting historical moment in modern Chinese history; it was the time when the Socialist Market Reform was officially adopted by the Xiaoping Deng Administration less than a decade ago and also the time when the Tiananmen Protests happened. In the preface of the book, Lull makes it clear that it is the role of television at this time that he finds fascinating. He says:

I place the role of television within the nation's cultural, economic, and political development in the communist era and emphasise what has taken place during the modernization period, beginning roughly at the start of the last decade [the 1970s], when television entered the everyday lives of Chinese family (Lull, 1991, ix).

From this, it can be seen that Lull closely associates the role of television with China's development as a nation. Thus, he establishes a concrete link between television communication and the widely-acknowledged Chinese 'modernization' (*xiandaihua*) movement.

From the perspective of media studies, Lull's work is influenced by a corpus of important work at the time. First, there is Newcomb and Hirsch's article *Television as a cultural forum* (1987), where the two authors argue that television 'presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant view' (p62); Lull applies this concept of 'multiplicity of

meanings' into an understanding of television encoding practices in China's television industry. Second, of course, there is Stuart Hall's piece *Encoding/Decoding* (1980), on which the whole idea of cultural resistance in the book is based. Third, there is David Morley's work *Family Television* (1986); it is used by Lull for a comparative purpose in his work. Although the subject of Lull's book is on television and Chinese culture and society, one could argue that, in terms of theoretical framework, this work still falls into the category of British cultural studies in the 1980s; Lull's discussion of the active Chinese television audience demonstrates an ambiguous ideological critique, which is always judged to be a common feature of British Cultural Studies in the 1980s (see Curran 1990). Before making any further comment on Lull's research findings presented in the book, I think it necessary to briefly review the formation of this ambiguous ideological critique.

In his 1987 article on television and ideology, American media scholar Douglas Kellner provides his explanation about the relationship between ideology and television communication. He proposes that:

We view ideology as a synthesis of concepts, images, theories, stories, and myths that can take rational systematic form...or imagistic, symbolic, and mythical form (in religion, the cultural industries, etc.) Ideology is often conveyed through images (of country and race, class and clan, virginity and chastity, salvation and redemption, individual and solidarity). The combination of rational theory with images and slogans makes ideology compelling and powerful (Kellner, 1987, p472).

Quite a few British scholars have also made constant contributions to a debate about ideology and modern culture from the late 1970s onwards (e.g. Eagleton 1991; Larrain 1979; Thompson 1984, 1990). However, coming from an English literature background and later serving as the spiritual figure within British cultural studies in the 1970s, Stuart Hall puts ideology in a less determinate sense. His influential position on ideology in relation to the media is well reflected in many of his articles written in the 1970s and early 1980s, of which *Encoding and decoding* (1973, 1980) paves a new way to studying audience interpretation of television programmes.

In *Encoding and decoding*, Hall goes against the then widely-accepted social scientific approach to the media which was heavily influenced by the American sociology of mass communication; he views the production of media output, its transmission, and its reception as a model of the social relations of cultural production involving producers,

programmes and audiences. According to this model, the meaning of a particular message is articulated rather than imposed between the producer and the audience; from encoding to decoding is a complex social, cultural and political process rather than a deeply deterministic model of powerful media which injects passive media consumers with their messages.

In the study of the Chinese audiences' response to the prime-time television drama *New Star* (*xin xing*), Lull finds it useful to employ Hall's Decoding model to identify a polysemic reading. *New Star*, a 12-episode series, was aired on China Central Television (CCTV) in 1986, and told a story of China's 'socialist reform' (*shehuizhuyi gaige*). The protagonist Xiangnan Li, a newly-appointed young male party cadre (*ganbu*) tries to fight against the muddled bureaucracy in a small Northern Chinese city; although this young cadre has managed to improve the situation to some extent after much effort, the story ends with his being forced to leave his post due to his controversial working style.

According to Lull, there is an interpretive battle going on between the young and old audience in the concept of 'reform' represented in the drama text. Lull finds that the young audience often compares the situation in China with the realities of the West and Japan; for them, 'reform means a fast and dramatic change' (ibid. p123). On the contrary, for the old audience, reform should be a gradual and stable modernization process led by the government. In some extreme cases, as Lull goes on to claim, some young people even 'completely distrust the motives behind China's government-sanctioned reform' while their parents seem to be very supportive of it (ibid.). Based on his interviews, Lull argues that oppositional reading exists in the Chinese audience's response to television programmes; it signifies different social, cultural and political positions.

Although Stuart Hall's version of Marxist cultural studies gained wide popularity in both Britain and abroad, notably the U.S. and Australia throughout the late 1970s till the mid 1990s, it also triggered much criticism within British academia during the same period. The most prominent criticism came from those who were in favor of the sociology of mass communication and political economy (e.g. Garnham 1983; Connell 1978, 1983; Curran 1990; Murdock & Golding 1977; Philo, 1993; Philo & Miller, 1997; Sparks 1996). These media sociologists and political economists point out two general weaknesses of cultural studies in a systematic theoretical investigation of ideology. On the one hand, Cultural

Studies promoted a decentring of cultural and media research; as British media sociologist James Curran (1990) claims, this was due to its Foucauldian legacy that considered power as diffused and discursive. On the other hand, Cultural Studies is ambivalent in its analysis of a concrete social formation; the major problem here lies in, as Sparks (1996) argues, ‘its Althusserian parent’ that ‘its increasingly baroque structure had less and less internal stability’ (p88).

This internal instability can also be found in Lull’s discussion of the Chinese audience. As previously mentioned, Lull suggests that the Chinese audience adopts a polysemic reading of television’s messages; this was especially the case during the 1989 Tiananmen Protest, when the government tried to impose a single meaning or produce only government-intended effects through government media manipulation (also see Calhoun 1994). Lull claims that it is ‘the macrosocial factors’ that made the Chinese audience interpret television messages in a polysemic way; by that, he means ‘the economic, political and cultural conditions that impinge upon their [viewers’] lifeworlds’ (ibid. p216). Interestingly though, Lull also attributes the Chinese audiences’ interpretive practices to ‘certain basic characteristics of Chinese culture and communication’, most importantly, the Chinese language (ibid. p218). He reminds us that, in spoken Chinese, each sound has four tones, so the listeners have to be careful in dealing with subtle shifts of stress, and in written Chinese, the same character carries different meanings in different linguistic circumstances. Therefore, Lull suggests that ‘Chinese language is more “aesthetic” – metaphorical and poetic – than it is “efficient”, in the purely functional sense of the world’ (ibid.).

Here, a sense of ambiguity can be felt in Lull’s argument. This ambiguity, as I argue, is generated by his affinity with the cultural studies approach to studying the Chinese audiences and their imagination of a modern China; in a cultural sense, Lull identifies a public yearning for modernization in urban Chinese society due to the crisis of Communist ideology, whereas in a structural sense, he believes that ‘certain basic characteristics of Chinese culture’ still play a crucial role in formulating the audience’s viewing strategies.

To conclude the introduction to his *China Turned On*, I would argue that Lull’s use of the Encoding/Decoding Model can be still inspiring for the study of a production-consumption relationship in contemporary China. As Hall (1994) later reminds us, the Decoding Model was developed ‘in the context of a particular debate with the dominant mass-

communication models of the time' (discussed by Morley, 2007, p33); although it maybe has become outmoded in today's western democratic countries, where the media is becoming personalized and fragmented, the Decoding Model continues to fit well with the Chinese context, where the government still occupies the dominant position in supervising the media. On the other hand, Lull's understanding of the role of television in China's modernization movement seems reductionist; as the last twenty years have witnessed the transformation of Chinese television from the mouthpiece of the state-socialism to that of state-capitalism. One might argue that it is the project of Chinese modernity itself that James Lull needs to rethink; this also brings us to Anthony Fung and Eric Ma's work on *Satellite modernity*.

2.4.2 A revised cultural approach and Anthony Fung and Eric Ma's *Satellite modernity*

The last three decades saw a heated debate between those scholars of political economy and those working in cultural studies within British academic media studies. In the debate, the issue at the stake was an intellectual engagement with meaning, value, social structure and power. Looking back, this debate has effectively led to an increasing recognition of pluralism in British media and cultural studies (e.g. Corner 2001; Garnham 1995; Mosco, 1996; Morley 2007). It is in this academic climate that, as I would like to term it, a 'revised' cultural approach to the media emerges in parallel with a renewal of ideological critique.

This revised cultural approach has two main characteristics. First, it involves a rethinking of cultural studies as theoretical and methodological practice. As David Morley (2007) recently claimed '...it seems, we are back again, if in a more theoretical vein, with the question with which I began, concerning the construction of common sense and its changing historical limits...' (p27). Facing this old question of 'common sense', many scholars help reinvent the wheel of cultural studies by reviving its important but neglected theoretical heritage (e.g. Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Blackman 2006; Couldry 1999, 2000,2003; Ellis 2000; Toynbee, 2008). Second, thanks to many Northern European scholars for whom there is a strong tradition of political science in communication studies, this revised cultural approach introduces popular culture to discussions about the media and democracy (e.g. Dahlgren, 1995; Hermes, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007). This discussion to a great extent, as Couldry (2006b) comments, encourages a closer

investigation of the ‘uncertainties about what constitutes the “culture” (or cultures) of citizenship’ (p321). Within this section, I shall focus on the first characteristic of this revised cultural approach, as it is more relevant to the work of the Chinese television audience-hood during the same period.

British media scholar John Ellis (2000), in his book *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, defines the current era of television broadcasting as the ‘age of plenty and uncertainty’ (a multi-channel broadcast environment, replete with remote controls, time-shift videos and audience fragmentation). Drawing on from his long-term committed field of psychoanalysis (see Coward and Ellis, 1977), Ellis proposes the term ‘working through’ to describe the process where television in the age of uncertainty turns into ‘the material of the witnessed world into more narrativized, explained forms’ (ibid. p78-p79). He situates the application of this term into a postmodern condition which is complex, open and indefinite. In order not to devalue the overused term ‘postmodernism’, he refers to a relevant definition given by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1993). As Ellis observes:

He [Bauman] sees contemporary society since the collapse of Communism as a culture that has no alternative to itself. The certainties that went with the divided world of the Cold War are no more. This also makes it a culture that has everything except dreams; a society with no utopias. Yet at the same time, it is a culture which promises that everything will be available, everything can be obtained, all desires can find a satisfaction in the market-place (Ellis, 2000, p84).

As I understand it, Ellis’s notion of ‘working through’ can be seen as a continuation of an exploration of the discourses of mediation from the early 1970s (e.g. Corner, 2001; Martin-Barbero, 1993; Silverstone, 1993, 1994). According to Silverstone (1994), mediation theories are ‘those that privilege the medium itself as the critical site for the construction of the audience’ (p134). Unlike the idea of decoding, which wrestles with a rigid relationship between meaning and social structure, the notion of mediation refers to wider social processes focused around the media which extends our understanding of media consumption to incorporate a broader range of cultural participation.

The last three decades also witnessed Chinese television’s entry into its own age of plenty and uncertainty. Since 1978, China has been gradually integrating into the world market due to its adoption of an Open-up Policy advocated by Xiaoping Deng. The actual outcomes of the policy lie at both the regional and global level. Regionally, the policy gave

a great push to the rise of the 'Greater China' area (linking mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South-East Asian Chinese diaspora), which has become the fifth major area of intra-regional trade in the twenty-first century. Globally, with its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002, China became committed to an international business exchange. As a result of all that, the landscape of Chinese television is changing. On the one hand, foreign television programmes and formats, mainly from the U.S., Japan and South Korea, are imported into the country on a frequent basis. On the other hand, collaboration in television production has become common in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and even Singapore.

Scholars of Chinese as well as East Asian media studies have made much effort to engage with these changes (e.g. Chua, 2004; Curtin, 2005, 2007; Dirlik, 2005; Fung & Ma, 2002; Keane, 2003; Keane, Fung & Moran, 2007b; Kim, 2009; Leung, 2008; Lim, 2008; Sinclair & Harrison, 2004; Tay, 2009; Thomas, 2004; Weber, 2003). This corpus of work, especially that on mainland Chinese media, in my opinion, is characterised as a theoretical formulation with mixed socio-cultural imaginaries including post-socialism, nationalism, trans-nationalism and globalism. When it comes to audience research in particular, Hong Kong media scholars Anthony Fung and Eric Ma's work (2002) deserves special attention.

Before I discuss Fung and Ma's work, it has to be mentioned that US-based historian Benedict Anderson's path-breaking work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) became a key reference for media and cultural scholars on China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Anderson's work is based on the idea that nationalism is less of a political ideology and more of a cultural system that gives rise to an imagined community. According to him, the sense of 'nation-ness' is historically enabled by the development of print technologies. Although he paves a new way to analyzing the problematic of nationalism as a cultural system, Anderson fails to address the particular ways that nations have been imagined.

In her critique of Anderson's approach to studying Chinese nationalism in the era of popular culture, American anthropologist Lisa Rofel (1994) argues that 'his (Anderson's) theory can explain the origin of imagined communities but not plots, climaxes, or denouement' (p701). She goes on to claim that a simple description of the administrative structure of the party-state China is inadequate for an understanding of how official power

works in the post-Mao era. Rather, she suggests we need to take a close look at how state power in China operates, not merely through its institutions, but ‘through the way the state creates itself as an imagined entity’ (ibid. p704).

Going beyond a geographically constrained state level, Fung and Ma’s work extends Anderson’s thesis of imagined community to study a televisual imagination of the ‘satellite community’ of Chinese modernity; they critically examine a phenomenon of trans-border television communication between Hong Kong and mainland China. As they realize, although ‘impacts on mainland China by the Hong Kong media have been studied on institutional, reception, and contextual levels’, the conclusions remain quite general (2002a: 68). However, the fact that Hong Kong is a liberal capitalist society as a result of long-term British rule, whereas mainland China is still governed by an authoritarian government offers them an opportunity to interrogate the issues concerning the modernity project of post-socialist China.

Fung and Ma identify a question of, what they term, ‘television colonization’ in mainland China’s coastal regions near Hong Kong, of which Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province in southern China is a perfect example; since the early 1990s, the television audiences in Guangzhou have been regularly watching ‘Hong Kong TV programmes which have “spilled over” across the border’ through satellite transmission (ibid. p69). Compared to mainland Chinese television programmes, Hong Kong television programmes, especially popular television dramas tend to be more entertaining and free of political messages. The local Guangzhou residents, therefore, have established a pattern of ‘watching Hong Kong television only’ throughout the years. Facing this phenomenon of television colonization and drawing on Appadurai (1996), Fung and Ma argue that ‘the Hong Kong mediascape is superimposed on the socioscape of Guangzhou’ (ibid.); it is against this backdrop that they decide to look at the televisual imagination of the Guangzhou television audience who watch Hong Kong television programmes regularly.

In their research, they find ‘four modes of imaginative configurations’ through 15 case studies. First, there is a pragmatic mode; this mode is reflected in an example of a young male salesman who works in a shopping mall, watches more than three hours of Hong Kong television everyday and earns the lowest income amongst all their respondents. As Fung and Ma explain, ‘in the pragmatic mode, the imaginative configuration domesticates

the Hong Kong mediascape within realist social routines' (ibid. p79). That is to say, this young salesman does not necessarily perceive his favourite characters on Hong Kong television dramas as 'modern'; rather, he regards them as 'serious, motivated and living in a casual lifestyle' (ibid.). The second one is a modernized mode. A typical person within this category is a sales manager in his thirties, who is single, lives alone, watches one and a half hours of television everyday and earns the highest salary amongst all the respondents. In this mode, 'imaginative configuration lies in the overlaps between a concrete experience of modern city life in Guangzhou and similar experiences as represented in the Hong Kong mediascape' (ibid.).

Third, there is a conspicuous mode, which refers to an aspiration to a consumerist and modernized life. Fung and Ma identify this mode from a female owner of a beauty salon, who is in her late twenties, watches three and a half hours of television everyday and earns the second highest income in their study; according to them, this type of person uses the Hong Kong mediascape as 'a reference frame' and then attempts to 'move forward and keep line with the aspiration embodied' in it in the reality (ibid. p73). The last one is a vicarious mode. The respondents within this category are represented by a clerk in her late twenties, who watches three and a half hours of television every day, earns the second lowest income bracket in the study and prefers watching local television programmes 'because they are more familiar and contextual' (ibid. p74); these respondents, for Fung and Ma, are quite aware of their different experiences of fictional and everyday worlds, but they still pursue much escapism and pleasure in watching Hong Kong television.

Based on these four modes of imaginative configurations, Fung and Ma point out that 'a postmodern implosion' exists in the project of Chinese modernity (ibid. p77); in the case of Guangzhou, it cannot be simply argued that Guangzhou is less modern than Hong Kong for its residents, as there is an unevenness between their televisual imagination of modernity. This 'unevenness', as Fung and Ma argue, is 'of course exacerbated by the actual pace of economic development; by welfare collapse, and by daily financial disappointments' (ibid. p77). Fung and Ma's work seems to fit well with Bauman's discussion of contemporary society since the collapse of Communism as I have quoted above; one might argue that it marks a postmodern turn in the study of the Chinese television audience. More importantly, it brings to the fore both the questions of Chinese nationalism and modernity in the study. Compared with the Encoding/Decoding model,

their research treats the individual as ‘the point at which a multitude of shifting social and cultural determinations converge’ (Jordin & Brunt, 1988, p234) rather than a social atom divorced from its social context.

2.4.3 The theories of cultural citizenship and Anthony Fung’s fandom and youth studies

As previously mentioned, the revised cultural approach also brought the issues of popular culture to a discussion about the media and democracy in Anglo-American and Nordic media studies. The scholarship within this cultural approach to television communication is interested in formal political processes and their relationship to popular television culture (e.g. Butsch, 2008; Corner & Richardson, 2008; Dahlgren 1995; Hermes, 1995, 2005; Marcus, 2002; Miller, 1993, 2007; Schroder & Philips 2007; Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007). This, according to John Corner (2008), also demonstrates that the study of politics has extended its reach to acknowledge the constitutive power of ‘political culture’. As he continues to define, political culture as a term suggests ‘a broader context within which political structures develop and operate and formal political processes happen’ (ibid. p387). The recognition of political culture in the study of politics provides much possibility of studying the cultural mechanism of political operation.

The scholars of television involved in this area point to two main research directions. First, there is a continuing urge for the study of ‘democratic mediations’ (Dahlgren 1995). According to Dahlgren, it is essential to focus attention on the public sphere, but ‘it is also imperative that efforts at enhancing democracy – from micro-situation to macrosocial structures – incorporate a public sphere perspective’ (ibid. p147). Dahlgren claims that television as a sociocultural experience that provides symbolic ‘raw materials’ may evoke viewers’ ‘democratic imaginary’, although this kind of imaginary is mediated and constrained ‘in present historical circumstances’ (ibid. p148-p155). Second, in a bit less ambitious way, Corner meticulously adopts his mediation analysis in his famous ‘public knowledge and popular culture’ project.⁸ Within the public knowledge project, television programmes, no matter whether they are factual or fictional or sources of information or entertainment, can be perceived as forms of public knowledge. Furthermore, the audience’s

⁸ For a thorough knowledge about this long term project, see Corner’s work in 1991, 1995, 2008 and 2009.

interpretation and its social determinants are connected with how the programmes function to organize and disseminate public knowledge.

For British media scholar Nick Couldry, these theoretical moves therefore generate a new paradigm for television studies, a paradigm of studying television and cultural citizenship (1999, 2003, 2004, 2006). Couldry's own book *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (2003) serves as a pioneer in the formation of this paradigm. In the book, he launches a careful critique of the neo-Durkheimian type of functionalism notably represented in Dayan and Katz's work on broadcasting events (1992); he puts forward a crucial assertion that, as Buonanno (2008) summarises, 'shared values emanating from the "core" of society find elements in televisual events that have...a "coagulating" effect, in that they keep the diverse and disunited parts of society together' (p46). Nevertheless, as Couldry himself argues, media rituals are not something universal; they are social forms 'which legitimate a fact that about the current organization of mediation, in most parts of the world, that is contingent, not necessary' (ibid. p135). The current organization of mediation, as he goes on to remind us, is 'the intense concentration of society's symbolic resources in centralized institutions that we call "the media"' (ibid.). Compared to Ellis's rather philosophical approach, Couldry's mediation analysis reintroduces a sociological perspective to Cultural Studies. What he attempts to do is to provide a missing link between the cultural and the social by reexamining the symbolic dimension of social life.

When it comes to the study of television entertainment and cultural citizenship in particular, the Dutch media scholars Joke Hermes and Liesbet van Zoonen's work deserves special introduction here. Their contribution comes from a critical examination of television entertainment and its political value. This 'critical' examination entails a postmodern move beyond many dichotomies: men-women, emotional-rational, personal-political, entertainment-information, and so on.

Hermes (2005), in her book *Re-reading Popular Culture*, treats popular culture as both a modern and postmodern genealogy. In the book, she argues for a new understanding of popular culture, that is, an understanding of how 'politics and pleasure are both articulated at the level of everyday life and are reciprocally involved in how we constitute ourselves in relation to society' (ibid. p152). Therefore, watching television, as she argues, involves 'a process of comparison and evaluation that is helped and inspired by popular media texts'

(ibid. p12). This process reflects on a sense of bonding and community building, which is by no means directly a political voice. In her recent study of audience reactions to the Dutch multicultural reality show *WestSide*, she and her colleague (Müller & Hermes 2010) provide a working definition for the term cultural citizenship. According to them,

Cultural citizenship, like all other forms of citizenship, is constituted by a process of continuous performance rather than a set of abstract legal rules. The performance of cultural citizenship can be defined as the struggle over the norms, practices, meanings, and identities through which groups and individuals are socially included and excluded in society. In short, it involves the negotiation of the role of cultural difference in everyday life. (Müller & Hermes, 2010, p194)

Similarly, van Zoonen, who is influenced by Weberian political philosophy as well as deeply committed to an academic position of political communication, considers popular culture as a resource for 'political citizenship'. In her 2005 work *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*, she provides a systematic discussion on the role of television in political communication. Through an online forum study of American audience's reaction to political dramas like *Mr. Smith, Dave* or *The West Wing*, van Zoonen finds that 'people seem to apply the same frames to make sense of fictional and true politics' (ibid. p137). These 'frames' including description, realism, judgment, reflection and utopia, according to her, cannot be seen as the ways that people understand and evaluate concrete political issues, but they provide opportunities for people to 'sharpen their overall angle on politics and express an overall sense of utopia' (ibid. p139). Thus, she argues that popular culture is a resource for 'political citizenship'; it produces 'comprehension and respect for popular political voices that allow for more people to perform as citizens...in other words, a resource that can entertain the citizen' (ibid. p151).

In the international field of Chinese media and cultural studies, some academic effort has also been made to address the question of cultural citizenship in contemporary Chinese context (e.g. Chu, 2007; Fong, 2006; 2007; Keane 2001b, 2007; Yu, 2006, 2009). For example, Michael Keane (2001b), in his article *Redefining Chinese citizenship*, rightly observes that the nature of Chinese citizenship has undergone a fundamental change in the past two decades. Although the concept of citizen still intends to modify social conduct to the Chinese socialist spiritual civilization template, contemporary citizenship and civic awareness in China need to be, as Keane (2001) points out, 'contextualized within the twin freedoms of property rights reform and consumerism' (p8).

When it comes to Chinese television studies, a large proportion of debate on television and cultural citizenship studies has yet to be formulated; this, in my opinion, has to be referred back to the debate between Jing Wang and Michael Keane in the application of the Foucauldian theories into the Chinese context, where the state apparatus remains the ultimate power in cultural production. However, the recent years saw a boom in the study of youth culture and fandom in Chinese media and communication research (e.g. Chang, 2007; Fung, 2003, 2009); these scholars have made great critical efforts to analyse the liberal values and public discourses generated by the rise of popular culture and consumerism. Anthony Fung is undoubtedly the most active scholar in writing on this topic. Here, I shall discuss his two recent journal articles dealing with two Chinese popular cultural icons respectively.

The first article *Fandom, youth and consumption in China* (2009a) is based on Fung's ethnographic study of youth culture and fandom in China in the case of the most popular Taiwanese singer, Jay Chou. Inspired by Maurizio Lazzarato's distinction of material and immaterial labour (1996), Fung (2009a) aims to critically examine the interaction between Chou and his fans that is reflected in the process of 'youth labour, performativity and culture in China, as well as their current challenges to the state' (p286). Fung and his research team conducted the ethnographic study of the fandom activities of Jay Chou between 2003 and 2005 in different cities in China; they interviewed media disc jockeys, Chou's concert promotion teams and the managing director and executive of his music label. Also, they participated in the fan club and its activities.

In conclusion, Fung presents two interesting findings. First, he argues that 'fandom – a spontaneous, "bottom-up" populism – has replaced politics already as the centre for values and lifestyles' (ibid. p300); as Fung realizes, the party-organs like the Communist Youth League (*gongqingtuan*) have lost control of Chinese young people and the young fans have the potential to constitute 'a civic space to challenge authoritarian rule' (ibid.). Second, the performativity of the young fans is mostly cultural but also can be political; it, according to Fung, has proved a powerful social force that fastens the speed of social reform.

Within the other article *Faye and the fandom of a Chinese diva* (2009b), Fung concentrates on the issue of a middle-class female fandom; using ethnographic methods and in-depth

interviews over a six-year period, he intends to explore the fans of Chinese Cantopop diva Faye Wong. Influenced by Bourdieu's work *Distinction* (1984), Fung (2009b) defines Faye Wong's culturally uncompromising performativity as a kind of cultural capital; it is by appropriating Faye's persona and engaging 'in independent trajectories and various struggles against existing cultural norms and gendered family values' that Faye's fans create a middle-class femininity (p252). Differently from the first article, this one addresses the question of fandom from the perspective of gender politics; it reminds us that fandom activities offer opportunities to investigate the process of social differentiation by looking at a particular social group, being it the youth or the middle-class female.

Having discussed Fung's fandom studies, I think it is worth introducing US-based Canadian media scholar Jonathan Gray's renewed fandom studies. In his work on the viewers of *The Simpsons* (2003), Gray rightly observes that many of the anti-fans and non-fans can also provide a lengthy and impressive in-depth analysis of the cartoon. He proposes that 'we must look to anti-fans and non-fans as well, and study how the text changes as it meets different audiences and viewing environments' (ibid. p79). He goes on to argue that this way should lie the future of audience research. In his recent work *Television Entertainment* (2008), Gray relates the study of fans, anti-fans and non-fans with that of many basic structuring principles of modernity. These principles, according to him, include 'how we create identity, how we relate to each other, why we watch so much television entertainment, how we envision a better society, and so forth' (ibid. p49). It can be seen that, instead of framing fandom/non-fandom activities by using postmodern or aesthetic discourse, Gray positions them in a central role in the creation of social realities. As he states towards the end of the book, it is 'the nature of those realities, their ideological underpinnings, and their inclusion or exclusion of a broad public in turn' that 'either grant or deny citizenship' (ibid. p155).

Although both of the scholars deal with fandom activities, what they are concerned with through their own research remains different. Anthony Fung highlights the political values surrounding China's fandom activities. In the case of the singer Jay Chou, he suggests that a 'spontaneous, bottom-up' populism is generated by fan culture, which can replace existing party-organs for liberal values and styles, whereas in the case of Faye Wong, he shifts his attention to gender politics, which, as he argues, can help to shape a middle-class femininity. Differently from Fung's explicit political critique, Gray's fandom studies rely

on ‘the basic structure principles of modernity’, based on which our sense of social realities are constructed; Gray believes that it is the nature of those realities that matters the citizenship. In comparison, I come to realize that the treatment of ‘the political’ differentiates the work by Fung from that by Gray. Fung still feels urged to endorse a radical populism with a view to fight against the authoritarian state power. As a Western scholar, however, Gray goes beyond a political critique and moves to question the changing nature of western modernity instead.

2.5 Concluding remarks: towards the relationship between the historical and the post-socialist Chinese audience-hood

To conclude, I would suggest that the relationship between the historical as a cultural category and the post-socialist Chinese audience-hood should be the key area of investigation for this thesis. As has been introduced previously, a wave of post-socialist television criticism has emerged in the practice of theorizing the nature of contemporary Chinese television. The transformation of ideological control is identified in the field of Chinese television studies; the rise of market forces has reconfigured the Party-state power that has impinged on television production. At the same time, the study of Chinese television’s audience-hood since the 1980s has been an academic effort to reposition Chinese audience-hood in China’s post-socialist social and cultural context. For example, Anthony Fung’s fandom and youth studies have pushed the political values of audience activity into a new stage; he considers fandom activities as alternative political actions against China’s mainstream authoritarian politics.

It is under this background of ideological transformation of Chinese television that the historical drama has been produced and consumed. What is more, due to the commercialization and transnationalization of Chinese television production, the use of ‘the historical’ as a term has become highly unstable here; ‘serious history’ versus ‘popular history’ remains the most common dichotomy made within the Chinese television industry and academia towards this rather broad genre of ‘historical TV’. I therefore argue that an empirical investigation into how Chinese audiences unpack this increasingly complicated cultural category of ‘the historical’ will generate thoughts on how new forms of Confucianism-related subjectivity are being formulated and contested in contemporary Chinese society.

Having said that, I shall move on to closely examine contemporary China's social, political and cultural circumstances under which the historical television drama emerged in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The rise of 'new historical drama' on contemporary Chinese Television

3.1 Introduction

Having discussed the theoretical framework for the whole thesis, I now move on to look at the contextual issues concerning the rise of the 'new historical television drama'. My rationale of addressing the 'contextual' question within this chapter is formulated under two major analytical influences. First, as previously mentioned, historical television programmes, according to McArthur (1978), 'take their character from the system of production relationships in the social formation they inhabit' (p15). That is to say, for a production study of any historical television programme, one needs to situate the question of production within a specific social formation process; this process is characterised as a series of interconnections, contradictions as well as negotiations taking place among all the parties involved for an actual production.

The second analytical influence comes from Jostein Gripsrud's work *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies* (1995). In his comprehensive investigation into the then popular American television soap *Dynasty* in Norway, Gripsrud, from the beginning, considers the programme 'as a complex media phenomenon, comprising both its origins in the US, its text, and its public and domestic reception in Norway' and aims at 'reaching a historical understanding' of the phenomenon (ibid. p2). By 'a historical understanding', Gripsrud defines the production and reception of *Dynasty* as part of cultural history that involves 'more general socio-cultural forces at play in the ongoing shaping of our lives and life worlds' (ibid.).

Those two analytical influences combined provide me with an insight into the contextuality of the rise of the historical drama on contemporary Chinese television since the mid-1990s; it has to be conceptualized at two levels. On the one hand, it is crucial to examine three prominent cultural and aesthetical movements that have taken place in contemporary China's governmental-ideological, literary and television media spheres respectively, following upon which the new historical drama emerged; they include the wave of enthusiasm for traditional culture 'fever' (*chuantong wenhua re*), the rise of the new historical novel (*xin lishi xiaoshuo*) and the popularity of anti-corruption television drama

(*fan tanwu dianshiju*). On the other hand, one needs to critically understand those movements against the background of past/present, traditional/modern, and local/global; this goal is to be achieved through a hermeneutic approach, by which I mean contextualizing a full range of relevant factors into a wider social-historical formation process.

This chapter therefore consists of three independent sections where each section deals with one of the movements; these movements also cover three main areas of the transformation of contemporary Chinese popular culture. The first section introduces the wave of traditional culture ‘fever’ in China first instigated by overseas Chinese intellectuals, notably the Harvard scholar Wei-ming Tu, and then overseen and promoted by Chinese government. In this case, historical drama as a whole television genre often performs a controversial ideological function in ‘building a harmonious society’ as advocated by the current Hu-Wen Administration. The second section focuses on literary transformation by revisiting the rise of the new historical novel; it uses Chinese historical novelist Er Yuehe and his well-known Qing emperor trilogy which was turned into several successful historical television dramas, as an example to illustrate this transformation. By tracing the development of historical television drama that deals with anti-corruption initiatives, the third section discusses the transformation of contemporary Chinese television content. In this respect, it has been widely acknowledged that the hybridisation of social criticism and historical realism has contributed to the particular dramatic style of historical drama in China (e.g. Li & Xiao, 2006; Yin, 2002). It is against the backdrop of this cultural transformation that historical drama has changed into its current manifestation on contemporary Chinese television. Next, I shall move on to the first section.

3.2 The governmental-ideological sphere: the rise of traditional culture ‘fever’

As previously mentioned, the popularity of the television historical dramas should be considered as a revival of Confucianism. Over the last two decades, many Chinese cultural scholars in China and abroad have pointed out that Confucianism owed its revival to the intellectual and general public’s responses to the great changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society and culture (e.g. Bell, 2008; Liu, 2004; Wang, 1996; Zhang, 2008). It is therefore worth taking a close look at this revival of Confucianism and its potential impact on Chinese historical drama production and consumption.

The end of the Cold War not only greatly eased the political and military stand-off between China and the western world; it also witnessed increasing Chinese-related human, cultural and economic mobility at both regional and transnational levels. China, as one of the longest continuous civilizations, re-emerged into the international community after nearly a century of impotence, frustration and humiliation. In response to China's changing situation, Wei-ming Tu, then Professor of Chinese history and philosophy at Harvard University, published a famous and influential essay entitled *Cultural China: the Periphery as the Centre* in 1991.

In the essay, Tu ambitiously uses the concept of cultural China (*wenhua zhongguo*), which, according to him, was coined in intellectual journals outside the mainland in the 1980s as opposed to the concept of geopolitical China based on size and sphere of influence that was over-emphasised during the period of the Cold War to evaluate the future global impact of Chinese culture. 'The meaning of being Chinese' is the key question that Tu attempts to interrogate in the essay. He starts out by pointing out that 'the meaning of being Chinese is intertwined with China as a geographical concept and Chinese culture as a living reality' (Tu, 1991, p1) and proposes a 'thinking and reflective' way of being Chinese in 'an increasingly alienating and dehumanizing world' (ibid. p2). By critically examining China's modernization process from the late twentieth century, Tu challenges the notion of comprehensive westernization as a precondition for China's modernization process. Also, leaving out the impact of mainland China, Tu positively discusses the remarkable economic achievements of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole where Chinese diasporic populations have always played an important role.

In a major academic contribution, Tu suggests three symbolic universes of cultural China; the first is comprised of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, 'the societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese', the second is 'Chinese communities throughout the world', and the third 'consists of individuals, such as scholars, teachers, journalists, industrialists, traders, entrepreneurs, and writers who try to understand China intellectually and bring their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities' (ibid. p12-p13). It is worth noting that, throughout the whole essay, Tu uses the concept of cultural China in an anthropological and ethical sense. What is more, although he mentions the influence of Confucian tradition on cultural China, Tu by no

means treats Confucianism as a set of fixed political principles that guide all Chinese societies. As He argues towards the end of the essay, ‘the meaning of being Chinese is basically not a political question; it is a human concern pregnant with ethical-religious implications’ (ibid. p28).

As it came out two years after the Tiananmen Protests, Tu’s essay made an immediate impact on Chinese intellectuals both inside and outside China. It provided them with an opportunity to recover from the painful memory of the Protests and rethink Chinese culture in a globalizing world. At the same time, although manifested in different ways in different popular cultural forms, ‘traditional Chinese culture’ (*chuantong zhongguo wenhua*) as a corpus of historical and symbolic resources began to be constantly used and appropriated by China’s media practitioners for the purpose of critical self-reflection. Within the Chinese public realm, this obsession with traditional Chinese culture is often labeled as ‘the fever of national studies’ (*guo xue re*). ‘National studies’ here refers to a learning of classic ancient Chinese philosophical works. The word ‘fever’ suggests that an interesting psychological dimension is embedded in this cultural phenomenon. However, China’s political landscape in the post-Tiananmen era, which was more controlled and focused on maintaining power for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), effectively turned this ‘fever’ of national studies into a political manifesto for sage leadership (see Zhu 2008). More importantly, Chinese government started to act as both the initiator and the negotiator during this process by exerting its authoritarian power in determining cultural policy.

The most prominent change within China’s political landscape in the post-Tiananmen era has been the revival of Confucianism. The tragedy and controversy of the Tiananmen Protests resulted in the Chinese public’s great distrust in Chinese government. Unlike the Maoist period, where the Party-state ideologies forcefully served as the moral standard in the public realm, the post-Tiananmen era witnessed the crisis of the Communist ideologies in ordinary people’s lives. In the last two decades, this moral crisis has been solved in some cases by other belief systems and ideologies such as Christianity, Falun Gong and popular nationalism of all kinds. But, as Daniel Bell, a Canadian born professor of political philosophy at China’s Tsinghua University rightly observes, Chinese government worries that such moral alternatives ‘threaten the hard-won peace and stability that underpins the country’s development, so it has encouraged the revival of China’s most venerable political tradition: Confucianism’ (Bell, 2008, p8).

Zemin Jiang, the former Chinese President, for example, took a series of unprecedented actions to endorse the rise of new Confucianism. By so doing, Jiang attempted to advocate a central leadership with Confucian moral principles and thus maintain the legitimacy of the CCP's rule. Under Jiang's Administration, for example, the China Millennium Monument (*zhonghua shiji tan*) was set up in Beijing in 2000 to celebrate the coming of a new millennium. This grand monument combines the spirit of traditional Chinese culture with modern architectural art and integrates architecture, landscaping, sculpture, mural painting, and various other art forms. It stands along a north-south axis in the Capital City, occupying an area of 4.5 hectares and a total floor space of about 42,000 square metres. Furthermore, Jiang himself launched a large-scale research project on the history of the Qing dynasty at Renmin University (or the People's University) in Beijing, one of China's top universities in Humanities and Social Sciences. The Qing dynasty was the last Chinese feudal empire, so it is always considered a crucial period for a critical examination of traditional Chinese culture. I shall return to this when discussing the historical novel and the Qing dynasty later.

After Jintao Hu, the current Chinese President, came into office in 2002, new Confucianism, as a state ideology, was pushed to a higher level. Along with the Prime Minister Jiabao Wen, Hu advocates that the building of 'a socialist harmonious society' should be the new leitmotiv for Chinese society. According to the Hu-Wen Administration, as the most important principle of Confucianism, harmony should be implemented and mobilized by China's major cultural and educational institutions. At this point, I want to further explain the social background for the Hu-Wen Administration's calling for this harmony.

The collapse of Maoist ideologies in China marked the end of crude domestic class struggles as well as the beginning of an era of so-called 'socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics' (*you zhongguo tese de shichangjingji*). By 'Chinese characteristics', briefly speaking, it means that although the market-based mechanism was introduced to China's economic system, the Party-state still plays a dominant role in controlling and mobilizing political, social and economic resources. However, as economic growth continued under this one-party authoritarian rule, rampant political corruption became a pressing issue in Chinese society. Concerns about corruption were also behind

the outbreak of student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Calls for stricter anti-corruption (*fan fubai*) measures, among others, was the most important appeal from the protesters. The Tiananmen Protest was notoriously put down by the CCP in the end, but political corruption remains a challenge to the legitimacy of CCP rule. It is at this historical point that a school of thought labeled as ‘the New Left’ (*xin zuo pai*) began to take shape in the mid-to-late 1990s within the Chinese intelligentsia.

As the US-based Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu notes (2008b), China’s intellectual journal *The Scholar* (*xue ren*) which calls for independent critical thinking provided the forum for the formation of the New Left in late 1991. Chinese literary scholar Hui Wang, one of the journal editors, later became known as the leading figure of the New Left. According to Wang, the western version of liberal democracy is not necessarily the only route for societal progress; he maintains that ‘instead China can find a way to modernize itself that avoids the pitfalls of capitalist society modeled on the West’ (cited by Zhu, 2008b, p25). Wang and his colleagues, notably the political scientist Zhiyuan Cui who trained at the University of Chicago in the US and is currently based in China’s Tsinghua University, argues for a strong central government with the aim of turning contemporary China into a welfare society.

Therefore, the New Left brings to the fore the issue of moral and responsible central leadership into discussions about contemporary Chinese politics. Faced with the legitimacy crisis of the CCP due to political corruption, China’s President Jintao Hu is said to have accepted ‘the New Left’s politically reserved diagnosis’ and welcome their call for ‘shifting the State’s economic focus from fast growth towards more balanced development’ (ibid. p36). At the same time, it was under the influence of the New Left that Jintao Hu, as Ying Zhu observes, ‘initiated a new round of campaigning against corruption’ after he came to power in 2002 (ibid.). I shall not go into any detail about this campaign itself, but it needs to be pointed out that the rise of the anti-corruption television drama was triggered by the intensified campaign against corruption.

At the opening ceremony of the 8th Congress of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) and the 7th Congress of the Chinese Writers Association (CWS) in November 2006, Hu urged Chinese artists and writers to devote themselves to promoting ‘cultural harmony’. Under this political climate, China’s cultural industries including

printing and television were certainly expected to play their usual roles in support of the state's propagandist purposes. However, unlike the Maoist period, they have also experienced a privatization and commercialization process. The next two sections will address how the literature and television industries gave a push to the rise of the new historical drama in changing political, cultural and economic circumstances.

3.3 The literary sphere: the emergence of new historical novel

As previously discussed in the literature review, one of the most remarkable recent literary phenomena in Post-Mao China has been the resurgence of historical fiction (see Wang 1992). Moreover, one of the tendencies in this new wave of historical interpretation can be found within a series of novels dealing with political events during the late Qing period, which is notable because it allows for an interrogation of all the aspects of China's last feudal society and thus offers a particular representation of Chinese identity and nationalism. For example, *The Boxer (yi he quan)*, a historical fiction written by the well-known novelist Jicai Feng and his co-author Dingxing Li in 1977, is often regarded as the earliest one of the series (also see Wang 1992). This fiction is based on the Boxer Rebellion Movement⁹ that took place in northern China between 1898 and 1901. Instead of repeating the over-cited official version of the event, Feng and Li drew inspiration in writing the novel from an oral history report released by the Department of History at China's Nankai University as well as their personal investigations conducted in the old quarter of the City of Tianjin in northern China where the Movement was born.

In his recent interview (XinhuaNet 2010) talking about the novel, Feng comments that the message that got conveyed through the novel was that ordinary people were the heroes in fighting against feudalism and imperialism. The novel therefore seemed at first sight to more or less fall rather neatly into the official Marxist philosophy of historical materialism at the time. However, as he adds, the novel attempts to tell the story of the Movement

⁹ The Boxer Rebellion, also called 'The Boxer Uprising' or 'the Righteous Harmony Society Movement' by some historians, was a proto-nationalist movement by the 'Righteous Harmony Society' or 'Righteous Fists of Harmony' or 'Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists' (known as 'Boxers' in English) opposing Western imperialism and Christianity. The uprising took place in response to European 'spheres of influence' in China, with grievances ranging from opium traders, political invasion, economic manipulation, to missionary evangelism. In China, popular sentiment remained resistant to Western influences, and anger rose over the 'unequal treaties', which the weak Qing state could not resist. There existed growing concerns that missionaries and Chinese Christians could use this decline to their advantage, appropriating lands and property of unwilling Chinese peasants to give to the church. This sentiment resulted in violent revolts against Western interests.

against the background of folk culture; that is to say, ordinary people involved in the event were driven by their own belief systems rather than superficial political slogans. It is this spiritual dimension of ordinary people, according to Feng, that to a large extent reflects the historical truth of the Boxer Rebellion Movement (ibid.).

Here, the notion of historical truth proposed by Feng is an interesting one, which may have implications for other historical representations such as television drama; it challenges China's communist historiography during the Maoist period. Chinese literary scholars Shengli Li and Jinghong Xiao (2006), in their co-authored book *Researching on Historical Television Drama*, document this literary transformation in contemporary Chinese fictional history writings. For them, this transformation is represented by two characteristics. First, compared to historical novels written between 1949 and 1976 (see Wagner 1990), China's mainstream historical novels since the early 1980s have tended to reconsider the role of the individual in any historical event, rather than the role of the ambiguous 'people'.

According to Mao's revolutionary agenda, the petty-bourgeois intellectuals should, first of all, live and labor with the workers, peasants and the soldiers, and thereby familiarize themselves with the latter's language, lifestyle and thoughts. More importantly, as the Chinese media scholar Anbin Shi (2000) introduces, 'the intellectuals should subjugate themselves to the ideological reform of the people' (p204). That is to say, intellectual elitism should be abandoned and the sanction of the proletariat hegemony should be adhered. However, in defining the historical writings like *The Boxer* as 'new historical novels', Li and Xiao attempt to distinguish them from the Maoist ones. They argue that, according to Maoist historical understanding, 'human suffering is caused either by external social and political systems or internal human consciousness', whereas in the new historical novels, 'the realm of human unconsciousness becomes the focal point for an interrogation of historical development' (ibid. p211). In the case of Feng's novel *The Boxer*, one can easily identify this 'new' way of representing ordinary people involved in the Boxer Rebellion Movement because he focuses on individual experience rather than focusing on events through an ideological lens.

Second, the new historical novel is characterised by the re-emergence of emperors as

heroic protagonists in historical representations. During the Cultural Revolution¹⁰, the emperors of China's by-gone dynasties were generally depicted as anti-revolutionary feudalism remnants (*fangeming fengjian canyu*) in literary works. Under the Maoist ideology, which prevailed until the early 1980s, it was always the ordinary people (*renmin qunzhong*) not a particular hero that were treated as the ultimate force in the making of history. Even in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most mainstream Chinese historical novels including *The Boxer*, as Li and Xiao rightly observe, were still guided by the idea of 'ordinary people as history makers' (ibid. p212).

However, the early 1990s witnessed a boom in Chinese historical novels depicting emperors and high officials (*diwang jiangxiang*) in the Qing dynasty. Notable examples include Li Ling's *The Young Son of the Heaven* (*shaonian tianzi*, 1987) and *Evening Drum, Morning Bell* (*mugu chenzhong*, 1991), Haoming Tang's *Zeng Guofan* (1990-1992), and Er Yuehe's *Great Emperor Kangxi* (*kangxi dadi*, 1985-1989) and *Emperor Yongzheng* (*yongzheng huangdi*, 1991-1994). Interestingly enough, unlike the 1980s' historical novels which were mostly written by young adult authors, the writers of those Qing 'emperor' novels were all born in the 1940s and were middle-aged at the time when they wrote the novels. One could therefore argue that, having survived the Maoist period, those middle-aged historical novelists had discarded an ideological mindset based on class-struggle and come to terms with a more revisionist understanding of historical development, which highlighted the actions of the ruling classes.

The Chinese novelist Er Yuehe, among those historical writers, is worth special attention here. Born in Shanxi Province in north China in 1945, Er Yuehe was originally named Jiefang Ling. He is best known for his biographical novels of three Qing dynasty emperors, Kangxi (1654-1722), Yongzheng (1678-1735) and Qianlong (1711-1799), all of which have been adapted into award-winning television series¹¹. It is generally acknowledged within both the Chinese and western fields of Chinese history studies that the Qing dynasty experienced its most prosperous period under the rule of these three emperors. This period, which lasted for about 110 years, is also known as High Qing or the Age of Kang-Qian Prosperity (*kangqian shengshi*). This period started with Emperor Qianlong's success in

¹⁰ For an explanation on the Cultural Revolution, see the previous chapter.

¹¹ These three television series are *Kangxi Dynasty* (China International Television Corporation, 50-episode, 2001), *Yongzheng Dynasty* (Beijing Tongdao Cultural Development Corporation, 44-episode, 1997) and *Qianlong Dynasty* (CCTV & Hunan TV, 40-episode, 2002).

suppressing a massive anti-Qing separatist rebellion in 1667 which involved three local autonomous regions (*san fan zhi luan*). After the crack down, the country's economy began to prosper and the Qing dynasty reached its highpoint between the Yongzheng and the mid-Qianlong periods. However, this so-called High Qing period is not without controversy. Contemporary Chinese historians often point to the issue of strict censorship and repression in the Qing dynasty¹² (e.g. Dai, 2002; Zhou, 2008).

The historian Siyuan Zhou (2008), for example, questions whether any kind of real prosperity was achieved under the authoritarian rule of the Kang-Qian periods. He argues that the economic development of the Kang-Qian periods was attributable less to any new means of production or forms of technological advancement than relative societal peace and stability compared to the late periods of the previous Ming dynasty (*ibid.*). On the other hand, from a different critical position, the historian Yi Dai (2004) disagrees with Zhou's complete denial of the Kang-Qian Prosperity. Instead of a reductionist analysis of the means of production, he suggests a more nuanced approach to the study of China's feudalism and its specific characteristics of different periods. In other words, according to Dai, although the Kang-Qian period was prosperous but ultimately repressive, one needs to look at this period in a more considered way.

It is within this intellectual climate that Er Yuehe contributed to the heated discussion about the history of Qing with his Qing emperor trilogy. Inspired by classic Chinese literature, in particular the famous novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*¹³, Er Yuehe not only introduces a serialized narrative to his works, but also tries to incorporate traditional Chinese folk cultural elements into his story-telling. In order to get hold of more first-hand materials, he made great efforts to research into the many unofficial historical records including folklores and some intellectuals' diaries written in the Qing periods. It should be

¹² The most notorious way of censorship and repression was literary inquisition, which refers to the official persecution of intellectuals for their writings in Imperial China. It took place under each of the dynasties ruling China, although the Qing dynasty was particularly extreme. Such persecutions could occur even as a result of a single phrase or word which the ruler considered offensive. Some of these owed to the naming taboo. By that, it referred to a cultural taboo against using, speaking or writing the given names of the emperors. In serious cases, not only the writer but also his immediate and extended families would be killed.

¹³ *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*hong lou meng*), composed by Xueqin Cao, is one of China's Four Great Classical Novels. It was composed in the middle of the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty. It is considered to be a masterpiece of Chinese vernacular literature and is generally acknowledged to be a pinnacle of Chinese fiction. 'Redology' (*hong xue*) is the field of study devoted exclusively to this work. *The Red Chamber* is believed to be semi-autobiographical, mirroring the rise and decay of author Cao's own family and, by extension, of the Qing Dynasty. As the author details in the first chapter, it is intended to be a memorial to the women he knew in his youth: friends, relatives and servants. The novel is remarkable not only for its huge cast of characters and psychological scope, but also for its precise and detailed observation of the life and social structures typical of 18th-century Chinese aristocracy.

explained here that folklores are characterised as vernacular forms of fictional writing, which are based on ordinary people's oral storytelling of captivating and colorful stories. In these stories, the boundary between reality and the odd or fantastic is blurred.

The four-volume novel *Emperor Yongzheng*, for instance, took him more than two years to collect and select raw materials before he started writing it. Compared to the historical novels of other writers in the 1970s and the early 1980s, Er Yuehe's Qing emperor trilogy has at least three features, which make it stand out from other works that had been written from a Maoist perspective. First, it takes a positive and sympathetic attitude in its treatment of the emperor figures. Unlike Maoist historical novels, where 'ordinary' working people took the leading roles, Er Yuehe's Qing emperor trilogy brings the emperors back to the centre stage and re-emphasises their importance in maintaining national unity and social stability.

Second, it attempts to provide a more comprehensive picture of royal history by revisiting some neglected historical figures. Take his novel *Kangxi Dynasty*, the Empress Xiaozhuang, the grandmother of Emperor Kangxi is portrayed in a much more vivid and detailed way than before. The Empress Xiaozhuang (1613-1688), known for the majority of her life under the title 'Grand Empress Dowager', was the concubine of Emperor *Huangtaiji*, the mother of the *Shunzhi* Emperor and the grandmother of the *Kangxi* Emperor during China's Qing Dynasty. She wielded significant influence over the Qing court during the rule of her son and grandson. Known for her wisdom and political ability, Xiaozhuang has become a largely respected figure in Chinese history. Because Er Yuehe successfully re-introduced Princess Xiaozhuang into the historical novel, this figure has now also become a popular character for many historical television productions ever since then.

Third, Er Yuehe's Qing trilogy reaffirms the continuity of the Han culture throughout the entire Qing period. From his novels, it is clear that although the Qing dynasty existed under Manchurian rule, it was in fact the increasing integration of Han and Manchurian cultures that allowed the Qing dynasty to last for nearly three centuries. Nevertheless, Er Yuehe's optimistic view of traditional Han culture coincides with the rise of new Confucian ethos in contemporary Chinese society. In the Qing dramas adapted from his Qing trilogy, all these features have become important inspiration.

3.4 The television mediasphere: anti-corruption television drama and new historical drama

Apart from the emergence of the new historical novel, the rise of the new historical television drama should be also explained by the transformation of content on contemporary Chinese television. Generic changes and the hybridisation of television historical drama were made possible by state-led innovation and regulation of Chinese television industry. The content of Chinese television drama has undergone great changes since television drama as a genre appeared on Chinese television in the 1950s. Chinese media scholar Hong Yin (2002) contends that Chinese television drama has experienced three phases of development: the experimental period (1958-1978), the transitional period (1978-1987) and the commercial period (1987 to the present). In using the ‘three phases of development’, Yin examines Chinese television drama primarily from a technological and ideological starting point.

According to Yin, in the experimental period (1958-1978), television was not a mass medium because China had only one television station ‘with a limited broadcast range’. Only ‘a very small number of government officials and senior intellectuals’ had access to it (Yin, 2002, p28). Furthermore, television dramas at the time were all single plays (*dan ben ju*) in black and white, which served the strong propagandist purposes of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In the transitional period (1978-87), as noted earlier, the end of the Cultural Revolution was followed by the Deng-led Economic Reform; the CCP changed its main policy from class struggle to economic construction with a view to speeding up the process of China’s so-called four modernizations (*sige xiandaihua*)¹⁴. Serial dramas (*lianxuju*) emerged on the television screen during this period. As Yin rightly observes, ‘the production of domestic drama series was influenced by productions from abroad’ (ibid. p30). In the late 1970s, popular television dramas started to be imported from foreign countries and regions, mainly the United States, Japan and Hong Kong¹⁵; these popular cultural products became

¹⁴ In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in 1981, Xiaoping Deng, along with his closest collaborators, such as Ziyang Zhao and Yaobang Hu, took the reins of power and their purpose of advancing the ‘China’s four modernizations’ (economy, agriculture, scientific and technological development and national defense) put up an ambitious plan of opening and liberalization of the economy.

¹⁵ It is worth reminding that Hong Kong was not handed over to the People’s Republic by Britain until 1997.

examples for the transformation of Chinese domestic television drama from ‘a mere expression of political and cultural tendencies into popular entertainment’ (ibid.). As a result, the themes and genres of Chinese television drama began to multiply and flourish in this period.

On the one hand, a wave of Chinese dramas adapted from classical and modern literary works were produced; notable examples include *Four Generations under One Roof*¹⁶ (*sishi tongtang*, 1985), *the Dream of the Red Chamber* (1986), *Journey to the West*¹⁷ (*xiyouji*, 1987) and *The Last Emperor*¹⁸ (*modai huangdi*, 1988). On the other hand, along with the rise of the previously mentioned literary works reflecting on political and personal conflicts during the Cultural Revolution, television dramas that critically portray social reality also gained wide popularity. *New Star* (1986), the 12-episode series, which tells a story of China’s ‘socialist reform’ in a small Northern Chinese city that has been discussed in the literature review, was an important example. Nevertheless, these dramas involving social criticism, according to Yin, included several important sub-genres, such as the ‘drama of pain’ (*shang hen ju*) or ‘retrospective dramas’ (*fan si ju*) which took a contemporary reflexive attitude towards past political turmoil and ‘reform dramas’ (*gaige ju*) which were based on the changing political and social situation in post-Reform Chinese society.

The commercial period (1987 to the present) saw television genres develop into more diverse and hybridized types of programming. As the CCP officially replaced a centrally planned economic system with a market one in the early 1990s, China’s mass

¹⁶ *Four Generations under One Roof*, written by the late Chinese novelist Lao She between 1944 and 1950, is a novel based on the life of ordinary and local people in Beijing during the Japanese Occupation in the 1930s. Lao She (1899-1966) was one of the most significant figures of 20th century Chinese literature, and is perhaps best known for his novel *Rickshaw Boy* (*luotuo xiangzi*) and the play *Teahouse* (*cha guan*).

¹⁷ Written by Chengen Wu in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty, *Journey to the West* is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. In English-speaking countries, it is also often known as *Monkey*. The novel is a fictionalised account of the legendary pilgrimage to India of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang, and loosely based its source from the historic text *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* and traditional folk tales. The monk travelled to the ‘Western Regions’ during the Tang Dynasty, to obtain sacred texts. The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (*Guanyin*), on instruction from the Buddha, gives this task to the monk and his three protectors in the form of disciples including Wukong Sun, Bajie Zhu and Wujing Sha together with a dragon prince who acts as Xuanzang’s steed, a white horse. These four characters have agreed to help Xuanzang as an atonement for past sins.

¹⁸ The last emperor here refers to Pu Yi (1906 -1967) who was the last Emperor of China, and the twelfth and final ruler of the Qing Dynasty. He belonged to the Manchu Aisin Gioro clan and ruled as the Xuantong Emperor from 1908 until his abdication on 12 February 1912. From 1 to 12 July 1917 he was briefly restored to the throne as a nominal emperor by the warlord Zhang Xun. In 1934 he was declared the Kangde Emperor of the puppet state of Manchukuo by the Empire of Japan, and he ruled until the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1945. After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, Pu Yi was a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference from 1964 until his death in 1967. Pu Yi’s abdication in 1912 marked the end of centuries of dynastic rule in China.

communication system as a whole embarked on a commercialization process from then on. Although it was (and still is) under government supervision through the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the production and broadcasting of television drama in China was increasingly funded by advertising and produced by both overseas and domestic companies. In order to provide a necessary industry background for my cultural genre analysis of the historical drama later, I shall go into some length on the important policy and regulatory changes of China's television drama industry in this period here.

The Xiaoping Deng-led socialist market economy reform, which officially started in 1992, has transformed the nature of Chinese television industry from a governmental institution (*shiye*) to a state-owned enterprise (*qiye*). During this process, as Chinese media scholar Liu summarises (2010), Chinese television organizations 'have evolved their operation to embrace commercial management through the business of advertising and program rights' (p73). The commercial management of Chinese television was technologically made possible by the adoption of cable and satellite technologies in the entire country which reinforced China's national television market from the early 1990s.

According to a 2009 report released by China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), by 2008, there were 277 television stations at city, provincial and central level, and 1969 radio and television stations at local level (in rural areas, radio and television stations are combined), operating thousands of television channels and broadcasting 14 million hours annually (SARFT, 2009, p185, p186). These channels covered 96.95 percent of the Chinese population and included 164 million cable users (ibid. p186). This huge proliferation of television channels led to severe shortages of content on Chinese television. On the one hand, content production within the state-owned television studio system was 'unable to satisfy demand', so television stations 'sought programs from outside the system' (Liu, 2010, p74). On the other hand, there was a fast growing demand from the public for innovative quality television programmes, which were less imbued with governmental propaganda and were also informative and entertaining.

Facing this content crisis, the Chinese television industry underwent three major changes to meet the challenges. In the case of television drama, first of all, leading state-owned television stations managed to strengthen production and distribution capabilities. For

example, the Television Drama Production Centre of China Central Television remains the largest television drama producer in mainland China. At the same time, China International Television Corporation (CITVC), the commercial arm of CCTV, is the largest seller of television programmes as well as the largest importer of programming.

Second, as commercialization of Chinese television industry continued, independent television companies appeared in China and the practice of outsourcing production grew from the early 1990s. As Beijing-based media scholar Hong Yin (2002) writes, hundreds of non-governmental television drama production companies began to emerge from 1990 onwards and by 2001 there were 800 registered television drama production companies in China. Today, independent production companies are the main content providers for China's television market. According to Liu (2010), 'independent production accounted for 80 percent of content in television drama' in China in 2010 (p76).

Third, the last 15 years saw the arrival of the golden age of television co-production and programme exchange among East Asian countries. As a result, television drama including imports from East Asia flourished on Chinese television and competition became much fiercer for mainland Chinese television drama producers. Early in the mid-1980s, popular television drama produced by Hong Kong television organizations, comprising mainly martial arts programmes, started to be shown on mainland Chinese television. Meanwhile, immediately after the lifting of martial law (*jiechu jieyan*) in Taiwan¹⁹ in 1987, television co-productions mainly of romance costume drama, between Taiwan and mainland China took off and achieved huge success across the Taiwan Straits. The exchange of television drama therefore became quite common in the Greater China region.

In addition, Japanese and South Korean television programmes also began to enjoy great popularity in China. For instance, romantic dramas (*langman ouxiang ju*) from both countries are prominent in China's television viewing market, and South Korean costume dramas, most notably the serial *Jewel in the Palace (Dae Jang Geum)*, also began to have

¹⁹ After World War II, the United Nations transferred rule of Taiwan to the Republic of China, which then initiated the longest period of martial law in modern history at the time. In the aftermath of the 2.28 Incident of 1947, which was a uprising of the native Taiwanese people (*ben sheng ren*) fighting against the authoritarian rule of the Chiang Kai-shek Administration, martial law was declared in 1948 despite the democracy promised in the Constitution of the Republic of China. In 1949, the Nationalist-led Republic of China government lost control of its possessions in mainland China to the Communist Party of China and retreated to Taiwan. The perceived need to suppress Communist and Taiwan Independence activities in Taiwan led to the fact the martial law was not lifted until 1987.

a considerable presence on Chinese television from 2004. In the year, *Dae Jang Geum* (DJG) was introduced to mainland China via Hunan Satellite Television Channel with high ratings; this came after its huge success in South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The drama is based on the real historical figure Jang-geum (played by Lee Youngae), who became the first female head physician to the King in the patriarchal Confucian society of the Chosun Dynasty of Korea in the mid-sixteenth century. The success of DJG ignited a heated debate about the quality of Chinese television dramas and that of South Korean ones within Chinese popular press as well as the general public (see Kim 2009).

In parallel with the commercialization of Chinese television, China's television regulatory climate began to change as well. For example, the SARFT, as China's top visual media regulatory body, changed its way of control of domestic television production. In dealing with the rise of independent television producers, for example, Liu (2010) suggests that since 1994 SARFT's regulatory approaches 'can be divided into three stages: banning, acquiescence and approval' (p76). Briefly, having experienced these stages, China's independent drama producers are now afforded certain freedoms in managing the business aspects of production and distribution. However, they must still have their shooting proposals censored and approved by the SARFT. When it comes to foreign television programmes, as Hong Kong media scholar Joseph Chan (2009) reminds us, 'China is still wary of alien forces coming from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West that may undermine the socialist system' (p33). In other words, Chinese government still has serious ideological concerns about the impact of television and the media generally. More importantly, the Communist Party would argue that the role of the nation-state remains critical in regulating Chinese communication across national boundaries and indeed the development of China's national cultural industry and this role cannot be left to the market alone.

After almost three decades of commercialization, therefore, according to Australia-based Chinese media scholar Michael Keane (2005), the content of contemporary Chinese television drama now falls into three broad groupings: 'historical/political', 'social (or reform) issues', and 'contemporary popular culture' (p84). It is within the first and second groupings that there emerged a new genre of anti-corruption television drama. Earlier in this chapter, I have introduced that contemporary China's anti-corruption campaign has been endorsed by current Chinese President Jintao Hu starting from the early 2000s as

context.

In a general sense, the anti-corruption drama belongs to the broad grouping of social/reform issues genres proposed by Keane. Through the narration of political corruption and power struggles in particular fictional settings (mostly governmental organizations), this type of drama is always meant to allegorically criticize the abuse of power and political bribery that widely exists in Chinese society. According to Ying Zhu (2008b), the anti-corruption drama debuted with the 20-episode literary adaptation, *Heavy Snow Leaves No Trace* (*daxue wuhen*) which was produced and aired by state broadcaster CCTV in 2001. Written by Tianming Wu, a veteran author of several novels dealing with the rise and fall of officials during the reform era, *Heavy Snow* starts with the homicide of an employee in the office of a municipal government. This employee was later found out to have been involved in a bribery case that implicates high-ranking officials in the city and in the province. This drama serial thus tells a story of how two protagonists Yulin Fang, a male detective at the city's police bureau and Hongyu Liao, a female medium-ranking factory official attempt to reveal the truth behind the homicide. It depicts a series of crimes, hypocrisies and scandals within both the city and provincial governments. *Heavy Snow Leaves No Trace* was a huge success on Chinese television; it was one of the most popular television shows in 2001. After *Heavy Snow*, more anti-corruption dramas were produced and aired on state television. According to Zhu 'contemporary anti-corruption dramas took over dynasty dramas' place as the new primetime audience favourite in the early 2000s' (ibid. p38).

The fact that dynasty dramas were superseded in popularity by contemporary anti-corruption dramas proved only temporary. The emergence of anti-corruption drama only came after a forced elimination of the dynasty genre and its later development largely reshaped the historical drama as a whole. In the early 2000s, the production of previously popular Qing dramas was ordered to be reduced by the SARFT. As Zhu notes, the over-saturation of Qing dramas in the early 2000s 'had raised eyebrows among policy makers, literary and cultural critics, and even audiences' (ibid. p37). In March 2001, the SARFT brought together quite a few influential television dramatists and held a forum on the theme of 'TV Dramas of Contemporary Subjects' in Beijing. The aim of holding this forum was to encourage those television practitioners to directly engage with contemporary social

and reform issues, rather than historical ones. In the end this forum more or less spelled a ban by the SARFT on dynasty dramas.

However, the arrival of anti-corruption drama offered new reference points for the transformation of the historical drama; the icon of the incorruptible ‘clean official’ (*qing guan*) proved to be the most important one. Ruoyun Bai, another US-based Chinese media scholar, in her 2008 article, discusses the image of the ‘clean official’ in anti-corruption drama. She traces back the so-called ‘clean official ideologies’ to traditional Chinese Confucianism informed by contemporary political morality; that is, ‘society is bettered and justice restored by “clean officials”, a minority of officials who are honest, fair, and who care for social underdogs’ (Bai, 2008, p49). In *Heavy Snow*, for example, neither Fang nor Liao occupies high governmental positions but both of them behave as ‘clean officials’; they demonstrate heroic spirit in fighting against immorality and irresponsibility in official places for the benefit of the general public.

More importantly, the icon of the clean official was also introduced to the historical drama. Although serious Qing drama had passed its heyday, popular historical drama did introduce the idea of ‘clean officials’. As a matter of fact, earlier in 1996, *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister* (*zaixiang liuluoguo*), a 40-episode costume drama produced and distributed by Shanghai Hairun Film and Television Production, had already achieved massive popularity. A comedy-style television satire, *Hunchback Liu* was greatly influenced by Taiwanese popular television imports.

The story of *Hunchback Liu* is centered around the conflicts between two famous senior officials during the Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty. Yong Liu (or *Hunchback Liu*) is an honest and caring official and Shen He is a notoriously corrupt and evil-hearted one. With the rise of the anti-corruption drama in the early 2000s, popular historical drama went out of its way to prioritize the theme of the clean official as well. The well-known costume drama serial *The Bronze Teeth* (*tiechi tongya jiaxiaolan*) also represented this new trend. With similar storylines to *Hunchback Liu* as well as using almost the same cast, *The Bronze Teeth* staged conflicts between Xiaolan Ji, a well-known senior literary official in the Qianlong period and, Shen He in a comedic manner. Initiated in 2000, *The Bronze Teeth* ran for four seasons. I shall explain this in detail in my cultural genre analysis of Chinese historical drama in Chapter 5.

At the same time, anti-corruption drama began to change because of market pressures. As Zhu notices, ‘the transformed anti-corruption drama sensationalizes politics and business in its drive for ratings, mixing in schemes rife with sex and violence’ (ibid. p39). In other words, the anti-corruption drama partly transformed itself into a crime genre in order to survive fierce competition in the television viewing market. Interestingly enough, in April 2004, the SARFT banned the broadcast of crime dramas in primetime and re-scheduled them after 11pm. As a result, the anti-corruption drama began to go down hill from then on. It had lasted less than five years. The sudden impact of the primetime ban caused the revival of dynasty dramas. According to Zhu, most of China’s local television stations returned to ‘historical and costume dramas’ for their dramatic programming and ‘new productions were slated for costume dramas of varying periods’ (ibid.) It is important to note that unlike earlier dynasty dramas which had concentrated on the emperor’s heroic deeds, this new wave of productions made serious efforts to properly represent traditional elements of Chinese culture. Hence, media representation of traditional Chinese culture as a whole has become the key issue for the historical drama since the mid-2000s.

3.5 Summary

In this chapter, attention was given to the political and cultural contexts under which the new historical drama emerged in China since the mid-1990s. The first section has briefly reviewed the significant political and literary moments that contributed to the formation of China’s traditional culture ‘fever’ since the early 1990s. The next two artistic movements put forward the question of the representation of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary China’s cultural practices. On the one hand, as far as Er Yuehe’s Qing trilogy is concerned, it highlights the fact that the Han culture not only survived more than 250 years of Manchurian rule but also integrated many other ethnic cultures; to borrow McArthur’s words (1978), it offers contemporary readers a past but ‘buoyant and optimistic’ self-image of the Chinese society (p40). On the other, from the interconnection of the anti-corruption dramas and popular historical ones, strong rhetoric links can be identified between the traditional Chinese clean official and nowadays Party heroes in China’s market-oriented reforms.

From the discussion, it was also demonstrated that what distinguishes Chinese historical

drama since the mid-1990s resides in its vivid narration of contemporary political and social issues in the guise of historical representation. As far as its sub-genres are concerned, the new historical drama mainly includes emperor drama (like *The Last Emperor*), anti-corruption satirical costume drama (like *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister*) and period drama (like *Yongzheng Dynasty*).

Chapter 4

Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the issues concerning the methodology and methods of my thesis. It is comprised of four parts. In the first part, I shall briefly explain the reasons why a qualitative research approach is adopted to deal with my research questions. The second part provides a detailed discussion on the use of the research methods including cultural genre analysis, focus groups, in-depth interviews and document analysis. Part three concentrates on my process of research data analysis towards writing up the findings; the main purpose of this part is to highlight the significance of reflexivity in two aspects of the qualitative data analysis: on the one hand, using grounded theory informed analytical techniques, and on the other hand, rethinking the use of focus groups in researching Chinese society and culture. The last part summarises the gains and limitations of my qualitative research practice.

4.2 Research methodology

As discussed in the literature review, the study of the historical television drama has been mainly conducted within the area of literary studies in China since the late 1990s (e.g. Li & Xiao, 2006; Wang, 2008; Yin, 2002); this corpus of work is focused on the textual conventions and artistic styles of the drama text. The aim of my research project, however, is to look at how the television historical drama is understood and socially and culturally valued in contemporary China, considering personal, social, historical and cultural issues that relate to viewers' engagement to it. In order to address the question of understanding and value judgment, I need to take a qualitative approach; it is only through conducting qualitative audience research that I am able to identify the ways in which the Chinese audience understands and evaluates historical television drama in relation to the enormous social-cultural changes taking place in Chinese society.

As discussed in the literature review, the paradigm of Chinese audience research has shifted from an Encoding/Decoding model (see Lull 1991) to a reflexive sociological approach that addresses issues concerning the question of cultural citizenship of particular

social groups (see Fung 2002b, 2003 & 2009). This paradigmatic shift suggests a crucial trend in conducting critical audience research in contemporary China. That is, moving beyond Lull's use of the Encoding/Decoding model, which was based on the thesis of cultural resistance by the Chinese television audience, we now adopt a more nuanced and multidimensional approach to examine the articulation and disarticulation of contemporary China's authoritarian politics and their interpretation by Chinese audiences.

Specifically speaking, the research methods utilized in this project are cultural genre analysis, semi-structured focus groups and in-depth interviews. The reason why I chose to do interviews is because I expected to reveal how audiences understand and value television historical dramas by analyzing how they 'talk' about them. Finnish media scholar Pertti Alasuutari (1999), in an introduction to three phases of reception studies, rightly observes the relationship between increased reflexivity and cultural concerns in contemporary media reception studies. He writes:

One of the gradual developments in cultural and media studies has been to reflect upon and to take distance from the cultural concerns embedded in the way we conceive of contemporary society and its characteristic new phenomena, such as mass communication and mass culture...to be 'critical' in the analytic sense requires that in one's perspective to the phenomena under scrutiny one is not led or blindfolded by culturally given concerns (Alasuutari, 1999, p9).

By 'reflect on' and 'take distance from', Alasuutari suggests a renewed interaction between the individual and social reality. For example, as far as a television programme or genre is concerned, according to him, one 'does not necessarily analyse the programme or genre "itself" at all' (ibid. p16). Rather, one has to treat it as a historical phenomenon, around which public debate and discussion are developed and media policy decisions are made. By using focus groups, then, I can bring audiences together, divide them into groups and invite them to a debate about these dramas. As a focus group features group consensus, it to some extent mimics real social situations in which certain social and cultural values are shared or contested. Nevertheless, as 'talk' can be seen as a process of sense-making, comprehension as well as critique, focus groups and in-depth interviews, which are both based on talk, provide an insight into how television historical drama as a genre with complex textuality is operationalised in contemporary Chinese context.

4.3 The use of the research methods

My research data was collected during a period of one and a half years between October 2006 and October 2008. The data collection process consists of two stages. The first stage relied on cultural genre analysis. Although the cultural genre analysis was carried out throughout the two-year period, the second stage was mainly the audience research, which involved semi-structured focus groups and in-depth interviews respectively. I shall introduce the use of them next.

4.3.1 Cultural genre analysis

In order to investigate Chinese audiences' responses to historical television drama, the first task I should do is to unpack the genre of the television historical drama itself. Inspired by Jason Mittell (2001), I adopted a cultural approach to researching historical television drama. According to Mittell, television genre is 'a process of categorization'; it is 'not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts' (ibid. c). Thus, Mittell's cultural genre analysis incorporates a wide range of areas associated with the formation of a given television genre; it treats a television genre as an open, flexible cultural process rather than a closed text. In my research, the cultural genre analysis is realized through textual interpretation, document analysis and industry interview.

Textual interpretation still plays a crucial role in my cultural genre analysis. The textual interpretation here is comprised of narrative analysis and textual analysis. Narrative analysis concerns not only the structural characteristics of a particular text that provide 'a sense of a beginning, a middle, an end, with endless junctions in between these three major time points', but also the discourse characteristics of the text that can be unraveled as 'how is what told by who' (Thornham and Purvis, 2005, p31). As for textual analysis, in the study of television drama, it is aimed to deconstruct the audio-visual elements that constitute a particular text, such as shots, camera angles, sequences, character perspectives, narrations, dialogues, monologues, natural sound and music. These two aspects of textual interpretation, as a whole, cannot be separated in the analysis of a drama text – their combination offers an appropriate framework to interrogate the relationship of the text and the context.

The method of textual interpretation, as I argue, is of unique importance in the study of television drama in contemporary China. First, as discussed previously, the clashes between the state and the market are inserted into the construction of the television drama text; the Chinese television drama text can thus be seen as a site, where the institutional forces like cultural policy and the textual practices like individual's narrative co-exist. In dealing with the social inscriptions of the historical television drama text, therefore, one needs to unfold the particular social, cultural, political and historical conditions of a given text by textual interpretation.

Second, as the US-based Chinese film scholar Ning Ma (1989) argues in his discussion of Chinese family melodrama of the early 1980s, 'since ancient times, Chinese cultural production has tended toward a fusion of history and fiction with emphasis on didacticism' (*wenyizaidao*) (p83). This cultural production tradition has thus led to the formal quality of the Chinese narrative text that is suggested by Ma as 'the textualization of the context' (*ibid.*). Ma's argument of 'the textualization of the context' in the Chinese narrative text, according to my understanding, is derived from the fact that the authoritative politics in China generates the discursive power relations between the dominant political discourse and the text. Hence, it can be argued that analyzing the textual contradictions of a drama text can result in one's grasp of the socio-political conditions of its context.

I chose three historical television series as my case studies, including *The Bronze Teeth* (*tiechi tongya jixiaolan*) (2000-), *The Great Emperor Hanwu* (*hanwu dadi*) (2005), and *The First Emperor* (*qin shi huang*) (2006). The reasons why I chose them are two-fold. First, they well represent a range from the serious drama to the popular drama, which is considered the most important distinction when it comes to the sub-genre question of the historical television drama. *The First Emperor* largely relies on historical record, presenting itself in a historically realistic style. Although based on historical record in terms of its characters and storyline, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is characterised as a strong melodramatic style. Differently from those two so-called serious dramas, *The Bronze Teeth* is a widely-recognized popular historical series. Second, from a chronological point of view, these dramas reflect the changing nature of the historical television drama; by looking at the continuities and discontinuities of artistic styles and content features of all three, I review and compare the social, cultural and political contexts from which these

dramas emerge.

The second aspect of my cultural genre analysis is based on a two-year long document research. The sources of my document research are diverse both offline and online. First of all, two official reports on China's television drama industry, *Annual Report on the Development of China TV Drama 2005-2006* (Li 2007) and *China's Development of Radio, Film and Television* released by the SARFT in 2009, provide important information on regulatory policy, quantity of production, market share as well as ratings of the historical television drama during a four-year period. Also, I used available internet and print sources to assess the scheduling of the television historical drama over the past ten years as well as in the present in China. At the same time, I used secondary academic/non-academic sources as background knowledge about how the mass media and academia, mainly historians, portray the critics and audiences' responses to these dramas.

The third part of the genre analysis concerns a consideration of the production side of the historical television drama. According to my original research plan, I planned to interview at least one senior production member of each one of my case studies. Hard as I tried to contact them through my personal network, I only managed to interview one person who is directly related to my cases: Mr. Shucheng Chou, the executive producer of *The Bronze Teeth*. I conducted a one-hour sit-down interview with him in March 2008 during the period of my field work in Beijing. It was not until I started my field work in October 2006 that I realized that nearly all of the production people I planned to interview were busy with their shooting projects and would be unable to take any non-press interviews until six months later, so I decided to approach other television professionals. The other industry interview I undertook was a one-hour long one by telephone in December 2007 with Mr. Le Fu, a senior executive producer at the Drama Unit of Hunan Television, a provincial television production organization. Although he was not involved in any one of my cases, he offers me invaluable insight into how the industry defines the historical television drama.

4.3.2 Focus group

Having introduced the genre analysis, I shall move on to the audience research. My fieldwork audience research was conducted from late September 2007 till early April 2008; as planned, it was carried out in two urban settings in China, the city of Beijing and that of

Changsha. Ten focus groups including two pilot ones were conducted involving 53 respondents in total ranging from 4 to 6 persons in each group. Six focus groups including the pilot ones were done in Beijing, all with mixed gender and among two age groups, young adult and the middle-aged. The remaining four groups using the same recruitment criteria were conducted in Changsha. The detailed focus group features are stated in the table below.

Table 1:

| Beijing | Changsha |
|--|--|
| Young Adult 1 (three males, one female) | Young Adult 1 (two males , three females) |
| Young Adult 2 (two males, three females) | Young Adult 2 (three males , three females) |
| Middle-aged Adult 1 (two males, two females) | Middle-aged Adult 1 (three males, three females) |
| Middle-aged Adult 2 (three males, three females) | Middle-aged Adult 2 (three males, two females) |

* Two pilot focus groups involving 12 respondents are not stated here

The focus group method is probably the most frequently used in qualitative audience research. It involves collecting a group, or more often, a series of groups of people together to discuss an issue in the presence of a moderator. For the American sociologist Robert Merton (1956), a pioneer in the use of focus groups, the purpose of the focus group is to generate new research questions and hypotheses to be tested using quantitative methods. On the contrary, many recent media scholars see the method as simulating ethnographic processes of talk and argumentation (e.g. Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Morley, 1980; Philo, 1993). Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone, in their article on the focus group written in 1996, have argued against some of the views of Merton by suggesting that ‘in contemporary research practice the focus group is regarded as a simulation of various aspects of social communication’ (p79). As they rightly point out, the focus group has an autonomy from quantitative methods unanticipated by Merton, although undoubtedly research can only benefit from a triangulated approach. It can be seen that the focus group as a research method has gone through different periods in history, from being used first

for critical, then mainstream, and now, again critical research.

However, although the use of focus groups as a research method for critical media studies is recognized, the recruitment criteria for focus group research remains debatable; it may vary according to different research projects and questions. The reason that I selected two cities is because these two cities represent two major types of social and political situation in China; Beijing is the capital and one of the most developed cities in China, whereas Changsha is a local region and fast-developing one. Because the adults (18-39) and middle-aged adults (40-55) are considered as the two major groups of target audiences of the television historical drama, my focus groups were conducted with those who define themselves as regular viewers. Here, choosing 'regular viewers' as focus group respondents is a methodological decision; it is based on an emphasis on an affective textual consumption in contemporary television audience studies.

Annette Hill, for example, in her work *Restyling Factuality* (2007), conducts a series of comparative reception studies of news, documentary and reality genres in Britain and Sweden. Unlike traditional cultural studies audience research, Hill and her colleagues adopt both quantitative (national survey) and qualitative (semi-structured focus groups) methods for the project. In terms of her use of focus groups, there are two main characteristics that are worth special attention. First, the focus groups that she and her colleagues conducted in both countries are all mixed gender. Second, instead of choosing those who express extreme like or dislike towards reality genres, they recruited the people who defined themselves as regular viewers of the programmes. The selection of the respondents for Hill's project, in my opinion, re-emphasises ordinary viewers' engagement with reality television; by choosing those viewers who do view a broad genre, but not with any intense involvement, the researchers try to find a different type of textuality – not through gazing at or immersion in a particular text, but through a fragmented and distracted textual consumption.

It is under the influence of this wave of 'regular' audience studies that I conducted my focus group research. As for the recruitment, I took a snow-balling approach in both of the cities, but I encountered different recruiting problems. While I was doing research in Beijing from late September to late December 2007, I had to accept the fact that it was not an easy task to gather together four to six people who are strangers to each other at one

time from different parts of a big city like Beijing. I had two research assistants helping me with recruiting suitable respondents. Three of us would have a meeting once a week keeping each other updated about the ‘fresh people’ we found and discussing possible times and locations convenient for all the respondents in a particular group. My research in Changsha was done between early January and late March 2008. Compared to that in Beijing, the recruitment in Changsha turned out to be less difficult but needed more selection. This is due to the fact that Changsha is a much smaller city, so there is greater risk of getting over-homogeneous audience samples. Therefore, I had to be cautious in selecting respondents for each group.

As far as the pattern of focus groups is concerned, it remains the same for all the groups. First, each respondent would be asked to fill in a questionnaire concerning his or her personal information and daily viewing preferences. Second, a group discussion, which lasts for at least one and a half hours, would take place; the discussion is centred around four questions detailed below:

1. How do you define the historical television drama?
2. How do you deal with the relationship between ‘history’ and ‘drama’ in the sample historical television drama texts?
3. What do you think of the quality of the Chinese historical television drama?
4. How do you associate the contents of the historical television drama with contemporary Chinese society?

In order to help the respondents to answer these questions, three clips would be shown in the middle of the discussion. All of the clips are taken from the three historical television dramas that I use as case studies. The first clip is a family gathering scene from *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, where the Queen mother of the Emperor Wu tries to persuade the Emperor himself into making his brother his successor; because the Emperor distrusts his brother, he showed his disagreement and thus argued with his mother. The second clip is from *The Bronze Teeth I*; it is a gift presentation ceremony at the birthday party for the Queen mother of the Emperor Qianlong, where one of the protagonists, Xiaolan Ji, an official with great integrity, plays a practical joke on Shen He, a notoriously corrupt official in the Qianlong Period. The third one is the scene of Jing Ke’s attempted assassination of

the Emperor Qin from *The First Emperor*. According to China's mainstream official historical interpretation, Jing is widely known as a historical symbol for loyalty and bravery for his attempt to assassinate Emperor Qin in order to protect his own country of Yan from being invaded and unified by the Kingdom of Qin. It is also worth noting two important reasons for choosing this particular scene: on the one hand, the story of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the Emperor Qin is one of the most well-known events of ancient Chinese history, which has been adapted into quite a few television and film works; on the other hand, *The First Emperor* was being repeatedly broadcast on Chinese television during the time of my field work. Due to these two reasons, I argue that the respondent would find it easy to take the scene as a reference point to touch upon relevant issues. I shall introduce these three case-study drama texts in some detail in my cultural genre analysis of contemporary Chinese historical dramas later in Chapter 5. Finally, all the focus groups were recorded with the respondents' permission; in case of technical glitches, I used two audio recorders.

4.3.3 In-depth interviews

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Jonathan Gray (2003), in his work on the viewers of *The Simpsons*, finds that many of the anti-fans and non-fans can also provide a lengthy and impressive in-depth analysis of the cartoon. He therefore proposes that 'we must look to anti-fans and non-fans as well, and study how the text changes as it meets different audiences and viewing environments' (ibid. p79). He argues that this way represents the future of audience research. Inspired by Gray's concept of fan/anti-fan, while the focus group was being conducted, I had 11 sit-down in-depth interviews with those individuals who expressed relatively extreme like or dislike about the historical television drama. Differently from the focus groups dealing with 'regular viewers', in-depth interviews shifted my attention to those who claim to be fans and anti-fans. The table below shows their features:

Table 2:

| | Beijing | Changsha |
|------------------|--|--|
| fans | three males (two young, one middle-aged) and two young females | two males (one young adult, one middle-aged) and two middle-aged females |
| anti-fans | One middle-aged female | one middle-aged female |

In-depth interview participants would also be asked to fill in the same questionnaire as the one used in the focus groups. Each one of them, on average, lasted for one hour; it took an open-structured form. All the in-depth interviews were recorded as well.

4.4 Data analysis

The accomplishment of focus groups and in-depth interviews was by no means the end of my research practice. Ien Ang (1996), in her book *Living room wars: rethinking media audience for a postmodern world*, reminds us that:

The collection of data, either quantitative or qualitative in form, can never be separated from its interpretation; it is only through practices of interpretive theorizing that unruly social experiences and events related to media consumption become established as meaningful ‘facts’ about audiences. Understanding ‘audience activity’ is thus caught up in the discursive representation, not the transparent reflection, of diverse realities pertaining to people’s engagements with media (Ang, 1996, p45-p46).

By differentiating ‘the discursive representation’ from ‘the transparent reflection’, in my understanding, Ang argues for a discursive turn in an interpretation of audience research data; she brings to the fore the position of reflexivity in contemporary audience research.

As far as my research is concerned, it has to involve two levels of reflexivity in the process of data analysis. The first level, which is also the technical level, deals with the research data itself. As the subject of my research mainly concerns the audiences’ response, the data

drawn from the cultural genre analysis needs to be used in alignment with that from the focus groups and in-depth interviews. It took me two and a half months to fully transcribe all the interviews from May 2008. In dealing with the interview transcription, I chose to make a manual qualitative data analysis. By making a qualitative data analysis, it is my intention to take a different stance from such classic linguistics informed analytical tools as conversational analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998), the ethnography of communication (Hymes 1972), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995). Inspired by the concept of grounded theory (Strauss 1987), however, I analysed the interview transcriptions without setting any agenda in advance. According to Strauss, the methodological thrust of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data can be understood as below:

[It] is toward the development of theory, without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests. So, it is not really a specific method or technique. Rather, it is a style of doing qualitative analysis that includes a number of distinct features, such as theoretical sampling, and certain methodological guidelines, such as the making of constant comparisons and the use of a coding paradigm, to ensure conceptual development and density (Strauss, 1987, p5).

As Chapters 6-8 are devoted to a detailed findings analysis, I shall not go to any length to present any particular theme based on my findings. Rather, it is at least worth noting at this point that, from the interview data, there emerged three important modes of audience response that I need to address here; they provided me with significant clues to further explore the audience's deep engagement with historical television drama.

First, there is the use of analogy. My respondents tend to use all sorts of analogies to describe their understanding of the historical television drama. The following are a few examples:

For me, *The Bronze Teeth* is like a modern TV sit-com in the guise of old costumes (female, aged 24, accountant)

For those who are fans of this kind of historical television drama, they can be really loyal to this kind of thing. When they smell it on television, they don't miss a single episode (male, aged 24, assistant mechanical engineer)

It is true that some serious historical dramas are very slow, but it is not a bad thing. It is just like our lives, slow is good. Our lives are too fast these days (male, aged 45, self-employed)

The use of analogy reflects the respondents' multi-dimensional engagement with the historical television drama; for example, making an analogy between historical drama and life in the last quotation above demonstrates the respondent's social imagination of a better life through his viewing experience.

Second, there is a sense of sureness. When a respondent feels very certain of what he or she says about the historical television drama, he or she is also making a firm value judgment. A couple of examples of this are detailed below:

I do think that there is a lot that we can learn from the historical television drama (female, aged 25, middle school teacher)

Anything that gets broadcast on the CCTV must be politically correct; it can't go against the Central Government (female, aged 24, bank clerk)

By using the terms like 'do think', 'must be' and 'cannot', these two young female audiences express great certainty in whatever they comment on. This sense of sureness deserves in-depth analysis. In the first quote above, for example, this respondent's learning attitude has to be contextualized in different viewing situations. In the second quote, although this female bank clerk does not directly criticize the strict governmental control, her strong tone implies some extent of disapproval and even disappointment, which needs to be analysed.

Third, there is a sense of uncertainty. Here are some examples:

When it comes to the importance of historical accuracy, I think it depends... Sometimes, it doesn't bother me (female, aged 40, bank clerk)

I think this kind of television historical drama may be more attractive to elderly people and those who are interested in politics (male, aged 50, university teacher)

The Bronze Teeth is not quite the same as a serious historical drama; it is between a serious drama and a comedy one (male, aged 48, technician)

These respondents take a quite relaxed attitude towards different generic characteristics of the historical television drama. This relaxed attitude cannot simply be treated as an act of

negligence; rather, in John Corner's words, it should be understood as the audience's 'unwitting affiliation' with historical television, which may contribute to the discursive formation of the genre as a cultural category (Corner 2007b).

The second level of reflexivity is on the use of focus group as a research method in the Chinese context. In an analysis of the interview data, I need to take this issue into consideration, because it is always the unsaid that matters more than what is said. As previously discussed, critical reception analysis, which is commonly used in the field of international media research, is generally absent in Chinese journals (Zhou 2006). Focus groups are therefore, still new to many media scholars, not to mention the general public; for all of my respondents, it was their first time attending a group discussion like this for an academic purpose.

As a matter of fact, for those Chinese people who were born in the 1940s and 1950s, they have been used to attending public meetings organized by their affiliated organizations to listen to and discuss the documents (*wenjian*) issued by various levels of the government; although these 'public meetings' allow people to express their own opinions to a varying degree, their aim is to mobilize the public for particular purposes and thus reach some consensus in the end. Against this backdrop, it would be interesting to see how the Chinese public behave in a focus group discussion.

In general, most of my respondents took a very corporate attitude towards the research; they were quite aware of the fact that what I was doing was a piece of academic research so that what they needed to do was just to answer my questions one by one. However, there were a few unexpected situations that I found myself in but are worth some reflection. In a young adult and a middle-aged adult focus group respectively, a young girl and a middle-aged lady straightforwardly challenged me more than once by asking me why I chose to pursue a Ph.D. abroad working on such a 'popular culture subject like this' as well as 'taking it so seriously'; by asking me this question, they showed much impatience in continuing with the discussion.

It is worth mentioning that the young girl obtained a first degree in Chinese literature and the middle-aged lady is a senior manager in a high-profile private-owned dairy products company. Their impatient attitudes reminded me of American media scholar Ellen Seiter's

article *Making distinction in TV audience research* (1990). In that article, Seiter documents an interview with two middle-class, middle-aged men; rather than cooperating and working with the two interviewers, as had other interviewees in the soap opera project, these two were especially interested, according to Seiter, in showing off their knowledge of television and their superior taste. The acts of those two female respondents in my research were quite similar to what the two middle-class and middle-aged men did in Seiter's research; they tell us that it is only at a certain level of social scale, where you are dealing with people who have a considerable degree of cultural power and self-confidence that your respondents actually confront you in such a straightforward way. More importantly, it also reminds us that a hierarchy of taste does exist in Chinese audiences' response to historical television drama.

Another unexpected situation occurred in a middle-aged focus group held in Changsha. When it came to the third question regarding the quality of historical television drama, the discussion soon turned into a heated debate about all kinds of social problems in contemporary Chinese society. The discussion started drifting away when one male respondent questioned the educational impact of the historical drama on young people; it then sparked much criticism about the status quo of high school education in China. After that, corruption and inequality in Chinese society became the topic. The respondents were so much involved in the discussion that they could not stop talking about 'real' social problems until I began showing them a clip in order to direct the discussion back to my research questions.

From this, it can be seen that deep concerns about social problems in contemporary Chinese society are being increasingly more expressed by the Chinese public; whenever they are offered an opportunity to raise their own concerns, most of them will not hesitate to take it. In this sense, the use of focus groups in researching Chinese society and culture can provide an alternative public space for the Chinese public to have their voices heard; at the same time, it requires researchers be more reflexive about the relationship between the research topic and the social and political discourses it may generate in the focus group.

4.5 Summary

My research project entails a qualitative approach to studying the reception of historical

television drama on Chinese television. As a critical television reception study, it makes an original contribution to two main areas from a methodological point of view. First, it utilizes a cultural genre analysis to critically examine the historical television drama. Unlike traditional genre studies which are characterised as a series of textual and narrative analyses, a cultural genre analysis covers a full range of issues concerning media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts. My research project, in particular, adopts textual interpretation, document analysis, industry interviews as well as audience research to rethink the historical television drama as a cultural genre.

Second, the use of focus groups and in-depth interviews and, more importantly, their recruitment criteria, fill a gap in researching contemporary Chinese audience-hood. It is worth remembering that the use of focus groups needs to be embedded within a particular socio-cultural context; in the case of my research, focus groups can serve as an alternative public space for the Chinese public to express their deep concerns about society, which are not always found in other mass media content.

Also, it needs to be acknowledged that this research project has a few methodological limitations. The biggest one is the size of the audience sample; if I had had been able to recruit more respondents, the research outcomes would have been more scientifically convincing. The second limitation is the limited number of industry interviews, because it was difficult to secure appointments. Finally, the use of computer-assisted data analysis software points to the future of audience research; a combination of manual and computer-assisted data analysis is supposed to enhance a better understanding of audience activity in this increasingly uncertain world.

Chapter 5

Contemporary Chinese Historical Television Drama as a Cultural Genre

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, attention was given to the political and cultural contexts under which the new historical drama emerged in China since the mid-1990s. From the discussion, it was demonstrated that what distinguishes Chinese historical drama since the mid-1990s resides in its vivid narration of contemporary political and social issues in the guise of historical representation. As far as its sub-genres are concerned, the new historical drama mainly includes emperor drama (like *The Last Emperor*), anti-corruption satirical costume drama (like *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister*) and period drama (like *Yongzheng Dynasty*).

Faced with this diversity and complexity, American media scholar Michael Curtin (2005), in his article *From kung fu to imperial court: Chinese historical drama*, defines Chinese historical drama as ‘a stylized genre in which contrived roles and events provide a pretext for reflection upon the usefulness of myth and legend for a modern world’ (p312). Here, there are two important notions in Curtin’s definition. The first one is a stylized genre. In his article, Curtin goes on to explain the ‘style’ of the historical drama in a general sense; that is, ‘such dramas are putatively about the past, but they are also about contemporary concerns’ (ibid.). Second, ‘a pretext for reflection’ also serves as a useful concept. By using this concept, Curtin rightly points out the nature of the historical drama as a corpus of cultural resources; it is through engaging with and reflecting on the roles and events of the past that the Chinese audience is encouraged to make sense of particular historical representations from a contemporary perspective.

Although he defines Chinese historical drama in quite a convincing way, what Curtin fails to question in this article is the category of ‘the historical’ itself. As mentioned previously, ‘the historical’ has become an umbrella term in contemporary China, referring to a full range of television dramas connected with the treatment of history (mainly pre-modern), explorations of key pre-modern events and figures as well as adaptations of classic novels. At the same time, the use of ‘the historical’ as a term is highly unstable. ‘Serious history’ (*zhengshuo lishi*) versus ‘popular history’ (*xishuo lishi*) remains the most common dichotomy made within the Chinese television industry and academia towards this rather

broad genre of 'historical television'. In discussing the global historical television phenomenon, British historian Jerome de Groot suggests that we consider the ways historical television has 'complicated "history" to the point that the "historical" becomes a genre itself to be challenged and subverted' (de Groot, 2009, p181). Back to my own study of Chinese historical drama, the diverse and inconsistent use of 'the historical' prompts the question of how 'the historical' is brought to life through narrating contemporary Chinese political and social issues within the historical drama text. In other words, what needs to be examined is how Chinese historiographical traditions are manifested in the contemporary historical drama's production and consumption processes.

Within this chapter, I will focus on the generic characteristics of the historical drama, but it is worth emphasising at this point that an interrogation of the textual production of the historical television drama paves the way for the reception analysis that this thesis moves on to later. As discussed in the literature review, the paradigm of Chinese audience research has shifted from an Encoding/Decoding model (see Lull 1991) to a reflexive sociological approach that addresses issues concerning the question of cultural citizenship of particular social groups (see Fung 2002b, 2003 & 2009). This paradigmatic shift suggests a crucial trend in conducting critical audience research in contemporary China. That is, moving beyond Lull's use of the Encoding/Decoding model, which was based on the thesis of cultural resistance by the Chinese television audience, we now adopt a more nuanced and multidimensional approach to examine the articulation and disarticulation of contemporary China's authoritarian politics and their interpretation by Chinese audiences. In the case of the historical television drama, first of all, we need to tease out the interpretive possibilities provided by the genre which allow audiences to engage in viewing practices. It is these interpretive possibilities that work to keep the concept of the historical valid for the historical television drama. This chapter therefore intends to undertake a cultural genre analysis to examine the generic characteristics of the historical television drama.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the cultural approach to television genres proposed by Jason Mittell (2004). Inspired by Foucault's historical model of genealogy (see Chapter 2), Mittell argues that television genre is 'a process of categorization'; it is 'not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts' (ibid. xii). Meanwhile, according to him, the categorical rubric, not the textual property of a given genre, should be the primary site and material for

genre analysis. Useful as it may be, Mittell's approach can be problematic in the study of Chinese television culture. The main problem, as I have pointed out, lies in its inheritance of a Foucauldian legacy that regards power as diffused and discursive. This, however, is problematic when addressing the strict state supervision of television production and broadcasting that prevails in China. As Wang (2001) reminds us, unlike modern liberal states and neo-liberal states in Europe and the United States, the Party-state apparatus remains the ultimate power in Chinese cultural production. It would therefore be naïve to directly apply a theory like Mittell's cultural genre approach to the Chinese situation, although this approach is appropriate as applied to the American broadcasting system. As a consequence, because of its theoretical limitations, I shall still use Mittell's approach as an analytical tool to unpack the historical television drama in China, but vigilance is required about how state intervention of all sorts might impact the production, distribution and reception of drama programmes.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section is devoted to briefly introducing three sample drama series including *The Bronze Teeth* (*tiechi tongya jixiaolan*) (2000-), *The Great Emperor Hanwu* (*hanwu dadi*) (2005), and *The First Emperor* (*qin shi huang*) (2006). The storylines and major theatrical features of the series are provided as indicative of contemporary Chinese historical television drama as a whole genre. These sample series will be used as case studies in discussions of the genre issues which arise. Section Two is focused on the Chinese television drama industry. The aim of this section is to look at how the Chinese television drama industry categorizes and evaluates historical drama through its production, regulatory, marketing and scheduling practices. The third section turns to television scholarship on the genre issues of the historical drama. It revisits the relevant work done by four important television scholars in China. Importantly, these television scholars approach the genre issues mainly from a textual perspective. The final section summarises the whole chapter and lays the foundations for the next stage of analysis, which concentrates on audience responses to the historical television drama.

5.2 A brief introduction to three historical dramas

As I have mentioned in Chapter 4, the reasons why I chose the three historical dramas as case studies are two-fold. On the one hand, when it comes to the sub-genre question of historical television drama, they well represent a range from serious drama to popular

drama, which is considered the most important distinction by Chinese popular cultural critics. In general, *The First Emperor* largely relies on historical record, presenting itself in a historically realistic fashion. Although based on historical record in terms of its characters and storyline, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is characterised by its strong melodramatic elements. In contrast to these two serious dramas, *The Bronze Teeth* is a widely-recognized popular historical series. On the other hand, from a chronological point of view, the production and broadcasting of these dramas covers a period of ten years (from 1999 to 2009). This period witnessed great changes in the content and artistic style of the historical television drama. Bearing these points in mind, I shall briefly introduce the three historical dramas in this section in order to provide the necessary background detail.

The Bronze Teeth

Produced by Beijing *Yahuan* Audio-visual Production, a Beijing-based commercial



Figure 1 source: web picture

television company, *The Bronze Teeth* ran for four seasons on Chinese television from its debut on Beijing Television Satellite Channel in 2000. Set in the Qianlong Period (1711-1799) of the Qing Dynasty, *The Bronze Teeth* tells the story of how Emperor Qianlong (played by Tielin Zhang) along with his two closest high officials, the royal literary official Xiaolan Ji (played by Guoli Zhang) and the Minister of Revenue Shen He (played by Gang Wang), deal with political power struggles and corruption within different levels of government.

According to China's prominent historical records, Emperor Qianlong showed his great affection for both Ji and He, although they were known as having conflicting working styles and moral behaviors; Ji is commemorated by most Chinese historians for his honesty, integrity and insistence on legal governance, whereas He is notorious for his greed, ingenuity and playing dirty politics. Therefore, the whole story of *The Bronze Teeth* is centred around melodramatic representation of clashes between Ji and He due to the differences in their political and moral values. Even the title of the series, the bronze teeth (*tong ya*), is used as a metaphor referring to Ji because of his powerful verbal language skills. In every episode there is always a scene where Ji confronts He in a sarcastic way

that serves as the climax.

Unlike those emperor series like *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1997) and *Qianlong Dynasty* (2002), which are adapted from Er Yuehe's historical novels and claim to be based on prominent classic Chinese historical records, notably *the Records of the Qing Period* (*qing shi gao*), *The Bronze Teeth* moves away from official historical records and sets a tone of popular costume drama in general. Although using quite a few real historical figures, it draws on storytelling resources from folklore (*minjian chuanshuo*) and non-official historical documents (*ye shi*). In terms of artistic style, it is characterised as a hybridisation of historical realism, contemporary satire and popular romance. Take the first season of *The Bronze Teeth* (2000) for instance. This 40-episode series consists of five separate stories which feature corruption, abuse of power, political hypocrisy as well as love affairs. Most importantly, all the stories are set at the level of local officials rather than simply in the royal court. With diverse theatrical features including tragedy, comedy and martial arts, they effectively portray a fictional 'public realm' (*min jian*) full of excessive moral struggles.

The Great Emperor Hanwu



Figure 2 source: web picture

Compared to popular television series like *The Bronze Teeth*, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is typical of an epic production on contemporary Chinese television. This 58-part television drama was co-produced by China Central Television (CCTV) and China Film Group Corporation (CFG), which are China's largest state-owned media organizations in the sectors of television and film respectively. Apart from the CCTV and the CFG, four private-owned media production companies also co-funded *The Great Emperor Hanwu*; they include Century Hero Film Investment Company Ltd., Beijing Hualu Baina Film and Television Production Company Ltd., Shanghai Jinde Film Company and Xintian International Group Corporation. With a huge cast of more than 1,700 characters, this epic drama series represents a 54-year period of the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) under the reign of Emperor Wu, who was the seventh Han emperor

from 141 BC to 87 BC.

According to China's mainstream interpretation of ancient Chinese history, it is due to the wise leadership of Emperor Wu that China under the Han Dynasty became the most powerful country in the world at the time. It is widely acknowledged that Wu accomplished two important political achievements when he was in power. On the one hand, he successfully strengthened centralized state power by cracking down on local separatist movements as well as defeating the *Xiongnu* people's²⁰ invasion of China. On the other hand, in the process of attacking the royal family's abuse of power and governmental corruption, he played the decisive role in the implementation of Confucianism as the state political philosophy in pre-modern China. Based on these two achievements the series *The Great Emperor Hanwu* offers a dramatic portrayal of events in the Han Dynasty under Wu's reign.

The Great Emperor Hanwu has three main theatrical characteristics. First, it re-emphasises a historically realist style in representing important historical events. In an interview in 2006 (Meng 2006), Mei Hu, the director of the series, says that what she intended to achieve with *The Great Emperor Hanwu* was not simply, as most of the previous emperor dramas did, to put the political power struggle within the imperial court on the television screen. More importantly, in order to better demonstrate the glorious military power of the Emperor Wu period, she insisted on recreating prominent battle scenes between the Han and the *Xiongnu* armies in a spectacular way through a combination of actual shooting and digital visual effects. Therefore, unlike the previous emperor dramas, which are mostly shot indoors, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* has almost the same number of outdoor scenes involving battles as indoor ones. Second, although it to a large extent maintains a realist mode of storytelling, the series also contain strong melodramatic elements. These melodramatic elements are mainly used to represent the characters' inner conflicts caused by all sorts of ethical dilemmas.

²⁰ The *Xiongnu* were ancient nomadic-based people that formed a state or confederation north of the agriculture-based empire of the Han Dynasty. Chinese sources from the 3rd century BC report them as having created an empire under *Modu Chanyu*, the supreme leader after 209 BC. The identity of the ethnic core of *Xiongnu* has been a subject of varied hypotheses, because only a few words, mainly titles and personal names, were preserved in the Chinese sources. The name *Xiongnu* may be cognate to the name *Huns*, but the evidence for this is controversial. This empire stretched beyond the borders of modern day Mongolia. Relations between early Chinese dynasties and the *Xiongnu* were complex, with repeated periods of military conflict and intrigue alternating with exchanges of tribute, trade, and marriage treaties.

At this point, it is worth saying a few words to differentiate the notion of melodrama in Europe from that in China. Christine Geraghty (2006), in her discussion of British soap opera *Eastenders*, proposes that there has been a shift from traditional realist modes to melodramatic modes in the storylines of *Eastenders* over the last few years. By referring to Zygmunt Bauman's book (2002) on risk society, Geraghty (2006) argues that 'the turn to melodrama (of *Eastenders*) can be understood as a way of trying to fill the vacuum created by the instabilities and lack of trust (in British society) that Bauman describes' (p226). However, in his discussion on Taiwanese film director Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet*²¹, Chris Berry (2003) points out that, in the Chinese language, the European notion of melodrama was translated as *wenyipian* that literally means 'literature and art film' because of many similar dramaturgical characteristics between them.

Using the family melodrama as an example, he further argues, the distinction between the European family melodrama and the Chinese family-morality drama (*jiating lunli ju*) is apparent; it 'produces a tension between two different models of secular subjectivity, one based on psychology and its expression and the other based on ethically defined social and kinship roles' (Berry, 2003, p186). In addition, as I have noted previously, Chinese government strictly censors the themes of China's television drama productions. Thus, Chinese television dramas are doomed to send positive, political messages to the general public. Unlike the melodramas in European countries, therefore, contemporary Chinese television drama is not merely a popular television genre. More importantly, it is burdened with political agendas. For example, the relationship between Emperor Wu and his mother is depicted as a major conflict in the series. Emperor Wu needs to be wary of the Queen Mother's constant intervention in his political decisions and at the same time shows her great care and respect.

Third, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* adopts a cast comprised of celebrity actors and actresses from the Greater China region. For instance, Huang Jiao and Baoguo Chen, both of whom are popular mainland Chinese actors for their performances as emperor figures in previous dynasty dramas, also play two important roles in the series; Jiao plays Emperor Jing (188 BC – 141 BC), the father of Emperor Wu and Chen plays Emperor Wu. Meanwhile, in

²¹ *The Wedding Banquet*, directed by Ang Lee, is a 1993 film about a gay Taiwanese immigrant man in the United States who marries a mainland Chinese woman to placate his parents and get her a green card. His plan backfires when his parents arrive in the U.S. to plan his wedding banquet.

order to attract audiences from Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as the attention of television drama buyers in those two regions, the series includes three non-mainland Chinese television stars. Ray Lui, a well-known Hong Kong actor, plays Qing Wei, one of the greatest generals of the Han period. Ya-Lei Kuei, an award-winning Taiwanese actress, plays the Queen Mother. Shih Chang, also from Taiwan, took the role of Fen Tian, the uncle of Emperor Wu.

The First Emperor



Figure 3 source: web picture

Similar to *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, *The First Emperor* is another epic television series produced by the CCTV. It is based on the story of Zheng Ying, the founder as well as the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (221BC – 207 BC). Although it only lasted for 15 years, the Qin dynasty was the first unified Han-Chinese state and it marked the beginning of more than two thousand years of Chinese ancient history. Because of that, Chinese historians often call Zheng Ying the First Emperor (*shi huangdi*). Within China's mainstream history text books in the post-Mao era, the First Emperor is in general portrayed as a heroic but controversial historical figure.

On the one hand, it was under his strong leadership that the Kingdom of Qin took ten years to unify the other six Han-Chinese kingdoms at the time and thereafter became the first Chinese empire in 221 BC. For the first time in Chinese history, a centralized administrative system was introduced by the First Emperor to govern the entire country. The country was divided into 36 counties (*jun*) and a county consisted of a certain number of towns (*xian*). The officials of both counties and towns were directly appointed by the Emperor himself. At the same time, it was also under his supervision that laws were passed to ensure the standard use of the Chinese language system and Chinese unit of measurement across the country.

On the other hand, the First Emperor is always criticised for his cruel dictatorship by Chinese historians. In building up his private palace as well as his own magnificent tomb, for example, he is said to have forced more than 700,000 ordinary men together with prisoners to work on the palace and the tomb as a form of unpaid national service. Also,

the First Emperor notoriously ordered most existing books to be burned with the exception of those on astrology, agriculture, medicine, divination and the history of the Qin dynasty. What is more, as he refused to take advice from Confucian scholars on the practice of moral governance, the Emperor even had more than four hundreds scholars buried alive for owning forbidden books.²² The First Emperor's immoral rule finally led to a massive peasants' rebellion organized by Sheng Chen and Guang Wu one year after he died. The rebellion resulted in the collapse of Qin dynasty in 207 BC.

Like other epic emperor dramas, this 36-part series narrates all the important events in the life of the First Emperor. It was filmed between 1999 and 2000 and was first released in 2001 in Hong Kong and Thailand, and in 2002 in Singapore. However, it was not approved for broadcast on mainland Chinese television because it had to endure censorship from the CCTV's Drama Unit. The initial version of the series had 32 episodes and two main adaptation issues were raised by the Drama Unit. First, the historians of the Drama Unit cast doubt on the way that the controversy surrounding the birth of the First Emperor was dealt with in the series. There have long been historical questions among Chinese academics about who were the birth parents of the Emperor. Yet the original television series seems to have treated this in an over-straightforward manner. Second, in the original version, the love affair between the First Emperor and a princess named *A Nuo* constituted an important part of the drama content. Interestingly enough, the love affair was judged to be over-emphasised and thus unacceptable by the Drama Unit. This section was re-edited and the series was not allowed to be shown on CCTV until 2006, five years after it had appeared in Hong Kong and Thailand.

Having briefly introduced the three case-study historical dramas, I shall next move on to take the second step of my cultural genre analysis looking at the Chinese television drama industry. The practice of categorization and evaluation of historical drama by the television industry can provide an important starting point for the audience to make sense of the genre.

²² According to China's well-known *Records of the Grand Historian (shi ji)*, after the Emperor unified China in 221 BC, his chancellor Li Si suggested that he suppress the intellectual discourse to unify all thoughts and political opinions. This was justified by accusations that the intelligentsia sang false praise and raised dissent through libel. Beginning in 213 BC, all classic works of the Hundred Schools of Thought (*zhuzi baijia sixiang*) — except those from Li Si's own school of philosophy known as legalism (*fa jia*) — were subject to book burning. The Emperor burned the other histories out of fear that they undermined his legitimacy, and wrote his own history books. Afterwards, Li Si took his place in this area.

5.3 Television industry

Based on my document analysis and industry interviews, I will divide the evolution of Chinese historical drama into three stages: 1984-1992, 1992-2004, and 2004 to the present. At each stage, the meaning of ‘the historical’ has been conditioned by certain literary, production, scheduling and regulatory circumstances. The phase between 1984 and 1992 not only witnessed Chinese television industry’s recovery from the Cultural Revolution. Chinese television drama also started to become more mature and diverse in terms of content and style during this period. It is between 1984 and 1989 that historical drama appeared as a new genre on Chinese television in greater numbers. The prominent examples are *the Dream of the Red Chamber* (*hong lou meng*, 1986), *Strange Tales of A Lonely Studio*²³ (*liao zhai zhi yi*, 1986), *Journey to the West* (*xi you ji*, 1987), and *The Last Emperor* (*modai huang di*, 1988). Most of these dramas were based on popular literary work, so the term ‘literary adaptation’ (*wen xue gaibian*) was often used referring to historical drama by the television drama directors at the time (see Li & Xiao 2006).

According to Chinese television historical drama researcher Liwen Liu (2004), these literary adaptations produced in mainland China fell into three categories: classic ancient Chinese novels (*zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo*, like *the Dream of the Red Chamber*), ancient legendary folklores (*minjian shenhua chuanshuo*, like *Strange Tales of A Lonely Studio*) and contemporary historical novels (*dangdai lishi xiaoshuo*, like *The Last Emperor*). Apart from their literary origins, these dramas have two other characteristics that are worth special attention. First, they were all produced by the state-owned television studios, mainly those affiliated to CCTV or provincial television stations. Under the strict supervision of China’s Central Ministry of Propaganda (*zhong xuan bu*), Chinese television dramatists were required to dogmatically follow the so-called Marxist literary and artistic principles (*makesi zhuyi wenyiguan*), which basically advocated that artists and writers

²³ *Strange Tales of A Lonely Studio*, authored by the Qing Dynasty Chinese writer Songling Pu (1640-1715), is a collection of nearly five hundred mostly supernatural tales written in Classical Chinese during the early Qing Dynasty. Pu borrowed from a folk tradition of oral storytelling to put to paper a series of captivating, colorful stories, where the boundary between reality and the odd or fantastic is blurred. The cast of characters include magical foxes, ghosts, scholars, court officials, Taoist exorcists and beasts. Moral purposes are often inverted between humans and the supposedly degenerate ghosts or spirits, resulting in a satirical edge to some of the stories. Ghosts and spirits are often bold and trustworthy, while humans are on the other hand weak, indecisive and easily manipulated, reflecting the author’s own disillusionment with his society. The stories differ broadly in length. Conciseness is the key, with the shortest stories under a page in length.

serve the people and the socialist system, adopting a social realism style in their work. In this political climate, as Chinese media critics Li and Xiao comment (2006), Chinese television dramatists throughout the 1980s ‘treated the historical or literary subjects in a relatively serious manner compared to those in the 1990s’ (p23).

This ‘seriousness’, in my understanding, well reflected the dramatists’ ideological and rhetorical burdens that were imposed by the central authority at the time. Meanwhile, the ‘seriousness’ effectively set a ‘quality’ standard for the historical drama. This quality standard can be characterised as a strong combination of literary accuracy and moral instruction. Second, as well as the inherited Chinese literary tradition, these productions were also influenced by productions from abroad, notably in their adoption of the serial format. For instance, *the Dream of the Red Chamber* has 36 episodes and *The Last Emperor* 28 episodes, with each episode running for about 45 minutes. What is more, most of these dramas debuted on the CCTV-1, the most watched television channel in the country, in the evening slot between 8pm and 8:45pm, which became China’s daily national television prime time throughout the 1980s until the present. From all that, one can say that historical drama on Chinese television in the 1980s performed a dual cultural function: promoting national literary heritage on the one hand, and providing mass entertainment on the other.

In the second stage between 1992 and 2004, Chinese historical drama experienced enormous transformation in both its content and its sub-genres. Most importantly, the dichotomy between ‘serious drama’ (*zheng ju*) and ‘popular drama’ (*xishuo ju*) emerged in the public discussion about historical drama in the mid-1990s. Taiwanese television culture and the ongoing commercialization of Chinese television worked together to generate and reinforce this dichotomy.

With regards to the influence of Taiwanese television culture, Curtin (2005, 2007) revisits this important political and cultural change which had much impact on contemporary Taiwanese and Chinese television culture. According to him (2005), ‘as martial law began to wither and new media outlets began to flourish’, reformers within the Taiwanese ruling *Kuomintang* (KMT) decided to loosen their control of China Television (CTV), one of three state-controlled television stations in Taiwan; the others being China Television System (CTS) and Taiwan Television System (TTS) controlled by the military and the

provincial government respectively (p297). KMT's decision to relax its control was made in response to a growing multiplicity of cable television channels and increased competition in the Taiwanese commercial television market. The KMT's reformers believed that cutting off the explicit ties between CTV and the party would better realize CTV's commercial objectives as well as making it more attractive as a public stock offering. At the same time, in order for the station not to fall into the hands of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the KMT installed managers who were sympathetic to the KMT at CTV. CTV transformed itself from the KMT's propaganda machine to a market-oriented business, although its core identity still revolved round 'its distinctive association with Chinese arts and culture' (Curtin, 2005, p298). It needs to be made clear here that CTV's strong Chinese identity is to a large extent determined by CTV's spiritual resonance with the KMT, which has always been controversially in favor of imagining a 'Greater China' (*dazhongguo xiangxiang*).

Under these circumstances, CTV started to devote itself to producing costume drama (*guzhuangju*) for audiences in the Greater China region from the early 1990s. CTV's production of costume drama served as a historic starting point for frequent collaboration between Taiwanese and Chinese television producers after almost 40 years of military stand-off across the Straits. The 42-part *Tales of Emperor Qianlong* (*xishuo qianlong*), co-produced by Taiwan's Flying Dragon Film Production and China's Beijing Film Studio, was the first pioneering series. Based on the well-known historical tale about the Qing Emperor Qianlong's visit to South China, it tells a story of the Emperor's wish to pursue freedom and true love. The serial made its first appearance on CTV in the prime time slot of 8pm to 9pm on weekdays between May and July in 1991. One year later in 1992, it got shown on most of China's cable television channels as well. In my view, the rise of the costume drama represented by *Tales* can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, as Curtin rightly observes, it came as a result of Taiwanese television producers 'seeking alliance outside of the island in order to respond to local market pressures' (ibid. p.311). On the other hand, it suggested to television producers on either side of the Straits that despite the fact that there exists intense ideological tension between contemporary Chinese and Taiwanese politicians, pre-modern Chinese history provides them with much less sensitive and culturally specific artistic inspiration.

For television dramatists in China, the success of *Tales* introduced them to the whole idea

of ‘popular historical drama’ (*xishuo lishi ju*). For a proper understanding of this broad term ‘popular historical drama’ in the Chinese context, I need to elaborate. Starting from *Tales of Emperor Qianlong*, *Xishuo* drama gradually came to be recognized by Chinese television dramatists as a distinctive television genre. Not based on official historical records but popular historical tales, a *xishuo* serial tends to address such issues as corruption, romance, tradition and identity using historical events and characters. Heavily influenced by *Tales*, a wave of popular historical dramas thus emerged in China and saturated prime time provincial television schedules in the mid-1990s. In Chapter 3, I have mentioned the 40-episode *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister* (*zaixiang liuluoguo*), which was produced and distributed by Shanghai Hairun Film and Television Production in 1996. It is widely documented as the earliest domestically produced popular (or *xishuo*) historical drama that enjoyed massive popularity (see Li and Xiao 2006). *The Bronze Teeth*, one of my case-study historical serials, serves as a more recent example of the *xishuo* genre.

At the same time, traditional ‘literary adaptation’ genres that emerged in the 1980s continued to develop. For one thing, many classic ancient Chinese novels, for example, *The Tales of Three Kingdoms* (*sanguo yanyi*), which was first turned into television drama in the 1980s, got re-made by the state-owned television studios, mainly by CCTV. The introduction of new set designs and new casts to the classic literary adaptations attracted audiences of all ages both in China and beyond. For another, as I have discussed in Chapter 3, the Qing emperor serials emerged. The most prominent examples have to be the novelist Er Yuehe’s biographical novels of three Qing dynasty emperors (see Chapter 3). Similar to the popular historical drama, the emperor serials use the past to mirror the present and draw upon the past to satirize the present. However, the fact that they claim to be based on official historical records differentiates them from the popular serials.

Ever since Er Yuehe’s Qing emperor drama was a huge success on Chinese television in the mid-1990s, the term ‘serious drama’ or ‘correct drama’ has been adopted by industry professionals. Le Fu, a senior television drama producer from the Drama Unit of Hunan Television, comments on the use of the term in my interview with him. He says that although China’s television dramatists still use terms like costume drama, period drama or emperor drama to specify a certain historical serial depending on its content and style, ‘serious drama versus popular drama has served as the threshold showing to what extent a certain historical drama concerns real history since the late 1990s’ (December 2007). ‘Real

history' is an interesting notion here. From this, it can be seen that the way of representing 'the historical' has become key in evaluating historical drama within the television industry since the mid-1990s. In other words, not until almost two decades after historical drama appeared on Chinese television did China's television industry professionals start to rethink the legitimacy question of 'the historical' as a cultural category in such a straightforward manner. This legitimacy question reflects the changing political and cultural value of Chinese historical drama. It eventually led to deep controversy and further hybridisation of the historical drama from 2004 to the present.

It is worth noting that, for the Chinese audience, the biggest attraction of Er Yuehe's Qing emperor series lies in its Chinese historiographical traditions which have been inherited from literary and artistic work. The series drew upon historical allegories and historical rewritings to explore the history and power relations of contemporary Chinese society. This televised practice of re-writing history reached a climax in spring 2003 when the incident of *Towards the Republic* happened. *Towards the Republic* (*Zouxiang Gonghe*), was a Chinese historical television series first broadcast on CCTV from April to May 2003. The series is based on events that occurred in China between the late 19th century and the early 20th century that led to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China. The series reinterpreted aspects of the historical events and actors involved. Therefore, its airing immediately resulted in heated public discussions in the media as well as in the internet. Due to its portrayal of historical issues deemed politically sensitive by Chinese government, the series was subject to censorship in mainland China. Some installments had to be edited, and its planned repeated airing in provincial television channels was cancelled.

In a general sense, the restrictions that *Towards the Republic* faced in the end were primarily due to the reason that, as German sinologist Muller (2007) states, the serial's historical interpretation 'did not accord with the widely-held official one supported by the government' (p3). Up to this point, I would like to propose that, unlike the seriousness embedded in the 1980s television literary adaptations, which wrestled with a combination of literary accuracy and moral instruction, the seriousness of the 2000s historical drama is imbued with eagerness to criticize contemporary political and social problems using historical memories and reflection.

Not surprisingly, the popularity of this televised re-writing of history soon attracted the attention of the Chinese authorities, the incident of *Towards the Republic* being an obvious sign. In 2004, the SARFT issued its 40th regulatory policy of the year on the censorship of television drama attached with a document entitled ‘Concerning the Adjustment of Censorship Procedure for Proposals and Final Versions of Film and Television Drama on Very Important Revolutionary and Historical Subjects’.²⁴ According to the policy and the document, film and television producers must have approval from a special committee within the Central Ministry of Propaganda, rather than simply the SARFT itself, if they wish to deal with prominent events and figures from both ancient and modern Chinese history.

The stricter censorship of historical drama since 2004 resulted in less and less mentions of the old dichotomy between serious and popular drama within Chinese popular press. I suggest that there are three main reasons behind this change of television culture. First of all, restrained by the SARFT’s 40th Regulatory Policy in 2004, Chinese television dramatists became more cautious in dealing with serious historical events and figures. The forced re-editing of *the First Emperor* by CCTV’s Drama Unit as discussed previously taught them a lesson.

Second, moving away from the controversial Qing dynasty, China’s veteran television dramatists re-emphasised the role of the historical drama in promoting Chinese culture and philosophy. *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is a case in point. As introduced earlier in this chapter, it tells a story of how Confucianism was established as China’s state political philosophy by Emperor Wu.

Last but not the least, increasingly more popular historical dramas are also devoted to promoting different aspects of traditional Chinese culture and societies. They have started to touch upon such issues as commerce, medicine and the legislative system in different periods of pre-modern China. Interestingly enough, the meaning of ‘being Chinese’ has again been addressed within more recent Chinese historical dramas. Echoing the Harvard professor Wei-ming Tu’s influential essay *Cultural China: the Periphery as the Centre* published in 1991, which I mentioned in Chapter 3, Chinese historical drama, as an

²⁴ 《电视剧审查管理规定（广电总局 2004 年第 40 号令）》以及《关于调整重大革命和历史题材电影、电视剧立项及完成片审查办法的通知》

important part of Chinese cultural industry, seems to be an unfinished project for modern Chinese identity formation.

Next, I shall move on to examine how prominent media scholars of Chinese television are critically engaging with historical drama as a genre.

5.4 Television scholars

When it comes to academic criticism of Chinese historical drama, although quite a few important scholars of Chinese media (some of whom are of Chinese origin) are based in North America and Australia, many more active ones come from mainland China (e.g. Li and Xiao, 2006; Wang, 2008; Yin, 2001, 2002, 2009; Zeng 2000, 2002). These mainland Chinese media scholars are under the dual influence of the domestic academic disciplinary tradition and Western-originated media and social theories. Unlike media work in Britain, for example, media studies, particularly television criticism in China, is not grounded in a tradition of sociology and political science; it is always theoretically-based, suspicious of statistical empiricism and obsessed with textual analysis of meaning and value. Looking back at influential criticism of television drama within China's academic circle in the past two decades, I should, first of all, mention the important debates between Beijing-based media scholars Qingrui Zeng and Hong Yin in the early 2000s.²⁵

Drawing on quite different cultural and political scenarios, these two scholars put forward a series of interesting questions concerning the innovation and commercialization of Chinese television. With the aim of evaluating the impact of Economic Reform on the Chinese television drama industry in the 1990s, Zeng published a two-part article titled '*In the defense of spiritual value in television drama: a review on conflicting television drama culture in the 1990s*' in 2000. In the article, he gives a full account of the development of the Chinese television drama industry since the early 1990s. He defines the nature of Chinese television drama in the 1990s as the interplay between mass culture, official culture and elite culture. For him, the rise of mass culture (*dazhong wenhua*) came as a result of the commercial management of the Chinese cultural industry. Official culture (*guanfang wenhua*), promoted and sustained by Chinese government, serves as a

²⁵ Zeng is professor of film and television arts at Communication University of China, Beijing. Yin is professor of communication arts at Tsinghua University, Beijing.

mainstream ideology embedded in media representation. The formation of elite culture (*jingying wenhua*), according to Zeng (2000a), is attributable to ‘those Chinese intellectuals who are always in the pursuit of enlightenment and artistic creation’ (p70).

From the article, one can easily tell that it is from the position of elite culture that Zeng expresses deep worry over the commercialization of Chinese television drama. Examining the emergence of popular historical drama on Chinese television, for example, the popularity of *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister*, he credits its success to the triumph of western-imported television consumerism in China. Instead of categorizing television drama like *Hunchback Liu* as either serious or popular, Zeng simply considers it to be slapstick television. Towards the end of the article, Zeng, in a rather abstract way, makes twelve observations on the challenges to Chinese television drama posed by the commercialization of Chinese television. His main concern lies in the crisis of Chinese national culture (*minzu wenhua*) in an age of cultural globalisation.

One year later in 2001, two journal articles on the subject of Chinese television drama written by Hong Yin appeared. In his first article, Yin (2001a) adopts what he calls ‘a political economy analysis’ of the development of the Chinese television drama industry since the early 1990s. He points out that the commercialization and de-regulation of the Chinese television industry led to a boom in television content in China. According to Yin, although the Chinese television industry is still subordinated to strict governmental supervision, it is through this ‘semi-marketization’ (*zhun shichanghua*) status that Chinese television transformed itself and became integrated into regional and global television programme exchanges.

In the second article entitled ‘*Cultural strategies of Chinese television drama*’, Yin (2001b) begins with a criticism of Zeng’s elitist position on contemporary Chinese television drama. He writes that Zeng takes ‘a culturally conservative attitude’ towards the marketization of Chinese television and this cultural conservatism remains widely shared by many other elitist Chinese intellectuals who are ‘opposed to marketization of China’s television communication in a radical way’ (ibid. p21). Taking a somewhat Foucauldian perspective, Yin positions his own understanding of cultural strategies in Chinese television drama into a site of ideological negotiation and compromise involving the government, commercial television organizations and the intellectual. That is also what he believes to be the current

situation of the Chinese television drama industry. In order to illustrate this point, Yin uses the rise of new historical television drama since the mid-1990s as a case study. He claims that ‘the appearance of many historical dramas in recent years is an evitable result of the conflicts within television culture’ (ibid. p22).

He goes on to explain that ‘History’ is distanced from all the sensitive conflicts and political power struggles of contemporary China, so ‘it provides a rich selection of resources and a more open narrative space’ (ibid.). As far as the evolution of the historical drama is concerned, Yin views it as a result of various cultural, social and economic forces combined. According to him, costume drama like *the Tales of Emperor Qianlong* had no intention of exploring ‘contemporary China’s political and power struggle in reality’; it simply offered the Chinese public ‘pure entertainment in the disguise of historical representation’ (ibid. p23). In contrast, historical dramas like *the Great Emperor Hanwu*, while adopting diverse theatrical styles, have inherited Chinese intellectuals’ historiographical tradition; it not only ‘recalled history, but also simulated history’ and ‘provided intellectuals with a means of expression and certain rhetorical strategies’ (ibid. p24). From this, it can be seen that, in Yin’s opinion, the dichotomy between ‘the serious drama’ and ‘the popular drama’ is formulated within Chinese-style cultural market logic, which can be characterised as the co-existence of socialist legacies and neoliberal strategies.

Unsurprisingly, Zeng strongly disagrees with Yin’s optimistic attitude towards the impact of global market forces on Chinese television drama. In 2002, Zeng wrote another two-part article titled ‘*Chaos and confusion of artistic institutions, cultural industry and mass culture*’ in response to Yin. In the article, Zeng points out that Yin conceptualizes the nature of Chinese popular television drama in a reductionist manner. He claims that since it first appeared on Chinese television in the late 1950s, television drama has played a significant role as a national artistic institution (*guojia yishu shiye*) in China. The last two decades witnessed the commercial transformation of the Chinese television drama industry, but, according to Zeng (2002b), that transformation process was intertwined with ‘not so much compromise and negotiation as conflict between the government, dramatist and elitist intellectuals’ (p13). He reminds us that the SARFT has been exerting major influence on the evolution of the historical drama. Nevertheless, Zeng (2002a) argues for ‘a rational attitude towards positive state ideological control (*youxiao guojia yishixingtai kongzhi*) on

the national cultural industry' (p11). He claims that, facing the invasion of modern western mass culture (*xiandai xifang dazhong wenhua*), Chinese government decided to strengthen its ideological authority over cultural production in the national interest.

In the case of the Chinese television drama industry, Zeng observes that Yin criticizes Chinese government's ideological control in a reductionist manner. He comments that 'Yin seems to be full of illusionary romanticism for Chinese popular culture, which is similar to an understanding of American popular culture by US-based cultural theorist John Fiske' (2002b:13). Zeng believes that Chinese government's positive ideological control over the television drama industry is crucial for the protection of China's national cultural personality (*minzu wenhua gexing*). In this connection, he introduces the national cultural project of producing 'mainstream melody television drama' (*zhuxuanlu dianshiju*) or 'quality television drama' (*jingpin dianshiju*) that has been initiated by Chinese government since 2000. By 'mainstream' or 'quality', it essentially means 'a quality of maximizing the influence of positive state ideology in the logic of popular communication' (ibid. p15). Therefore, as far as Zeng is concerned, whichever sub-genre or artistic style a certain television drama belongs to, the main evaluation criterion lies in how well it performs its mainstream cultural function.

From the debates between Zeng and Yin, it can be seen that these two media scholars hold quite different opinions as to the nature of Chinese popular television culture. Yin considers the rise of Chinese popular television culture to be the result of the power struggle between the government and the commercial television dramatists. However, Zeng attempts to find a possible alternative to Western modernity and capitalist globalisation in determining a conceptual framework of the national-popular (although not in a Gramscian sense) in a contemporary Chinese context. In relation to Chinese historical drama, therefore, these debates position the drama in a wave of post-socialist television criticism, within which a linkage between the historical and the popular is established and critically examined. This linkage not only challenges the narrowly defined dichotomy between 'serious drama' and 'popular drama' that has been often used by television professionals in their categorization of the historical drama. More importantly, it brings forward the question of 'the popular' (*tongsu*) in a rethinking of Chinese historical drama genre as a whole in contemporary Chinese society.

Apart from media scholars like Zeng and Yin, who mostly discuss Chinese television drama in general, there are also media scholars in China who have studied the historical drama in particular (e.g. Li and Xiao, 2006; Wang, 2008). In my opinion, *Researching on Historical Television Drama* (2006) co-authored by Shengli Li and Jinghong Xiao presents the most comprehensive and systematic academic investigation on the historical drama. It is worth noting that, as both of the authors come from a traditional Chinese literary studies background, their discussion more or less concentrates on textual characteristics and assumptions.

In Chapter 3, I have already referenced Li and Xiao's work when analyzing the rise of new historical novels in contemporary China. For that, they document the literary transformation in contemporary Chinese fictional pre-modern history writings, which is generally characterised by the re-emergence of emperors as heroic protagonists in historical representations. Within their work, as a matter of fact, the transformation of history writing in contemporary China is treated merely as one of the eight perspectives offered by Li and Xiao for a study of the historical drama; the remaining seven being motives of reception and production, dramatization of history, historicization of drama, claims of historical authenticity, Chinese literary tradition, contemporary social reality as well as television effects. From this list of perspectives, one can see that, although Li and Xiao attempt to examine the whole process of the historical drama communication from production and reception issues to textual and literary properties, the textual parts receive more attention and remain more detailed.

As far as production issues are concerned, Li and Xiao put them into two main categories; one is intentional, the other is contextual. According to them, under the supervision of Chinese government, communicating historical knowledge to the general public serves as a significant educational goal of China's historical dramatists. At the same time, due to its mass communicative nature, a successful historical drama is supposed to 'seamlessly combine the elements of history education and dramatic entertainment' (Li & Xiao, 2006, 41). They go on to argue that, in order to realize educational purposes, the historical drama needs to involve contemporary implications. In this connection, they refer to Chinese literary critic Jian Ouyang's (2003) view on the relationship between historical fiction and historical fact. For Ouyang, the writing of a historical fiction is technically driven by 'the author's unsatisfactory and suspicious attitude towards certain historical facts' (quoted by

Li & Xiao, 2006, p43). It is this unsatisfaction and suspicion that leads to continuous reinterpretation of the historical facts from a contemporary perspective.

When it comes to the provision of ‘dramatic entertainment’, they believe that it constitutes an important cultural function of Chinese television industry. For them, the so-called ‘popular historical drama’ is largely intended to offer mass entertainment and, in their words, produce ‘economic gains’ (*jingji xiaoyi*), as its creative process well demonstrates a viewing market-driven logic; on the contrary, ‘the serious historical drama’ puts more emphasis on mass education and indeed the achievement of ‘social gains’ (*shehui xiaoyi*).

Furthermore, Li and Xiao suggest one think through this divide between the economic gain and the social gain by situating it into a wide economic, cultural and political context of contemporary China. For one thing, they propose that the commercial operation of the Chinese television industry and the rise of media consumerism in Chinese society provide a basis for the commoditization of the production, distribution and broadcasting of the historical drama, although strict television content censorship system still exists. Once it gets approved by the SARFT to be broadcast on television channels at certain levels, the ultimate aim of the historical drama is to ‘attract the biggest audience numbers that it possibly can’ (ibid. p163). This market-oriented pressure, according to Li and Xiao, applies to historical drama of all kinds whatever sub-genre it belongs.

Another point they rightly observe is that the emergence of the historical drama fills in an important content gap on contemporary Chinese television. As cultural globalisation process continues, the historical drama provides the Chinese people with a televised forum to ‘reflect on their traditional cultural identity’, ‘claim their spiritual heritage’ as well as ‘reconsider their orientation in a future order of global culture’ (ibid. p168). Meanwhile, the fact that dramas related to contemporary subjects are somewhat over-burdened with their expected ideological function allows much space for the development of the historical drama in China. As previously mentioned, endorsed by Chinese government, producing ‘mainstream melody television’ remains the most important standard for a politically correct television drama in China.

This forced pursuit of political correctness poses great challenge for the television dramatists and makes them attempt to balance propagandist function and artistic appeal in

dealing with contemporary social issues. Under these circumstances, as they explain, the production of the historical drama multiplied; sufficiently far removed from a direct representation of sensitive social and political situations, the historical drama, especially the popular incarnation, draws on story-telling resources from a mixture of ‘official historical records, local folklore and the contemporary social reality’ (ibid. p174).

In the treatment of the historical drama text, Li and Xiao’s discussion falls into two main groupings of discourses. First, there is a question of historical accuracy. Initially, they put forward a dichotomy between dramatization of history (*lishi de xijuhua*) and historicization of drama (*xiju de lishihua*). By ‘dramatization of history’, they refer to a historically realist fashion adopted by most of the so-called serious historical drama, for instance, *Great Emperor Hanwu* and *The First Emperor*, which is characterised by the very fact that it is largely based on official historical records. They continue to argue that dramatization of history produces two major consequences in portraying historical figures and events: ideologization (*yishi xingtai hua*) and aestheticization (*shenmei hua*). In the case of Er Yuehe’s Qing emperor series that I mentioned in Chapter 3, Li and Xiao write that the serious historical drama attempts to convey strong political messages to its audiences through selective representation of relevant historical materials. As a result, it makes a highly ideological judgment on certain historical figures or events.

As for the dimension of aestheticization within the historical drama, they refer it to a Kantian analysis of aesthetics (*shenmei*). According to them, Kantian version of aestheticization means rational human pleasure in processing authenticity, virtue and beauty. Importantly, it ‘supplements the concept of ideologization with an ethical (*daode*) interpretation’ (ibid. p61) and involves both the aesthetics of content (*neirong*) and that of form (*xingshi*). In the example of the historical drama, Li and Xiao assert that its content consists of characters, settings, plots and visual-audio effect, whereas its form includes narratives, formats and structures. For them, it is both the content and the form that work together to generate aesthetical discourses around a certain historical drama. Take *the First Emperor*, they highlight the significance of choosing an appropriate actor and a balanced serial format in representing its protagonist the emperor Zheng Ying.

By ‘historicization of drama’, Li and Xiao focus on the role of historical representation in the realization of dramatic effect. They note that the term ‘historicization’ here can be also

understood as ‘simulation of history’ (*nishi*) (ibid. p78); it basically means staged or falsified history. They meticulously break down historicization of drama into two types: historicization of drama-in-part and historicization of drama-as-a-whole. The former type can be easily found in the serious historical drama (like *Great Emperor Hanwu* and *The First Emperor*), where some parts of the story are made up and not based on any historical record; it enables the television dramatist to either amend or rewrite certain historical moments with a view to keep them valid in a historical logic. The latter type well defines most of the popular historical dramas (like *The Bronze Teeth*), where the whole story narrates contemporary issues such as corruption and political power struggles using historical characters and settings; this illusionary artistic practice, in Li and Xiao’s view, is conducted by the historical dramatist in order to avoid potential political risk on the one hand, and satisfy the audience’s consumerist fetishism for history on the other.

To summarise the first grouping of textual discourses, Li and Xiao suggest one extend a thinking of historical truth claim (*lishi zhenshi*) to that of artistic truth claim (*yishu zhenshi*), and in the meantime, differentiate these two concepts from each other. Historical truth claim, as they clarify, carries a double-layered meaning which includes: a) a reasonably conducted rewriting or distorting of certain historical facts with an aim to encode a logical historical-related message and b) a partial or complete use of certain historical records on certain historical figures or events. Artistic truth claim, however, operates as a discursive formation involving three cultural factors: a) the producer’s sincerity during the process of selecting historical materials and producing the historical drama, b) the extent to which a certain historical figure and event is based on widely recognized historical records, and c) the audience’s perceived realism in watching the historical drama. By ‘perceived realism’, Li and Xiao here propose a certain level of experiential authenticity as the outcome of the audience’s textual engagement with a drama text. For them, it is these two truth claims combined that creates a sense of historical authenticity for a certain historical drama.

Li and Xiao’s second grouping of textual discourses circulate around Chinese literary tradition. In the book, they point out that historical drama, as an art form, has experienced a long history in China since ancient times. In regard to the uniqueness of historical drama as a Chinese literary genre, Li and Xiao explain that this uniqueness is derived from the most important tradition of ancient Chinese mainstream fictional writing. That is, writers always preferred turning to actual historical figures and events over cultural myth or legendary

tales for their creative inspiration, or, as Li and Xiao phrase, ‘they adored history and undermined myths’ (*chongbai lishi yizhi shenhua*) (ibid. p137). Li and Xiao move on to write that, unlike old Greek myths, which were systematic on their own, ‘primitive Chinese myths were lacking in interconnectedness and often contradicted each other’ (ibid. p140). What is more, the rise of Confucianism from the second century in Chinese society, as they argue, further constrained the development of Chinese myth culture through introducing a series of secular political and moral principles. In brief, these principles include avoidance of conflict, a social hierarchy that values seniority and patriarchy and a reliance on astute leadership. Consequently, it is History rather than any sacred belief system that became the major influence on ancient Chinese fictional writings.

As far as historical inaccuracy of Chinese historical drama is concerned, Li and Xiao believe that it should be traced back to literary nature of important Chinese historical records. They remind us that prominent ancient Chinese historical records are always characterised as a blurred boundary between history and literature. In the example of China’s most well-known historical record *the Records of the Grand Historian* (*shi ji*)²⁶ written by the great historian Maqian Si in the Western Han period (206BC-9AD), Li and Xiao rightly observe that subjective elements such as the use of language, inner-world activity description and plot structuring often overweigh objective ones such as time, numbers and details involved in the historical record text. This, according to them, is due to the practical reason that since the Han period (206BC-220AD), there had emerged ordinary citizens’ historical record keeping accompanied by the rise of mass education in ancient China, and therefore, unofficial literary intellectuals had taken the place of official historians in documenting historical figures and events. Nevertheless, as most of these intellectuals gained recognition and support from governmental officials at the time, their literary historical records like *the Records of the Grand Historian* got passed on from generation to generation.

Having said that, Li and Xiao claim that both of the literary traditions above mentioned have a significant bearing on contemporary Chinese television historical drama. They point

²⁶ *The Records of the Grand Historian* (*shiji*), written from 109 BC to 91 BC, was the Magnum opus of Sima Qian, in which he recounted Chinese history from the time of the Yellow Emperor (*huang di*) until his own time. The Yellow Emperor, traditionally dated around 2600 BC, is the first ruler whom Sima Qian considered sufficiently established as historical to appear in *the Records*.

out that, there exists a dichotomy between the serious historical drama and the popular historical drama within Chinese public realm, but the irony is that few Chinese historians would treat the so-called serious dramas as real historical documentation. They argue that this dichotomy simply reflects Chinese public's collective cultural sub-consciousness to legitimize the category of the historical within popular historical representation. At this point, Li and Xiao also express their concerns about the Chinese audience's exposure to the historical drama text. On the one hand, they worry that a certain historical drama may run a serious risk of 'misleading its audience by presenting inaccurate or mistaken historical facts' (ibid. p181). On the other hand, they consider the audience's reception to be a complicated process; referring to Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, they write that 'to what extent an audience will be affected by a certain historical drama is ultimately determined by his or her social and cultural positions' (ibid. p189).

It can be easily seen that Li and Xiao's work adopts a text-centred approach in looking at all the aspects concerning the historical drama. In my view, this text-centred approach demonstrates the crucial position of the text in Chinese cultural productions. As previously mentioned, the Chinese cultural production tradition has 'tended toward a fusion of history and fiction with emphasis on didacticism' (*wenyizaidao*) (Ma, 1989, p83). This cultural production tradition has thus led to the formal quality of the Chinese narrative text that is suggested by Ma as 'the textualization of the context' (ibid.). As an audience researcher, however, I must say that, although they offer some thoughts on the audience response to this 'textualization of the context' of the historical drama, Li and Xiao fail to present any empirical evidence in their work.

5.5 Concluding remarks

The popularity of historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television has triggered a massive cultural debate within the Chinese popular realm since the mid 1990s. At the heart of the debate are concerns about the implications of those bygone dynasties as well as historical characters represented within the drama texts for contemporary Chinese society. Although so much has been said about Chinese historical drama in the debate, what has been neglected is to question the category of 'the historical' itself. In this chapter, I used three sample series including *The Bronze Teeth* (*tiechi tongya jixiaolan*) (2000-), *The Great Emperor Hanwu* (*hanwu dadi*) (2005), and *The First Emperor* (*qin shi huang*) (2006)

as case studies in discussions of the genre issues which arise.

The first section is focused on the Chinese television drama industry. The aim of this section is to look at how the Chinese television drama industry categorizes and evaluates historical drama through its production, regulatory, marketing and scheduling practices. Since the early 1990s, Chinese historical drama has experienced enormous transformation in both its content and its sub-genres. Most importantly, the dichotomy between ‘serious drama’ (*zheng ju*) and ‘popular drama’ (*xishuo ju*) emerged in the public discussion about historical drama in the mid-1990s. However, the stricter censorship of historical drama since 2004 resulted in less and less mentions of the old dichotomy between serious and popular drama within Chinese popular press. Therefore, one can say that the Party-state apparatus remains the ultimate power in Chinese cultural production. The strict state supervision of television production and broadcasting still prevails in China.

The second section turns to television scholarship on the genre issues of the historical drama. It revisits the relevant work done by four important television scholars in China. Generally speaking, these television scholars approach the genre issues mainly from a textual perspective. The debates between Zeng and Yin position the historical drama in a wave of post-socialist television criticism, within which a linkage between the historical and the popular is established and critically examined. This linkage not only challenges the narrowly defined dichotomy between ‘serious drama’ and ‘popular drama’ that has been often used by television professionals in their categorization of the historical drama. More importantly, it brings forward the question of ‘the popular’ (*tongsu*) in a rethinking of Chinese historical drama genre as a whole in contemporary Chinese society.

Li and Xiao, two literary scholars in China, present a comprehensive and systematic academic investigation on the historical drama. As far as the serious/popular divide of the historical drama is concerned, they argue that, the so-called ‘popular historical drama’ is largely intended to offer mass entertainment and, in their words, produce ‘economic gains’ (*jingji xiaoyi*), as its creative process well demonstrates a viewing market-driven logic, whereas ‘the serious historical drama’ puts more emphasis on mass education and indeed the achievement of ‘social gains’ (*shehui xiaoyi*). They also point out that, historical drama, as an art form, has experienced a long history in China since ancient times. However, unlike old Greek myths, which were systematic on their own, primitive Chinese myths

were lacking in interconnectedness and often contradicted each other. What is more, the rise of Confucianism from the second century in Chinese society, as they argue, further constrained the development of Chinese myth culture through introducing a series of secular political and moral principles. Although Li and Xiao attempt to examine the whole process of the historical drama communication from production and reception issues to textual and literary properties, the textual parts receive more attention and remain more detailed.

Chapter 6

Engaging with History

6.1 Introduction

As previously mentioned, the popularity of historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television has triggered a massive cultural debate within the Chinese popular realm since the mid 1990s. At the heart of the debate are concerns about the implications of those bygone dynasties as well as historical characters represented within the drama texts for contemporary Chinese society. For those media scholars who look solely at the production and content aspects of historical dramas, the implications are two-fold (e.g. Yin, 2002; Zhu, 2008a, 2008b). On the one hand, historical dramas inherit China's intellectual traditions of historiography, which are characterised as 'using the past to mirror the present, and drawing upon the past to satirize the present' (Yin, 2002, p35). As Yin argues, the appearance of historical dramas thus 'provided intellectuals with a means of expression and certain rhetorical strategies' in response to all sorts of social, cultural and political changes in contemporary China (ibid. p34). On the other hand, the rise of historical dramas is attributed to Chinese government's advocacy of 'building a harmonious society through television drama' (Zhu, 2008b, p126). Consequently, the emergence of historical dramas is articulated with, what Zhu terms (2008a), the Chinese public's 'totalitarian nostalgia'. Fascinating as these two implications may seem, what is missing here is any empirical inquiry into the Chinese audience's reception and perception of these dramas. As far as a popular cultural phenomenon like the Chinese historical drama is concerned, one may fail to comprehend the nature of it, unless all the forces that shape the phenomenon itself are taken into account, to which the audience's understanding largely contributes.

This chapter analyses three important issues concerning the historical representations within the drama texts from the point of view of the audience. These issues, including the significance of historical accuracy, totalitarian nostalgia and contemporary use of the historical representations, are drawn from the long-term debate of historical dramas that can be easily found both within the Chinese television drama industry and academic debates. In his writing on televised history, John Corner (2007b) proposes the notion of 'sensory engagement' in differentiating watching television history from reading history

(p.135); he defines this sensory engagement as watching and listening to ‘the physicality of the past as places, people, objects and actions and then, on the basis of this, a more deeply cognitive and affective engagement with its meanings and implications’ (ibid.). What Corner argues here to a large extent echoes John Ellis’s (2000) psychoanalytical understanding of contemporary television as ‘working through’; by this, Ellis means that ‘television can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the material of the world into more narrativized, explained forms’ (ibid. p78). Both Corner and Ellis provide me with an insight into looking at how the Chinese audiences perceive those three issues in relation to the Chinese historical drama; in this sense, this chapter can be also seen as an attempt to operationalize their discussion on contemporary television culture through a nationally specific reception study.

6.2 Historical accuracy and the public attitudes

As I have discussed in Chapter 5, when it comes to the sub-genres question of contemporary Chinese television historical dramas, the most widely-accepted distinction would be that of ‘serious dramas’ (*zheng shuo ju*) versus ‘popular ones’ (*xi shuo ju*); this is particularly the case for the majority of historical drama producers and the popular press in China. As Le Fu, a senior executive producer at the Drama Unit of Hunan TV, states²⁷, ‘although there are a couple of commonly used terms to categorize the Chinese historical drama, notably costume drama and period drama, the most straightforward one for me is serious or popular drama’.

The distinction of ‘serious and popular’ here brings to the fore the issue of historical accuracy (*lishi zhenshi*); the major difference between a serious historical drama and a popular one concerns to what extent it is based on historical evidence. For instance, *The Kangxi Dynasty*, *the Qianlong Dynasty* and *the Great Emperor Hanwu*, which claim to be based on prominent classic Chinese historical records, such as *the Records of the Qing Period* (*qing shi gao*) and *the Records of the Grand Historian*, always fall into the category of serious drama; the prime examples of popular drama include *the Tales of Qianlong*, *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister* and *the Bronze Teeth*, where the protagonists and settings are present within historical records, but the plots are either altered or re-written in

²⁷ Telephone interview conducted in December 2007.

order to narrate or simply satirize contemporary issues.

The boundaries between serious and popular historical dramas seem clearly defined, but the issue of historical accuracy concerning the whole genre of Chinese historical drama remains controversial amongst many Chinese historians and cultural critics (e.g. Meng 2005; Lei 2007). The controversy involves a heated discussion of the role of Chinese historical drama played in the public education of pre-modern Chinese history.

Chinese historian Zhuo Meng (2005), for example, in his provocative book *A Critique towards Six Famous Historical Dramas*, revisits six well-known contemporary Chinese historical television dramas, pointing out a wide range of historical inaccuracies within the drama texts; by doing so, he intends to arouse the public's awareness of the significance of accumulating accurate historical knowledge and argues for 'correct' public understanding of traditional Chinese culture. Along with this discussion of the educational mission of the historical dramas emerges a deep worry about the rise of media consumerism in China. As Lei (2007) reminds us, watching televised history has become an important leisure activity for ordinary Chinese people since the mid-1990s; she goes on to argue that both history and the audience who watches it face the possibility of being commodified in the production and consumption process of historical dramas, and therefore it is important to critically examine the historical drama producer's 'perspectives on the history' (*shi guan*).

It can be argued that the debate about historical accuracy of the Chinese historical drama is not just shaped from within the needs of communicating historical knowledge. Rather, it is an institutional media phenomenon, which is associated with a specific set of regulatory, production and consumption practices. In other words, it takes its character from the relationship between production and consumption it inhabits. In my research, my respondents demonstrate their own understanding of this relationship from different perspectives. The following are just a few examples:

When it comes to television programmes, they serve two purposes for the general public; providing entertainment, on the one hand, and spreading knowledge on the other. That's it! (male, aged 55, company manager).

Commercial values are so important for television drama these days. A good drama is good because it can make a good profit. As far as the historical drama is concerned, it

makes every effort to attract the modern audience even at the cost of misrepresenting traditional Chinese culture (male, aged 25, office worker).

The reason why people choose to watch the historical drama is because that they want to get some positive message from it, for instance, one's loyalty to his country. As long as a certain historical drama meets your expectation, it can be considered a success! (female, aged 40, senior manager).

These quotations illustrate some crucial dimensions of the Chinese public's attitudes towards a production-consumption relationship of the historical television drama; they suggest a multilayered framework for rethinking the debate of historical accuracy as a popular culture phenomenon. First of all, a certain level of culture repertoire is required for Chinese audiences to deal with the issues of historical accuracy here in question. By proposing a dichotomy between entertainment and knowledge, for example, the middle-aged male respondent quoted above shows a relatively serious attitude towards the purposes of television programmes; this 'seriousness' reflects his ability not only to understand the features of a certain television programme, but also to make distinctions among them.

Second, with the commercialization process going on in China's television industry, there has been a growing awareness of commodification of television products for Chinese audiences; through acknowledging 'the commercial values' of the historical drama, my respondents recognize the significance of infotainment within the drama text. Furthermore, instead of directly criticising the question of historical inaccuracy itself, they make an issue of the rise of commercial culture in Chinese media industry as a whole. Third, against the backdrop of China's commercial television culture, the personal meanings of a certain historical television drama need to be taken into consideration; my respondents' use of the terms like 'choice', 'want' and 'expectation' in their discussion reveal that Chinese audiences seemingly enjoy much freedom of watching and valuing a certain drama text, although to what extent that 'freedom' has to do with 'democratic mediations' (Dahlgren 1995) remains a question.

One may argue that this multilayered framework explains how Chinese audiences make sense of the historical television drama; it, therefore, provides us with a point of departure to get involved with the debate of historical accuracy in the drama text. However, I would like to push an understanding of this framework a bit further. The multidimensionality of

the Chinese public's attitudes here offers me possibilities to reassess the relationship between generic knowledge and agency within the reception process of Chinese historical television drama; in my understanding, the issue of historical inaccuracy, as a crucial component of generic knowledge about Chinese historical television drama, matters less in the fields of historical knowledge than in those of the social world and action. Similarly, Nick Couldry (2006a), in his thought-provoking article *Transvaluing media studies*, argues for moving beyond a media-centric perspective and thus a renewed sociology of knowledge. He writes:

By knowledge, I mean, not our knowledge of media as researchers, but the relationship between media and the social distribution of knowledge about the world. The primary question, then, is not the analysis of this or that media form, but the role, if any (and there could be huge variation here), of different media in people's acquisition and use of knowledge, including knowledge of the social world (Couldry, 2006a, p187).

If we agree with Couldry, then the debate about historical accuracy along with the popularity of the Chinese historical television drama needs to be re-examined; rather than dwell on the category of historical knowledge, one has to shift one's attention to study how the debate is constructed, and at the same time, why it matters in a wider socio-cultural context. In this connection, the study of audience responses should not be simply focused on the audience's textual engagement with the drama texts either; it is required to explore, to use Bourdieu's concept (1984), 'the generative mechanism' of the debate itself from the audience's point of view. As Couldry goes on to argue, 'Accumulating evidence about how people read or engage with this or that text is not, by itself, enough unless it contributes to our understanding of how they act in the social and personal world with or without reference to media' (ibid. p187).

Bearing all these arguments in mind, I now move on to analyse my respondents' engagement with the issue of historical accuracy. As previously discussed in Chapter 5, the dichotomy between a serious drama and a popular one is central to the debate about the historical accuracy of the Chinese historical television drama; although it is considered invalid by some of China's professional historians, who treat the historical television drama as a television genre of mass entertainment more than anything else, this dichotomy is widely used within Chinese television industry as well as amongst Chinese cultural critics. However, the use of this distinction to categorize the Chinese historical drama has

attracted constant criticism. Chinese media scholars Shengli Li and Jinghong Xiao (2006), as previously mentioned, in their book *Researching into the historical television drama*, critically examine the distinction between the serious and popular historical drama. According to them, this distinction not only concerns the extent to which a historical drama is based on historical record; it is also a matter of artistic style.

They go on to claim that, the serious type refers to both normal serious drama and tragedy, whereas the popular type is always comedy. Here, Li and Xiao introduce the issue of artistic style into a bold discussion about historical accuracy; what they intend to do is to enrich an understanding of generic knowledge of the Chinese historical television drama by emphasising the importance of its artistic value. Some of my respondents are also quite aware of the artistic elements that characterize different types of historical dramas. For example, after showing them the act of ‘Jingke’s attempted assassination of the Emperor Qin’ in *The First Emperor*, I asked this group of young people in Beijing about what they think of the importance of historical accuracy in this piece of television work. A young man chose to answer my question from an unexpected angle. He says:

I think most of these Chinese historical TV dramas are targeting those who are over 35 years old [laugh]. Why it is the fact that Korean dramas are more popular, I think, is because they are quite straightforward. Many Chinese historical dramas are filled with hidden meaning. You’ve got to be sophisticated enough to understand them. Korean dramas are not like that; they cater to a wider range of age groups. A 20-year-old girl likes them, so does my mother. The Chinese ones are preoccupied with too much subtlety. Some age groups just won’t be able to understand (24-year-old, Beijing male, accountant).

Instead of making any direct comment on my question, this young man relates the question of genre to the demographic factors of the audience, including age and gender. It is worth noting that *The First Emperor* can be seen as a perfect example of the so-called serious historical television drama; compared with most of the Korean costume dramas like *Dae Jang Geum* (see Chapter 3) shown on contemporary Chinese television, *The First Emperor* indeed presents itself in a historically realistic mode. According to this young male audience member, however, this historically realistic mode is ‘filled with hidden meaning’ and ‘with too much subtlety’, and therefore it becomes something available to ‘those who are over 35’ and probably mainly male audiences. What this young man is concerned with prompts the question of cultural competence in television reception studies.

By revisiting Stuart Hall's famous 'Encoding/Decoding model' (1973, 1980), David Morley (1992), in a critical postscript on his own work *The 'Nationwide' audience*, argues for 'translating our concerns from the framework of the decoding model into that of genre theory' (p127); by doing so, he believes that we can develop a more flexible model of text/audience relations, where the interplay between generic forms and cultural competences is better observed. Here, Morley borrows the notion of cultural competence from Pierre Bourdieu. In his work *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu asserted that 'a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (p2). Drawing on the example of Cohen and Robbins's work on Kung-fu movies and youth culture (1978), Morley continues to suggest that 'the genre is popular to the extent that it "fits" with the forms of cultural competence available to this group' (ibid. p128).

From Morley, then, one can argue that, understanding a certain cultural genre is made possible by the distribution of cultural competences among the audiences of that genre; nevertheless, the distribution process itself is an on-going social formation involving a wide range of structural factors, among which age and gender are certainly significant ones. In the case of the Chinese historical television drama, this argument has been proved valid by that young Beijing man's response to the issue of historical accuracy.

Besides age and gender, more structural factors can also be identified in my group interviews concerning the same issue. When asked whether they would care about historical accuracy in the drama text or not, a couple of middle-aged respondents from Changsha debate on this:

LIU: I wouldn't care about that personally. Pure history is just too much for the general public.

PENG: I would though.

LIU: Oh yes, I am sure some people do, like those fans of politics.

PENG: Come on, I am not really a fan of politics! I started going to see the old operas like these with my mother when I was a small child, so I have been quite familiar with some stuff and cannot bear anything inaccurately done to them.

Within this short debate, a potential gender-related stereotypical view on the historical television drama audience is firstly challenged by the fact that Liu is a male, whereas Peng

is a female; what it tells us is that, although it may be the case that the male audience, on average, shows greater interest in watching historical drama, in particular, the serious type, than his female counterpart, the overemphasis of the gender factor runs much risk of misrepresenting the truth about television reception from a qualitative perspective. Second, the linkage between ‘pure history’ and ‘fans of politics’ made by Liu is such an interesting one; it largely reflects over-interpretation of the potential political implications of historical television drama by some audience groups within China. Like many intellectuals, who, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, consider the historical drama as a means of expression and certain rhetorical strategies, these ‘audience groups’ also pay specific attention to certain historical fact and its contemporary implication. Last but not the least, educational capital surely plays a part in the audience’s engagement with the historical television drama; this can be seen by Peng’s familiarity with some particular historical knowledge due to her long term exposure to it. Interestingly though, rather than through any form of school education, her educational capital in the field of the historical knowledge gets accumulated through parental influence since her childhood.

6.3 The myth of totalitarian nostalgia

According to my literature review as well as the genre analysis on the historical drama, apart from the issue of historical accuracy, another prominent accusation facing contemporary Chinese historical television drama is made of its association with a wave of totalitarian nostalgia within China’s popular cultural sphere, which began from the late 1980s. US-based Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu (2008a, 2008b), in a series of discussions on the popularity of the Qing drama, points out, as what she phrases, ‘the symbolic link between Neo-authoritarianism’s justification of the Tiananmen crackdown and the drama’s ideological positioning’ (Zhu, 2008a, p30). She reminds us that, the revisionist Qing drama emerged at a time when Chinese society was undergoing rapid economic growth due to the Xiaoping Deng-led economic reform in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989; as the Chinese people were fed up with corruption and the society’s perceived loss of its moral grounding’ along with the economic development, these dynasty dramas attempted to ‘present exemplary emperors from bygone dynasties and ‘capitalize on the popular yearning for models of strong leadership’ on Chinese television (ibid. p32).

At the same time, Zhu positions this authoritarian nostalgia for ‘exemplary emperors’ in parallel with the fact that Mao enjoyed the same kind of renewed popularity from the late 1980s to the early 1990s (see Wang 1996). From this, it can be seen that Chinese intellectuals like Zhu believe that, the search for model rulers is rooted in Chinese cultural tradition that has been dominated by Confucianism, as a state religion, dating back to the second century and down to the late Qing Dynasty and the early twentieth century.

Within this section, it is not my intention to argue against the interconnections between Confucianism as an old Chinese political philosophy and its contemporary media representations. Rather, as a media sociologist, who is obsessed with the category of media experience and its sociological groundings, I always feel suspicious of a narrowly-interpreted media phenomenon and thereafter felt urged to interrogate its broader, but not necessarily deeper, meanings; on this point, I have to agree with Barker and Brooks’s (1998) observation on the problem of media and popular culture studies, as they say that ‘the problem seems to be that the media and popular culture are so politically salient and culturally sensitive, that it is hard to break free from what we will call “folk theories of the media”’ (p84).

Nevertheless, much room is left in Zhu’s discussion itself that can be further explored. By using the term ‘the symbolic link’ to describe the relationship between ‘Neo-authoritarianism’s justification of the Tiananmen crackdown and the drama’s ideological positioning’, she unconsciously offers great opportunity for a cultural sociological study of the drama in question; what she does here, as a matter of fact, introduces a ‘symbolic’ dimension into an understanding of the drama’s ideological features in relation to their actual political backdrop. Therefore, to borrow Nick Couldry’s idea of symbolic power in his book *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (2003), the embedded discourse of authoritarian nostalgia within the Chinese historical television drama text can be understood as a corpus of symbolic resources provided by the drama production and broadcast organization; its connections with symbolic power cannot be ignored, as these connections exist on two territories, first, the very heart of the drama production and broadcast organization, second, their social consequences, which I am mainly concerned with within my thesis.

Before I touch upon the question of social consequence, I need to cast some light on the

idea of nostalgia here. Fred Davis (1979), the late University of Chicago trained sociologist, in his book *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, offered his subtle and complex insight into nostalgia as a human mood. Influenced by the theory of symbolic interaction of Herbert Blumer, Davis looked at the issue of nostalgia through the lenses of sociology of culture. He explained that the word 'nostalgia' had its Greek roots of '*nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, a painful condition', so it means 'a painful yearning to return home' (1979:1). Moving away from an etymological perspective, Davis went on to suggest a theoretical approach to studying modern nostalgia by proposing a framework of orders of nostalgia. He said:

By 'order of nostalgic reaction' I mean something other than the purely logical possibilities inherent in some such scheme as: I feel nostalgia; I reflect upon the nostalgia I feel; I reflect upon the reflection of the nostalgia I feel, etc. Rather, I shall point to three successive orders of cognition and emotion, the patternings of which derive not from the mere mechanical extension of ordinal possibilities but from the musings attendant on the course of life experience. I shall call these First Order or Simple Nostalgia, Second Order or Reflexive Nostalgia, and Third Order or Interpreted Nostalgia (Davis, 1979, p17).

According to Davis, then, 'the order of nostalgic reaction' comes into being and operates during the course of people's life experiences; it takes its character from a modern human condition, which consists of a series of subjective or inter-subjective activities, such as feeling, reflecting and interpreting. Also, it is worth emphasising that in this order of nostalgic reaction, Third Order or Interpreted Nostalgia is placed at the highest level, which, as Davis argued, is less of the fact that it has something to do with 'issues of the historical accuracy or felicity of the nostalgic claim on the past' than that it 'unfolds, questions and, potentially at least, renders problematic the very reaction itself' (ibid. p24).

Towards the end of his book, Davis usefully brought the question of nostalgia into the reality of contemporary media-dominated society; he believed that 'rather than polluting the wells of our nostalgic memory, the mass media have enriched and invigorated them' (ibid. p140). Taking together all Davis's arguments, one can argue that, the study of media-dominated nostalgia has to involve two main considerations; on the one hand, the theory of 'order of nostalgic reaction' can be still illuminating, on the other hand, the rise of mediated-culture sets new agenda for a revised understanding of modern nostalgia, the new agenda that needs to be addressed in the field of media and communications studies.

Having introduced the theoretical part, I shall return to my respondents' attitudes towards the issue of authoritarian nostalgia concerning the Chinese historical television drama. Interestingly enough, although most of my respondents give more or less affirmative answers to the question, the angles that they choose to answer remain quite diverse. Here are some representative examples:

Nostalgia? Oh, I am sure there is a bit. Nostalgia for great emperors...or simply for great heroes! (male, aged 25, accountant).

As far as authoritarian nostalgia is concerned, I don't think the audience would have so strong feeling about it while he or she is watching the actual drama, but for a particular nation-state or ethnic-state, there must be something that it subconsciously shows nostalgia for but not even realizes (female, aged 26, university teacher).

While I was watching *the Great Emperor Hanwu*, not only did I get so attracted by the emperor himself, but also became very concerned with the fate of other characters. Also, you can imagine how strong the Han Dynasty was at that time! (female, aged 43, accountant).

For a historical drama audience, it takes a certain level of human qualities to be able to feel nostalgic for anything. You have to think and be reflexive! If you don't sort out the business of thinking through a particular historical story, you just end up feeling very bored about it (male, aged 45, self-employed).

This diversity of audience response offers me, at least, two points of departure to unpack the myth of authoritarian nostalgia. First, the representations of a particular historical figure or period in the drama text tend to conjure up the Chinese audience's cultural imagination of different types. Instead of treating the issue of nostalgia at a superficial level, the audience always tries to reflect upon and interpret a nostalgic reaction. In the first quote above, for instance, this young man perceives the nostalgia as less of a yearning for any actual political authority than that for heroic figures who made their names by successfully changing the status quo in a particular historical period.

In a similar vein, that middle-aged female respondent acknowledges her nostalgic reaction towards the Han Dynasty. However, it needs to be pointed out that this reaction is essentially triggered by her melodramatic imagination based on a series of historical characters in a fictional version; the fact that, not only did she get attracted to the emperor

as the protagonist, but also ‘became very concerned with the fate of other characters’ tells us that her understanding of the relationship between characters is key to her representations about the Han Dynasty portrayed in the drama text.

Second, a television viewer’s life stage also affects his or her nostalgic reactions toward the historical representations. Gauntlett and Hill (1999), in their work *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life*, give much attention to this question; they apply the concept of life-course analysis to study whether ‘television has a role to play in the transitional periods of people’s lives’ (p79). According to them, the audience adopts different ‘coping strategies’ in the use of television at different transitional periods of their lives (ibid.). For example, compared to young adults, middle-aged adults are ‘more likely to have established patterning of television viewing’ (ibid. p109) - this fits well with the middle-aged male respondent quoted above. This self-employed man told me that he had formed the habit of watching television as a daily routine and, more importantly, he regarded the practice of watching television drama as ‘a business of thinking through’.

On the contrary, that young female university teacher doubts that the audience would have strong nostalgic feeling ‘while he or she is watching the actual drama’, as she claims that watching television is by no means a daily routine in her busy life. However, by recognizing a country’s ‘subconscious nostalgia’ for its past, she shows good awareness of possible cultural values surrounding the historical television drama within Chinese society; this kind of cultural awareness, as I would argue, exactly reflects this young woman’s attempt to come to terms with a variety of audience interpretations from different socio-cultural positions.

From these, it is clear that the audiences’ interpretation of the issue of authoritarian nostalgia remains quite divergent; it reminds us of Sonia Livingstone’s social psychological work *Making Sense of Television* (1990, 1998a), where she highlights the importance of using empirical methods to investigate the ‘theoretical concerns developed within cultural studies’ (p150) in discussing the potential convergence between media effects dominated and critical audience studies. In the example of Chinese historical television drama here, through a critical analysis of the viewers’ responses, it indeed appears that the issue of authoritarian nostalgia, which is originally defined by literary cultural critics, can also be repositioned in a framework of reflexive sociology.

6.4 Historical resources and contemporary use

From what has been discussed so far, it can be seen that, unlike most of the Chinese literary television critics and media academia in general, who often take the historical television drama quite literally, the Chinese audience expresses a wide range of cultural concerns over the drama text on a daily basis. Furthermore, the last two sections put the question of reflexivity on the spot through an analysis of my respondents' attitudes towards the historical television drama. In a general sense, however, in what ways does the Chinese audience use the historical television drama? Or, what frames does the audience apply to make sense of the historical drama? In order to answer this question, first of all, we need to be clear about the importance of understanding the historical drama as a cultural resource in relation to its audiences.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, John Ellis (2000) defines the current era of television broadcasting as the 'age of plenty and uncertainty' and then proposes the term 'working through' to describe an inter-subjective process linking media forms with people's public and private concerns. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005), who is deeply committed to an academic position of political communication and is also influenced by Weberian political philosophy, considers popular culture as a resource for 'political citizenship'; for her, popular culture produces 'comprehension and respect for popular political voices that allow for more people to perform as citizens...in other words, a resource that can entertain the citizen' (van Zoonen, 2005, p151).

As for a study of the Chinese historical television drama, to borrow Ellis and van Zoonen's arguments can be both useful and problematic. With the economic development and the spreading of television technology, television historical drama has gradually become the most important television genre for the Chinese public since the mid-1990s; its artistic styles and sub-genres also flourished as hundreds of commercial television companies have emerged in the country to meet the fast-growing market demand for this television product since 1990. Thus, the Chinese historical television drama has made its own contribution to 'an age of plenty', as least, in terms of the quantity of production; it provides a multitude of cultural resources for the general Chinese public. However, differently from most of western democratic countries, television production is still subordinated to strict

governmental control in China; a television drama cannot be produced unless its proposal gets approved by China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). In this sense, the question of to what extent popular culture 'produces comprehension and respect for popular political voices' in China will take much empirical effort and in-depth analysis to answer.

As also discussed in Chapter 2, Michael Keane suggests that one apply the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality' to understand the policy ramifications that impact on Chinese television; for him, in a post-socialist or post-reform Chinese society, cultural resources are guided through the authoritarian Chinese government's cultural policies; at the same time, these cultural resources function as cultural technologies, which play an important role in organizing different fields of human action in society. Seen from this perspective, therefore, the ways that the Chinese audience uses the historical television drama go beyond the level of textual interpretation; they can provide a clue to understanding the audience's varying levels of affect by the drama text as well as the degree to which these levels work in an identity creation process of the audience. In the rest of this section, I shall discuss three significant frames that can be identified in my respondents' use of the historical television drama; it is within these frames that they deal with a sense of the past.

6.4.1 Learning

When it comes to the cultural values of the Chinese historical television drama, for the Chinese cultural elites, the most important one is always considered as 'educating the Chinese people about their own history'. In his famous article *History, History Studies and Historical TV drama*, for example, Fensi Xing (2006), the editor-in-chief of the Chinese Communist Party's official journal *Seeking Truth*²⁸ (*qiushi*), suggests that the historical television drama serves a better educational function than history studies in communicating historical knowledge; he argues that the historical television drama should be much more acceptable and understandable than history studies by the general public, as it deals with historical facts through lively artistic representations.

²⁸ Launched in July, 1988, *Seeking Truth* is the primary theoretical journal of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. As one of the CPC's official publications, most of its distribution goes to government offices at various levels in China. The cover inscription was written by Xiaoping Deng. The magazine was launched in 1988 as a replacement for *Red Flag* (*hong qi*), which ran from June 1, 1958, through June 16, 1988.

Underlying this argument is the very assumption that the audience has a desire to seek historical knowledge from the drama text; according to Chinese cultural critics like Xing, the practice of historical knowledge learning is taken for granted when it comes to watching the historical television drama. Of course, no one can deny the fact that accumulating historical knowledge serves as an important purpose for the historical television drama's audience. For example, this middle-aged Beijing male respondent says in my in-depth interview with him:

Why I like watching *the Great Emperor Hanwu* is because it helps me to increase my knowledge about the Han Dynasty. We all know the importance of the Han Dynasty in Chinese history, but I personally didn't know much about it in detail. This drama is such a nice artistic version of the history of the Han Dynasty (male, aged 55, company manager).

At a superficial level, his answer may not look surprising, but if one critically examines this statement, there are at least two points worth special attention. On the one hand, this respondent to a significant extent expresses his personal interest in 'knowing about' the history of the Han Dynasty; this can be seen as a driving force behind his willingness to watch *the Great Emperor Hanwu*. On the other, by describing the drama as 'an artistic version' of the Han history, he shows good awareness of the fact that what he learns from is not a serious history lecture but a piece of dramatic representation. Drawn on from these two points, I would argue that the practice of learning has to be attached with two strands of social psychological activities.

First, the issue of fandom emerges here. Similar to the middle-aged male above, when asked whether they could learn any concrete historical knowledge from the Qing Drama series, quite a few of my respondents, the majority of whom are young males, give me answers like the following:

Some people learn a lot from them because they are just interested in that particular historical period (male, aged 24, assistant mechanical engineer).

I was a big fan of them when I was in college, so I learned a lot about the Qing Dynasty at that time (male, aged 25, office worker).

Interestingly, instead of talking about himself, this 24-year-old assistant mechanical engineer points out 'some people's' fandom for the Qing Drama series; his recognition of

the ‘some people’ here reveals a close association between historical knowledge learning and fandom activity in the reception of the historical television drama. At the same time, the factor of life stage contributes greatly to the practice of learning. That 25-year-old office worker, for instance, was a fan of the Qing Drama series only when he was in college; that is to say, it is at that particular life stage that he was immersed in the drama series and therefore had the chance to ‘learn from’ the drama.

Second, emotion plays a role in the practice of learning. Also in a discussion of the act of ‘Jingke’s attempted assassination of the Emperor Qin’ in *The First Emperor*, a middle-aged female’s response is a good example. She says:

I originally learnt this story from history books. The TV drama version is really engaging; it is full of emotional elements. Middle-aged female audiences like me prefer this kind of educational and emotional stuff [laugh] (female, aged 52, administration officer).

For her, emotion constitutes an integral part of the learning experience of the drama. More importantly, she is aware of an interaction between emotional engagement with her age and gender; using the Foucauldian analysis of emotion, I would argue that this kind of emotional learning can be viewed as a ‘strategic formation’ that continually interacts with and is (re)produced and regulated by other strategic formations, of which gender remains a crucial one (discussed by Harding and Pribram, 2002, p413).

6.4.2 Reflection

Having discussed the question of learning, I now move on to the issue of reflection. As I pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, Corner proposes the notion of ‘sensory engagement’ to differentiate watching television history from reading history. He claims that there are two levels involved in this ‘sense making’ process; the first level, which resembles an actual learning process as I have just discussed, concerns ‘an encounter with the physicality of the past as places, people, objects and actions’, and the second level refers to ‘a more deeply cognitive and affective engagement with its meanings and implications’ (Corner, 2007b, p135). It is these two levels, in my understanding, that form the basis for the audience’s reflection on televised history. Although he rightly defines two levels of sensory engagement in watching television history, Corner does not go any

further to discuss specific themes of sensory engagement in his particular article. In my research, however, I find three basic reflective themes in the reception of the Chinese historical television drama.

First, there is witnessing. For example, this young adult says:

The most fascinating part about watching a historical television drama is a kind of witnessing, witnessing a dynasty going from prosperity to devastation, or from turbulence to restoration (male, aged 25, accountant).

Rather than go into any deep level of interpretation, this male respondent primarily expresses a sense of co-presence with a historical drama text. As Ellis (2000) observes, ‘witness is a new form of experience; it arrived with the development of mechanical media which accord with how we believe we perceive everyday reality’ (p15). According to Ellis, then, this co-presence can be understood as ‘an everyday, intimate and commonplace’ relationship established between the audience and the historical television drama (Ellis, 2000, p36); one thus can say that, this reflective style plays on the richness of the relations between two types of time perception: historical time represented in the drama text on the one hand, and physical time in reality on the other.

Second, there is demystification. It is mentioned in Chapter 5 that the late 1990s saw a rise of television serials under the title of ‘popular history’ (*xishuo lishi*) on Chinese television; based on folklore and vernacular historical tales, this wave of historical drama offers an alternative representation of a wide range of historical events and characters. Although its commercial considerations aroused massive controversy, this new genre of historical television adds another generic characteristic to the Chinese historical television drama, a characteristic often described as ‘demystification’ (*jiemi*). Lots of my respondents also perceive this as an important mode of address employed by contemporary Chinese historical television. A 35-year-old male audience claims:

For me, the most important thing about a historical TV drama is the extent that it demystifies a certain historical fact; take *The Secret History of Xiaozhuang*, I always wanted to know who on earth the Empress Xiaozhuang married and this drama gives you a sort of answer. The whole idea of demystification is what makes you think, as far the historical TV drama is concerned (male, aged 35, electronic technician).

This respondent's mention of the Empress Xiaozhuang is particularly interesting. As I have introduced in Chapter 3, the Empress Xiaozhuang (1613-1688), known for the majority of her life under the title 'Grand Empress Dowager', was the concubine of Emperor *Huangtaiji*, the mother of the *Shunzhi* Emperor and the grandmother of the *Kangxi* Emperor during China's Qing Dynasty. She wielded significant influence over the Qing court during the rule of her son and grandson. Known for her wisdom and political ability, Xiaozhuang has become a largely respected figure in Chinese history. It was not until the historical novelist Er Yuehe successfully re-introduced Princess Xiaozhuang into the historical novel that this figure has now also become a popular character for many historical TV productions ever since then.

The term 'a sort of answer' is interesting here; it demonstrates that this audience does not necessarily believe in 'the answer' given by *The Secret History of Xiaozhuang* to his question, but he still gains some satisfaction in it. For him, demystification becomes what he expects to gain from the historical television drama; it makes the drama itself into a reflective resource for him to explore the meaning of history in both public and private arenas.

Last, there is national identity. Michael Billig (1995), in his book *Banal Nationalism*, argues that, in the contemporary new world order, the theoretical consciousness of nationalism includes 'assumptions about how a nation should behave; how "we" should behave; and the world, or the whole "international community" should behave' (p92). The assumption about 'how a nation should behave' also finds its place in my respondents' interpretation of the practice of reflecting on history. My favourite example of this is the one below:

Reflecting upon history is such a Chinese thing! The Chinese people enjoy pondering over the meaning of history. This is part of our culture! Some people call it a sign of being a civilized Chinese [laugh]! (female, aged 47, civil clerk)

This middle-aged female audience succinctly relates the practice of reflection with her understanding of being Chinese; for her, 'pondering over the meaning of history' makes us come to terms with our national identity. In a reference to Billig's arguments, for the Chinese audience, the practice of reflecting on the historical television drama has to be understood as a national behavior; it is 'narrowed into the framework of nationhood' but

negotiates with an increasingly globalizing media landscape. I shall return to this point in the following two chapters.

6.4.3 Suspicion

The third important frame that can be identified from my respondents' engagement with the historical television drama is what I would like to term as suspicion. A middle-aged male university instructor told me about his suspicious feeling towards the historical television drama in a focus group conducted in Changsha:

Sometimes, the dialogue and the image in the historical drama give you a sense of uncertainty, or if you like, a sense of falseness. It looks really odd that those ancient characters speak the modern Chinese language (male, aged 44, university instructor).

This respondent is quite clear about the fact that what he watches is nothing but a television drama, but when it comes to the factual part of a 'historical' text, he simultaneously understands that this staged 'past' is itself a falsification; his sense of 'oddness', in De Groot's words, demonstrates that a consumer of historical product 'has a complexity of engagement that is at a level higher or more complex than that of the "contemporary" text' (De Groot, 2009, p182).

Also, this sense of oddness has much to do with the question of anti-fandom and non-fandom. A middle-aged female respondent, who claims to dislike historical television dramas, says in a Beijing in-depth interview:

I have never watched this kind of thing because I am not interested in history. It looks very boring to me. It is a pure propaganda thing. I cannot feel anything. I have no idea how I should relate to it (female, aged 42, accountant).

Extreme as her response may look to some extent, this respondent at least expresses her anti-fandom for the genre of the historical television drama. US-based Canadian media scholar Jonathan Gray (2003), in his work on the viewers of *The Simpsons*, finds that many of the anti-fans and non-fans can also provide a substantial and impressive in-depth analysis of the cartoon. He proposes that 'we must look to anti-fans and non-fans as well, and study how the text changes as it meets different audiences and viewing environments' (Gray, 2003, p79). Compared to the affect it has on those who claim to be its fans, the

historical television drama indeed changes its role for the anti-fans like this female respondent; it becomes a ‘pure propaganda thing’ for her due to its explicit politics-related content. Of course, for those who are non-fans, they do not seem to take the issue of ‘falsification’ in their viewing experience. The following two young adults in a group discussion illustrate this well:

CHANG: We are uncertain about the historical TV drama in terms of how real it is. Few people would turn to history books for things they watch in a historical drama.

FANG: That’s right!

CHANG: (continues) Most of the audiences just watch it for fun. It is true that they are uncertain about how real it is, but they do not really bother either.

6.5 Concluding remarks

Based on an analysis of my field work data, this chapter makes an attempt to address three important issues concerning the Chinese historical television drama; these three issues, including the significance of historical accuracy, totalitarian nostalgia and contemporary use of the historical representations, are raised in a long-term debate of the historical television drama’s role in communicating historical knowledge within the Chinese television drama industry and the academia.

Standing from a perspective of reception studies, I find that the ways that the audience engages with these historical representations are far more complex than generally thought; rather than insist on a literal interpretation of the drama text, the audience engages with the historical television drama in quite a divergent way due to his or her age, gender, life stage and socio-cultural status. Inspired by the work of Couldry, Davis and van Zoonen, I realize that a renewed sociology of knowledge may serve a more convincing theoretical approach to studying the impact of historical television drama on Chinese society.

Within the first section, which deals with the issue of historical accuracy, the dichotomy between serious and popular drama was a constant challenge to my respondents; moving away from a textually informed way of categorizing, my respondents tend to bring forward the factors of cultural competence as well as socio-cultural position to contextualize the extent to which the issues matter to them. The second section concerns the problem of authoritarian nostalgia; although most of my respondents acknowledge nostalgia as a

political and cultural agenda set by the drama producer, they take more or less reflexive attitudes towards a nostalgic reaction. It is worth noting that it is the social consequence rather than the nostalgic reaction that concerns the audience the most.

The last section analyses the three important frames that are adopted by my respondents in their use of the historical television drama as a cultural resource. Influenced by Corner's concept of sensory engagement in watching televised history, I move a bit further in examining specific constitutive elements of engagement in a general sense; these three frames, including learning, reflection and suspicion, can be viewed as a discursive formation of the Chinese audience's viewing experience of the historical television drama. All in all, what I have discussed in this chapter very much echoes Durkheim's (1995) argument towards the end of his famous book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* : 'It is life itself, and not a dead past, that can produce a living cult' (p429). Bearing this argument in mind, I shall move on to examine two main themes that emerged from the second stage of my finding analysis within the next two chapters.

Chapter 7

Fact/Fiction

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, I analysed my respondents' views on three main issues that are drawn from a long-term debate about historical drama within the Chinese television drama industry and academic circles. These three issues include the significance of historical accuracy, totalitarian nostalgia and the contemporary use of historical representations. According to my analysis, as previously mentioned, the ways that my respondents engage with historical representations are far more complex than generally thought; rather than insist on a literal interpretation of the drama text, a respondent would engage with the historical television drama in quite a divergent way depending on his or her age, gender, life stage, socio-cultural status as well as a certain extent of affinity with a specific text or sub-genre. Also, after a critical examination of how my respondents respond to individual issues, I came to realize the usefulness and necessity of adopting a critical sociological approach to a production-consumption study of the historical drama.

This critical approach, as I would like to re-emphasise here, has focused on integrating two areas of sociological investigation: the sociology of the historical drama as a body of popular cultural knowledge on the one hand, and the sociology of the audience's cultural competence on the other. Therefore, it is theoretically guided by a critical sociological approach and methodologically informed by the grounded theory (see Chapter 4) that I conducted during the second stage of my analysis of the audience research data.

At this point, it is worth noting again that the central research question of my entire thesis concerns how historical television drama is understood and socially and culturally valued in contemporary China, through an examination of the personal, social, historical and cultural issues that relate to viewers' engagement to it. In other words, the ways that my respondents 'understand' and 'value' the sample historical dramas are supposed to be the focal points of the audience data analysis. Within the previous chapter, quite several themes and concepts were raised and discussed and they to a varying degree help address the central research question. The three main themes addressed include learning, reflection and suspicion.

However, it should be pointed out that, all of the three themes are derived from the respondents' mental processing and interpretation of the historical drama texts. This psychological interest in the study of contemporary audiences, according to Alasuutari (1999), has given way to a more sociological perspective, 'within which one studies the range of frames and discourses on the media and their content as a topic in its own right' (p13). In this chapter as well as the next one, therefore, I shall present two text-based interpretive frameworks that are adopted by my respondents across all the focus groups and in-depth interviews in their understanding and evaluation of the historical drama text. Both of these interpretive frameworks are identified through manual data processing; they serve as the two most significant categories of findings from my audience research.

This chapter is focused on the interpretive framework of fact/fiction. This particular competing framework emerged from my respondents' discussion about the first and second questions that I asked them in the interviews. The first question was how they define historical television drama. The second question was how they deal with the relationship between 'history' and 'drama' in the sample historical television drama texts. In Chapter 5, I undertook a cultural genre analysis examining how Chinese television drama professionals and key scholars of Chinese media studies in China perceive the truth claims of Chinese historical drama. From the television drama professionals' perspective, in general, there still exists a dichotomy between serious historical drama and popular historical drama. This is defined mainly according to the extent to which a certain drama text is based on prominent historical records. However, the media scholars (Li and Xiao, 2006; Wang, 2008; Yin, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005; Zeng 2000, 2002) suggest, for a proper understanding of the historical drama's truth claim, one must link a consideration of historical accuracy or a claim to historical truth with that of claims to artistic truth where, apart from the roles played by the producer and the drama text, the audience's perceived realism in his or her viewing practice is involved. By 'perceived realism', the media scholars here propose a certain level of experiential authenticity as the outcome of the audience's textual engagement with a drama text.

Although it remains a textual assumption made by and for media scholars, this notion of audience's perceived realism is such an inspiring one. In my view, it can be seen as a psychological standard for a Chinese rational individual involved in the practice of

watching historical drama. In her comparative study of British and Swedish reality television, Annette Hill (2007) usefully reminds us that the rational individual plays ‘an important part of thinking behind “the public knowledge project”’²⁹ and notions of the public sphere’ (p85). Within the public knowledge project, television programmes, no matter whether they are factual or fictional or sources of information or entertainment, can be perceived as forms of public knowledge. Furthermore, the audience’s interpretation and its social determinants are connected with how the programmes function to organize and disseminate public knowledge. I believe that it is also worth exploring how this viewing rationality is manifested or challenged in the reception process of a drama text in the specific Chinese context.

At the same time, in a technical sense, the notion of the audience’s perceived realism offers me an opportunity to re-contextualize the interpretive framework of fact/fiction in a particular actual viewing practice. John Durham Peters, in his 2001 article *Witnessing*, presents a rather philosophical discussion on the relationship between fact and fiction in contemporary media representations on news events. He argues that ‘ultimately, the boundary between fact and fiction is an ethical one before it is an epistemological one’ (Peters, 2001, p721). By prioritizing the ethical over the epistemological, Peters attempts to highlight the importance of a moral interpretation of textually complex media content nowadays. Influenced by Peters’ argument, I would assume that a critical analysis of the Chinese audience’s perceived realism in the viewing practice will reveal broader social and cultural implications from the whole fact/fiction complex other than simply textual ones.

Bearing all those points in mind, I shall next present my findings in relation to the fact/fiction framework in two sections. The first section introduces diverse ways of defining the historical drama by my respondents. I find that the defining practices work as points of departure for my respondents to articulate a broad range of public and personal meanings from the fact/fiction complex. The second section moves beyond the ways of genre definition and concentrates on the major attitudes adopted by my respondents towards China’s historiographical traditions inherent in the historical drama text. Based upon their attitudes towards the historiographical traditions which take their character from contemporary China’s system of television historical drama production, I divide my

²⁹ For a thorough knowledge about this long term project, see John Corner’s work in 1991, 1995, 2008 and 2009.

respondents into three types including conservatists, culturalists and realists. Arbitrary as it may look, this dividing practice methodologically reflects certain cultural and social identities that potentially constitute my respondents' cultural citizenship. As discussed in Chapter 2, cultural citizenship is constituted by a process of continuous performance that can be defined as the struggle over the norms, practices, meanings, and identities through which groups and individuals are socially included and excluded in society. In short, it involves the negotiation of the role of cultural difference in everyday life. Finally, a concluding part will be provided to integrate all the findings and highlight critical viewership that exists in my respondents' adoption of the interpretive framework of fact/fiction in their viewing practices.

7.2 Genre definition

In Chapter 5, I conducted a cultural genre analysis looking at how the Chinese television drama industry and important scholars of Chinese media studies in China contribute to the social formations of Chinese historical drama. It needs to be re-emphasised that my genre analysis represents an attempt to use Jason Mittell's cultural approach to television genres in a contemporary Chinese context. As discussed in Chapter 2, following Foucault's historical model of genealogy, Mittell's cultural genre analysis has undergone an analytical focus shift from a traditional text-centred approach to a cultural one to television genres. For Mittell, television genres are 'not found within media texts, but operate across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts' (2004: xii). Therefore, discursive formations of genres should not be studied through 'interpretive readings or deep structural analysis'; rather, they should be studied 'in their surface manifestations and common articulations' (ibid. p13).

As an analytical tool, Mittell's approach has proved quite useful in my genre analysis. It enables me to gain a multidimensional understanding of Chinese historical drama, from the past to the present and from the textual to the contextual. However, based on my genre analysis, I would like to argue that Mittell's Foucauldian position towards television genres remains largely incompatible with the social formations of Chinese historical drama, although it is appropriate as applied to the American broadcasting system.

According to my discussion in Chapter 5, there are two main reasons behind this potential theoretical incompatibility. First, unlike in the United States, where the television system

operates under liberal market logic, in China, the Party-state apparatus still plays a dominant supervisory role in the production and broadcasting of historical drama. Through its regulatory policies, the Chinese Communist Party forcefully determines the ways that a certain historical figure or event should be interpreted and represented within a particular drama text. Second, prominent Chinese historical dramatists like Mei Hu, the director of *The Great Emperor Hanwu* often claim to promote traditional Chinese cultural heritage through their works in response to the rise of cultural globalisation (see Meng 2006). As a result, a serious historical drama text is expected to carry more explicit symbolic meanings in relation to Chinese national belonging than would other television genres. On the basis of these two reasons, I hence argue that Mittell's cultural genre analysis that considers media power as diffused and discursive is inadequate for a proper understanding of the Chinese context, where the government still occupies the dominant position in supervising the media and organizing media-based symbolic resources.

Returning to my analysis on how my respondents define historical drama, I would like to promote a re-centring of Mittell's cultural approach to television genres in Chinese situations. By 're-centring', I mean that, instead of dwelling on the 'surface manifestations' and 'common articulations' in the study of the social formations of a particular television genre, one needs to re-establish a link between those manifestations and articulations and their actual historical and sociological groundings. When asked to define the historical drama, my respondents would offer me a broad range of ways of definition. Some define by historical setting (for example Qing drama), some by content (for example anti-corruption drama), some by audience effect (for example historical comedy), and some by narrative form (for example the drama of demystification). On the other hand, when it comes to the relationship between historical accuracy and dramatic effect, the respondents' initial responses are always similar to what this young male adult from a Changsha group said below:

I think the relationship is already very clear; dramas like *The Great Emperor Hanwu* are real historical dramas because they are based on historical facts, whereas stuff like *The Bronze Teeth* is nothing but a satirical television fiction set in the Qing dynasty (male, aged 28, self-employed).

At the surface level, one can easily identify a definitional tension that emerges here. For one thing, there appears a diversity of genre definitions depending on the angle from which

the audience chooses to textually engage with a particular drama. For another, there seemingly exists a clear boundary between fact and fiction in defining a historical drama amongst my respondents. However, after conducting an in-depth analysis of my respondents' definitions across all the groups, I came to realize that there was a crucial link between the fact/fiction complex as a corpus of genre knowledge and the respondents' cultural competences in dealing with it.

In Chapter 6, I introduced Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural competence linked to David Morley's reflection (1992) on his own work *The 'Nationwide' audience*. According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural competence is the code into which a work of art is encoded; it is 'only for someone who possesses the cultural competence' that the work of art 'has meaning and interest' (p2). Meanwhile, I have found this notion quite useful in analyzing my respondents' attitudes towards the issue of historical accuracy. When I move further to examine the textual engagement with the fact/fiction complex within the historical drama in particular, I find that my respondents demonstrate two main types of cultural competences. It is through the working through of these cultural competences that they are able to offer a broad range of definitions. Next, I shall detail these cultural competences in the rest of the section.

First, there is an extent to which the audience has known a particular historical subject before he or she watches the historical drama that deals with it. It is worth remembering here that three clips were shown in the middle of the focus group discussion in order to help the respondents to answer the questions (see Chapter 4). All of the clips are taken from the three historical television dramas that I use as case studies; *The Great Emperor Hanwu* and *The First Emperor* being often labeled as serious historical dramas and *The Bronze Teeth* a more popular entertainment drama. According to my observations, almost all of my respondents are aware of the fact that this serious-popular divide lies at the heart of public discourses about the historical drama. In talking about their familiarity with those sample dramas, many respondents would naturally use the divide to differentiate *The Great Emperor Hanwu* and *The First Emperor* from *The Bronze Teeth*. However, when I move on to ask them to define these dramas in their own ways, most of my respondents expressed a certain level of suspicion or uncertainty about the serious-popular divide in their definitions. The following are four representative examples:

Example 1: I am not sure if *The Great Emperor Hanwu* and *The First Emperor* are completely based on historical records, but I would still define them as historical dramas because at least their main plots stick to well-known historical facts (male, aged 28, self-employed).

Example 2: For me, most of the so-called serious historical dramas are just revisionist or reinterpreted historical dramas because lots of historical facts in them have been either altered or rewritten. For example, some elements of the story of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the Emperor Qin are missing in *The First Emperor*. Because I have known this story very well, I can quickly realize what the missing elements are (female, aged 40, bank clerk).

Example 3: For me, a historical drama is characterised as a knowledge spectrum; at the one end of the spectrum is complete popular history and at the other end of the spectrum is complete official historical document. It's up to you to position a particular historical drama within that spectrum (female, aged 25, college teacher).

Example 4: In my opinion, the popular historical dramas like *The Tales of Emperor Qianlong* and *The Bronze Teeth* to some extent serve as unofficial versions of the history of the Qianlong Period, so I would call them costume dramas with historical tales. In *The Tales of Emperor Qianlong*, for example, most of the love stories that happened to Emperor Qianlong during his visit to South China may be totally made up, but there have been oral tales for generations saying that Qianlong lost his passion for his ugly wives so he went to inspect South China with the aim of taking beautiful concubines [laughter] (male, aged 25, office worker).

From the four examples shown above, one can easily see that the ways that the respondents perceive and evaluate historical knowledge largely influence how they engage with the fact/fiction complex of the historical drama. It is a multimodality of historical knowledge that keeps the term historical television drama valid in contemporary Chinese context. These four examples well illustrate this multimodality of historical knowledge.

The first example represents the most common attitude towards the fact/fiction complex within the historical drama amongst my respondents. This self-employed young man comes to grips with historical facts by adopting a grand narrative. In order to make sense of historiographical traditions inherent in a particular historical drama text, he chooses to rely on the plots of historical subjects rather than the details of them. Unlike this young man who appears relaxed about the issues of historical accuracy, the female bank clerk presented in the second example takes issue with the representation of detailed historical facts. Her particular comments about the depiction of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of

the Emperor Qin are, of course, made on the premise that she has ‘known this story very well’. However, by claiming that ‘most of the so-called serious historical dramas are just revisionist or reinterpreted’, she demonstrates a general critical viewership in the reinterpretation of historical facts within the historical drama. It should be pointed out here that, in all the focus group discussions, only those respondents like this lady, who have a considerable level of history education and self-confidence, are able to take this sort of critical stance on historical representation.

Going beyond the categorization of historical representation, the respondents shown in the third and the fourth examples express their major concerns about the nature of historical knowledge itself. In Example Three, the female college teacher takes quite a conservative attitude towards historical knowledge. By differentiating ‘complete popular history’ from ‘complete official historical document’, she attempts to draw a line between popular historical representation and official historical records. For her, official historical records serve as the highest factual standards for historical representation.

In the fourth example, on the contrary, the young male office worker challenges this narrow definition of historical knowledge. For him, as well as official historical records, oral historical tales occupy important positions in his knowledge about the Emperor Qianlong. As previously explained, it is widely considered by the Chinese television audience that *The Tales of Emperor Qianlong* is a popular costume drama. That, however, would not stop the man from using his vernacular historical knowledge to formulate an alternative historical understanding of the drama. This alternative historical understanding is not only highly male-oriented. At the same time, it is, to borrow Fung and Ma’s notion (2002a), offered in a pragmatic mode. That is, by bringing in the Emperor’s romance tales, the man treats the story of the Emperor Qianlong as a casual and realistic tale rather than noble or mysterious one.

Moving away from the question of concrete historical knowledge, the second type of cultural competence involves an awareness of the operation of ideology within particular drama texts. This awareness of ideological operation can be easily identified from the ways that my respondents define historical drama. More importantly, it is also manifested within an interpretive framework of fact and fiction. As noted earlier in Chapter 5, Li and Xiao (2006) raise the concept of ‘dramatization of history’ in order to explain the relationship

between the factual and the fictional within contemporary Chinese television historical drama texts. By ‘dramatization of history’, they mainly refer to the historically realist style adopted by most of the so-called serious historical dramas, for instance, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* and *The First Emperor*, which are characterised by the very fact that they are largely based on official historical records. For them, dramatization of history produces an ideological consequence in portraying historical figures and events. In the example of Er Yuehe’s Qing emperor series that I mentioned in Chapter 3, they write that the serious historical drama attempts to convey strong political messages to its audiences through selective representation of relevant historical materials. As a result, it makes a highly ideological judgment about certain historical figures or events. Drawn from a text-centred approach in the study of historical drama, the ideological consequence here proposed by Li and Xiao remains a textual assumption.

David Morley (1992), in his influential work *Television, Audience and Cultural Studies*, offers a proper understanding of ideological problematic in relation to audience research. Ideological problematic, according to him, ‘must be understood not as a set of contents but rather as a defined set of operations: the way a problematic selects from, conceives and organizes its field of reference’ (Morley, 1992, p66). Moreover, a text can ‘be structured by more than one problematic, although one or a restricted set will tend to be in dominance’ (ibid.). Inspired by Stephen Neale (1977), Morley continues to argue that it is from certain ‘subject positions’ of the audience that certain ideological operations of the text become realized (ibid.).

Back to my own audience research, Morley’s explanation of ideological problematic proves quite convincing. In their definitions of the historical drama, my respondents would touch upon different ‘fields of reference’ to the operation of ideology based on the drama text. In the case of *The First Emperor*, I found that my respondents revealed four main fields of reference, which can be illustrated by the following four examples respectively:

Example 1: As far as I am concerned, *The First Emperor* is just an educational television drama. The way that the historical facts are presented in it is almost as boring as it is in the history textbook that I used in my high school history class. Not much new stuff in there! (female, aged 24, technician).

Example 2: For me, most of the Chinese historical dramas like *The First Emperor* are

nothing but poorly delivered televised history lectures. They're overloaded with historical stuff that the producer wants you to learn. They are so vague but the producer expects you to guess their meanings... I am just so sick of guessing them (female, aged 26, university teacher).

Example 3: *The First Emperor* is typical of a Chinese historical drama, which is always about something positive and about one's loyalty to his own country. Like this story of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the Emperor Qin... Jing shows great loyalty to his King by following his order. He is such a typical national hero (female, aged 44, hospital nurse).

Example 4: The historical drama is by no means just something about the past. Instead, things like *The First Emperor* tell us what we should do in the present. As the Confucian saying goes, only by reviewing the old can one learn the new. *The First Emperor* is that sort of a cultural thing! (male, aged 55, company manager)

In the first example, the female technician links Chinese historical drama with China's high school history textbook. According to her, there is a similar treatment of the story of *The First Emperor* within high school history teaching and the mainstream popular television communication in contemporary China. One may argue that the comment of 'not much new stuff in there' on the historical drama is somewhat unfair, because the drama producer, as mentioned in Chapter 5, has made good attempt to provide the audience with some unofficial tales about the protagonist Emperor Zheng Ying in the drama. In my view, however, the comment at least shows that she identifies the same dominant narrative in the televised historical representation as in the high school education concerning this particular historical subject. Furthermore, by 'almost as boring as it is in the history textbook', she criticizes this dominant narrative sustained by both China's media and educational institutions.

Example Two brings to the fore the issue of communicative style of contemporary Chinese historical drama. On the one hand, this female young university teacher demonstrates her good knowledge about the whole genre of Chinese historical drama. On the other, by using the terms 'poorly delivered history lectures', 'over-loaded' and 'vague', she expresses strong disapproval towards the propagandist tone of the historical drama. Differently from the first example, where that young lady relates the historical drama to the field of China's history education, this young teacher concentrates on the field of China's television drama production.

The third and fourth examples shift their attention from the contents and styles of the historical drama to the political implications behind them. Importantly, it is mostly those respondents from my middle-aged groups who would show positive attitudes towards those implications. Unlike most of my young adult respondents who are very aware and critical of the informative and educational elements of the historical drama, the middle-aged ones tend to take a culturally reflexive approach to treat those elements. In the third example, the middle-aged lady perceives *the First Emperor* to be ‘typical of a Chinese historical drama’ for the sake that it offers a detailed portrayal of this national hero Jing Ke. If one refers back to the so-called positive state ideology endorsed by Chinese media scholars like Zeng which I discussed in Chapter 5, the story of Jing Ke is such a case in point. It is worth reminding that, according to China’s mainstream official historical interpretation, Jing is widely known as a historical symbol for loyalty and bravery for his attempt to assassinate Emperor Qin in order to protect his own country of Yan from being invaded and unified by the Kingdom of Qin. Through a positive reading of the story of Jing in *The First Emperor*, this lady comes to terms with the state ideological meanings involved in this drama text.

Example Four extends an ideological interpretation of *The First Emperor* from the political arena to the cultural one. This is demonstrated by the definition of ‘that sort of a cultural thing’ given by the middle-aged company manager. By quoting that particular Confucian saying about the relationship between the old and the new, he seems to suggest that the historical drama be understood as a contemporary adaptation of ancient Confucian teaching. This effectively adds a cultural/historical dimension to an understanding of the historical drama apart from the educational, the industrial and the political ones shown by the other examples just discussed. It is these dimensions altogether articulated by my respondents, as I would argue, that constitute the ideological operations of the historical drama.

7.3 Chinese historiographical tradition and its three types of television interpreters

Having undertaken a multidimensional analysis on the definitions of the historical drama, I shall now move on to examine how my respondents deal with the relationship between ‘history’ and ‘drama’ in the selected historical television drama texts. In Chapter 5, I have

introduced how some prominent media scholars in China look at China's historiographical traditions inherent in contemporary Chinese historical drama text. According to Li and Xiao (2006), historical drama, as an art form, has experienced a long history in China since ancient times. In regards to the uniqueness of historical drama as a Chinese literary genre, they explain that this uniqueness is derived from the most important tradition of ancient Chinese mainstream fictional writing. That is, writers always preferred turning to actual historical figures and events over cultural myth or legendary tales for their creative inspiration, or, as Li and Xiao (2006: 137) phrase, 'they adored history and undermined myths' (*chongbai lishi yizhi shenhua*). Li and Xiao move on to write that, unlike old Greek myths, which were systematic on their own, 'primitive Chinese myths were lacking in interconnectedness and often contradicted each other' (ibid. p140). What is more, the rise of Confucianism from the second century in Chinese society, as they argue, further constrained the development of Chinese myth culture through introducing a series of secular political and moral principles. In brief, these principles include avoidance of conflict, a social hierarchy that values seniority and patriarchy and a reliance on astute leadership. Consequently, it is History rather than any sacred belief system that became the major influence on ancient Chinese fictional writings.

When it comes to the appearance of the television historical drama since the mid-1990s, Yin (2001b: 22) explains that 'History' is distanced from all the sensitive conflicts and political power struggles of contemporary China, so 'it provides a rich selection of resources and a more open narrative space' (ibid.). As far as the evolution of the historical drama is concerned, Yin views it as a result of various cultural, social and economic forces combined. According to him, costume drama like *the Tales of Emperor Qianlong* had no intention of exploring 'contemporary China's political and power struggle in reality'; it simply offered the Chinese public 'pure entertainment in the disguise of historical representation' (ibid. p23). In contrast, historical dramas like *the Great Emperor Hanwu*, while adopting diverse theatrical styles, have inherited Chinese intellectuals' historiographical tradition; it not only 'recalled history, but also simulated history' and 'provided intellectuals with a means of expression and certain rhetorical strategies' (ibid. p24).

From the perspective of audience research, however, the historiographical traditions discussed by these media scholars serve as nothing but text-based assumptions made by

them for the understanding and interpretation of the historical drama. Furthermore, they are derived from the treatment of the historical drama as a literary form of writing history. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between the writing of history and historical television drama programmes is far from simple. A historical television drama is shaped primarily within the categories of television rather than the needs of historical knowledge; it is an institutional media phenomenon, which is associated with a specific set of regulatory, production, distribution and scheduling practices.

In the meantime, the writing of history and the production of historical television programmes are not completely autonomous activities; according to British film and television scholar Colin McArthur (1978), they ‘take their character from the system of production relationships in the social formation they inhabit’ (p15). In this connection, I would argue that the ways that the audience relates to certain historical representation and its contemporary meanings largely reflect particular attitudes they take towards the social formation where the production of that representation takes place.

As argued in the previous chapter, the debate about historical accuracy along with the popularity of the Chinese historical television drama needs to be re-examined beyond the textual level. By the same token, rather than dwell on the historiographical traditions as such, one has to shift his or her attention to study how their different ways of perception are constructed, and at the same time, why they matter in a wider socio-cultural context. Informed by this understanding of production-consumption relationship, I identify three main types of attitudes amongst my respondents in terms of how they perceive the historiographical traditions inherent in the historical drama.

Meanwhile, it should be pointed out that these three types of attitudes adopted by my respondents are essentially methodologically determined. They are distinctively constituted within the focus group discussions as well as the in-depth interviews. As I have noted in Chapter 4, a focus group features group consensus and it to some extent mimics real social situations in which certain social and cultural values are shared or contested. Nevertheless, ‘talk’ can be seen as a process of sense-making, comprehension as well as critique. Therefore, the focus groups and in-depth interviews that I conducted, which were both based on talk, would provide insight into how the historical drama as a genre with complex textuality is operationalised in contemporary Chinese context. My intension of dividing the

respondents into three types is to reveal that operationalization process of cultural difference. It is also during that process that, as I argue, the historiographical tradition becomes socially relevant. Next, I shall elaborate on each one of the audience types.

7.3.1 Conservatists

The first type of respondents is what I would term as conservatists. Out of my 41 focus group participants in total, I would say that there are around five respondents who can be categorized into this type. Also, all of the historical drama fans that I interviewed would belong to this category as well. These respondents strongly advocate that China's television dramatists be obliged to represent important Chinese historical figures and events in an accurate way. As far as a serious historical drama is concerned, they would prioritize its claim to historical truth over that to artistic truth emphasising the avoidance of realizing dramatic effect at the sacrifice of distorting historical facts. The following two respondents are representative of this type of audiences. For example, when talking about *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, they express their opinions as below:

Generally speaking, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* has done well in dealing with the relationship between fact and fiction. Most of the scenes are based on their original historical stories. However, some of the big scenes look a bit too modern and not that authentic. For instance, there is this scene where a big royal ceremony is held to celebrate the end of the winter. It looks more like a disco dance party than any event that would take place in ancient times (male, aged 44, university instructor).

In general, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* has made a good balance between representation of historical facts and melodramatic effect. It can be easily felt that the producers have made good efforts to weave historical facts into an engaging way of story-telling. Where it falls down, however, is in an insufficiency of historical accuracy in the detail. For example, there is this battle that involved tens of thousands of soldiers according to its well-know historical records, but you just get less than one hundred actors appear in the scene. Fake scenes like that would make me feel very unsatisfied and disappointed (male, aged 27, self-employed).

From these two quotes, one can easily feel a sense of strictness concerning the extent of factual accuracy of the historical drama that these two male respondents expect. In other words, the quotes demonstrate the respondents' strong yearning for a fair and candid representation of historical facts by historical dramas, especially those ones which claim to be based on well-known historical records. Here, this strong yearning for authentic historical representation is manifested by two approaches of audience interpretation. First,

there is a sensory approach. That 44-year-old male university instructor above quoted, for example, constantly expressed unsatisfactory feelings with misrepresentation of historical facts in the historical drama in his group discussion. In that quote, his critique of ‘a bit too modern and not that authentic’ on that particular royal ceremony scene from *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is simply derived from his sensory engagement with relevant historical representation.

The second approach of audience interpretation is informed by the audience’s use of factual knowledge. The quote from that 27-year-old self-employed male well illustrates this interpretive approach. In my in-depth interview with him, this young male fan of the historical drama repeatedly emphasised the crucial significance for a serious historical drama to do justice to the widely known historical facts represented within it. He even drew a parallel between the historical drama and the historical documentary on contemporary Chinese television, stating that his ideal type of historical television programmes would be ‘a perfect combination’ of the two genres. Extreme as his statement may sound, what he says here tells us the fact that a claim to historical truth remains the most important viewing value for him as far as the historical drama is concerned. For him, historical accuracy serves as the most important standard for a quality, serious historical drama.

The above-mentioned two males are representative of the conservative audiences for the fact/fiction debate in two main aspects. First, these audiences are always males. Like that young self-employed male respondent, they have a strong affinity for the historical drama. Furthermore, this affinity is mainly towards the claim to historical truth made by the dramatist. In the previous chapter, I have revealed a close association between historical knowledge learning and male fandom activity in the reception of the historical television drama. Here, this gender-based association needs to be re-emphasised.

Second, those who take a conservative attitude mostly have relatively high educational levels. Like that middle-aged male who is a university instructor himself, there other two out of the five respondents within this type are both middle school teachers. From the focus group discussions, I find that these educational workers tend to more naturally and strongly defend the function of communicating accurate historical knowledge to the general public performed by the historical drama. More importantly, they also criticize the

misrepresentation issues similar to the one taken by that middle-aged male through a sensory engagement of particular historical drama texts. This, in my understanding, is largely due to the fact that they have cultivated a strong awareness of historical knowledge in watching the historical drama. In the meantime, they are more likely to articulate that awareness on public occasions like a round of focus group discussion.

7.3.2 Culturalists

Different from those conservative audiences who have high expectations on factual accuracy of the historical dramas, especially of the serious ones, many other respondents are much more relaxed in dealing with historical accuracy. On the one hand, they would more or less admit that artistic illusion between the past and the present created by the historical drama serves as the biggest attraction for them to watch this particular television genre. On the other hand, they would challenge the legitimacy of the widely acknowledged serious/popular divide of the historical drama; they suspect that the serious historical drama's claims to historical truth could be actually realized on contemporary Chinese television in the way that those conservative respondents assume. Out of my 41 focus group participants, I find that there are about 18 of them who basically take this kind of attitude. For these respondents, I would like to call them culturalists here for the analytical reason. The following two quotes are from two respondents within this category respectively:

There is absolutely no doubt that all these emperor dramas including *The Great Emperor Hanwu* and even *The Bronze Teeth* have their own political agendas. We all know that the government is now promoting the building of a harmonious society in China, right? These historical things are surely supposed to send that message. However, in order to get that message across a certain historical drama has to be made acceptable to its audiences in the first place. Producing historical dramas is not doing academic historical research. It is mass art and mass entertainment production! The serious historical drama also needs to be entertaining (male, aged 55, company manager).

To what extent or in what ways an audience would understand the relationship between a certain historical fact and its contemporary meanings is a complicated question. You may get different answers from different people. I think that a good understanding of historical representation has a lot to do with this audience's life experience. Take the story of Jing Ke's assassination of the Emperor Qin, you have to be old and mentally mature enough to truly understand Jing Ke's heroic deeds. The story is not just about him being a national hero. It is also about human suffering! (female, aged 47, civil clerk)

From these two quotes, it is easy to identify a high level of cultural competence. As previously explained, cultural competence is the code into which a work of art is encoded; it is 'only for someone who possesses the cultural competence' that the work of art 'has meaning and interest' (Bourdieu, 1984, p2). In this particular case, this high level of cultural competence is reflected in the respondents' good ability and flexibility to deal with the fact/fiction issues that relate to the historical drama. For example, that 55-year-old company manager believes that Chinese historical drama, whichever sub-genre it is, performs an important propagandist function for Chinese government. From this, one can say that this respondent is quite aware of the fact that the rise of traditional Chinese culture contents on contemporary Chinese television has been deliberately endorsed by the government. On the other hand, he is also very concerned with mass entertainment. In saying that 'a certain historical drama has to be made acceptable to its audiences in the first place', he effectively suggests an audience-centred way of understanding the impact of the historical drama. Furthermore, his statement of 'the serious historical drama also needs to be entertaining', in my view, shows his positive attitudes towards the ideological transformation of the historical drama text.

Instead of making a serious/entertaining distinction, that 47-year-old female civil clerk considers an understanding of historical representation to be 'a cultural question'. In the previous chapter, when discussing the audience's practice of reflecting on the historical television drama, I also quoted this female respondent. In that quote, she succinctly relates the practice of reflection with her understanding of 'being Chinese'. She claims that pondering over the meaning of history while watching the historical drama makes her come to terms with her own 'Chinese cultural identity'. In this quote, she further explains that identity formation process. By proposing the notion of 'the audience's life experience', she brings a humanist perspective in an understanding of historical representation. The way she interprets the story of Jing Ke's assassination of the Emperor Qin well reflects this. She moves beyond a nationalistic interpretation of Jing and treats his heroic deeds as 'human suffering'. This humanistic interpretation echoes the revisionist understanding of historical development within China's historical novels since the early 1990s, which I have discussed in Chapter 2. That is, it is the realm of human unconsciousness not external social and political systems that should be the focal point for an interrogation of historical development.

As far as their age and social status are concerned, these culturalist respondents have two characteristics worthy of a special mention. First, like the two respondents above quoted, most of them are middle-aged viewers. In the previous chapter, some discussion has been devoted to an interaction between my respondents' emotional engagement with the historical drama and their age. I find that the middle-aged respondents are more likely to have established patterning of television viewing than their young adult counterparts. As a result, they tend to regard the practice of watching television drama as a serious business of gaining entertainment as well as engaging with public concerns. In the case of the historical drama, these culturalist audiences, in particular, would view it as an important cultural forum on which prominent Confucian values are disseminated and debated in contemporary Chinese society.

Second, interestingly enough, nearly all my respondents who occupy senior administrative positions in China's state-owned enterprises fall into this audience category. They would address Confucianism-related or traditional Chinese culture issues in a more active manner than others. The above quoted middle-aged male respondent serves as a perfect example. The male respondent is a senior manager of a small-sized state-owned retail company in Beijing. For instance, when discussing *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, he enthusiastically associated the Emperor Wu with China's current leading political authority, the Hu-Wen Administration. He repeatedly claimed that the Hu-Wen Administration had a lot to learn from the Emperor Wu in maintaining China's national unification and social stability.

7.3.3 Realists

The third type of my respondents is what I would like to call realists. Based on my analysis on all the interview data, I find that the rest 18 focus group participants and the two female anti-fans for my in-depth interviews belong to this category. Unlike two preceding types of respondents, these respondents would take distance from actual historical facts in an interpretation of certain historical representation. More importantly, in terms of their social positions, most of these realistic respondents are either self-employed or low-rank employers in state-owned enterprises. They not only choose to approach the historical representation from a contemporary perspective. Their understanding of the historical representation is entirely derived from their personal social and cultural concerns. In order to illustrate my point, I provide two quotes as below:

When it comes to an interpretation of the historical drama, it completely depends on the angle from which you choose to look at it. In my view, there are normally three main angles. They include seeking for historical knowledge, pursuing contemporary meanings and just looking for fun. You know what, I have watched *The Great Emperor Hanwu* three times. For the first time, I watched it on television like everyone else. Just for fun! For the second time, I watched it really carefully on the Internet. That was during a summer holiday when I was in college because I felt like learning some history. I didn't watch it for the third time until after I watched Zhongtian Yi's lectures on the Han Dynasty on the CCTV 10³⁰. Yi interpreted the history of Han from a complete contemporary angle. It was so engaging and lively that I couldn't help watching the show again! (male, aged 24, assistant mechanical engineer)

I am a complete realist. I only care about contemporary life. Those dynasties are too far away from me. Take the scene of Jing Ke's assassination of the Emperor Qin for an example, I have absolutely no problem with its presentation of historical facts and figures although there are maybe some missing details. However, getting its message is the key. That is, Jing's bravery and loyalty to his country! What I am really concerned, however, is that the scene is just so slow that young people like my 14-year-old daughter won't have the patience to watch it at all. I think young people should learn some history! (female, aged 40, senior manager)

Instead of directly addressing the historical drama in relation to its social impact, these respondents tend to focus more on their personal concerns with the genre. The first quote is from a young adult who works for a state-owned factory as an assistant mechanical engineer. In this quote, he almost tells a personal story about how *The Great Emperor Hanwu* as a television text was consumed by him. From his words, one can easily feel his strong sense of freedom in television consumption. One may argue that the use of multi-platform communication technologies offers him opportunities to engage with the same drama text at different times for different purposes. However, his mention of this television personality Zhongtian Yi deserves attention. In my opinion, the fact that he chose to watch *The Great Emperor Hanwu* for the third time under the influence of Yi's lecture series to some extent contradicts his sense of freedom of choice in consuming the text of *The Great Emperor Hanwu*. In other words, to what extent his realistic attitudes toward the historical drama enable him to formulate his own idea of History remains a question.

³⁰ Born in 1947, Zhongtian Yi is a Chinese writer, historian, scholar and television personality. In 2005, he appeared on the television programme *Lecture Room (Baijia Jiangtan)* on the CCTV 10, CCTV's educational channel. Yi's lecture series on personalities of China's Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period were successful. However, because of his colloquial way of lecturing on history, he also aroused some controversy about the academic quality of his lectures.

In the second quote, in a rather blunt way, this middle-aged female respondent claims that she is ‘a realist’. By that, she goes on to explain that she would always interpret television contents from a contemporary perspective. It is worth pointing out that this female respondent is a senior manager in a high-profile private-owned dairy products company in the city of Changsha. In my methodological notes in Chapter 4, I have noted that, in her group discussion, she straightforwardly challenged me more than once by asking me why I chose to pursue a Ph.D. degree abroad working on such a ‘popular culture subject like this’ and ‘taking it so seriously’. In almost the same tone, she also strongly disagreed with those fellow respondents in her group who insist on the importance of historical accuracy of the historical drama.

Using the story of Jing Ke’s assassination of the Emperor Qin as an example, she argues that what is really important about the historical drama does not lie in historical accuracy. Rather, she believes that it is important to grasp the exact message that a certain historical drama intends to send to its viewing public. What fascinates me the most about her quote is the fact that she expresses her worry about a limited influence of the historical drama on the young people like her daughter. On the one hand, she feels that there is a need for her daughter to learn ‘some history’. On the other hand, she claims that the serious historical drama like *The First Emperor* may fail to attract the young people due to its slow speed of story-telling. What she worries here, as a matter of fact, points towards the question of quality about the historical drama in general. It is exactly this quality question that I should move on to deal with in the next chapter.

7.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter concentrates on the ways that my respondents tend to understand the historical drama depending on their own viewing practices. Through an in-depth data analysis, I identify a competing framework of fact/fiction from the respondents in their understanding of the relationship between ‘history’ and ‘drama’ in the sample historical television drama texts. In order to unpack this fact/fiction complex, I adopt a critical sociological approach to a production-consumption study of the historical drama. As shown in the discussion, this critical approach has focused on integrating two areas of sociological investigation: the sociology of the historical drama as a body of popular cultural knowledge on the one hand, and the sociology of the audience’s cultural

competence on the other. In a general sense, I have established that this conceptual framework of fact/fiction works to produce two main cultural approaches amongst my respondents. For one thing, it serves as an interpretive tool for the respondents to textually and socially engage with the serious-popular divide that characterizes historical drama on contemporary Chinese television. For another, it operates as a cultural indicator which divides my respondents into three types in terms of how they perceive the sense of realism that can be derived from the historical drama text. It is based on these two cultural approaches that I became aware of my respondents' critical viewership in understanding historical drama as a television genre.

As far as the actual findings are concerned, I find that my respondents demonstrate two main types of cultural competences when they attempt to define a particular historical drama. The first type of cultural competence concerns the extent to which the audience has known a particular historical subject before he or she watches the historical drama that deals with it. The second type involves an awareness of the operation of ideology within particular drama texts. When it comes to the fact/fiction debate concerning Chinese historiographical traditions inherent in the historical drama, the most important finding is that those who occupy senior administrative positions in state-owned enterprises as well as those who are middle school or university teachers appear much more concerned with the debate than those who are self-employed or low-rank employers in state-owned enterprises. Based on all these findings, I would argue that it is only those respondents, who have accumulated a considerable amount of political and educational capital, are actively and consciously participating in a fact/fiction debate on the historical drama.

Chapter 8

Classic

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter concentrates on the ways that my respondents tend to understand historical drama depending on their own viewing practices. Through an in-depth data analysis, I identify a competing framework of fact/fiction from the respondents in their understanding of the relationship between ‘history’ and ‘drama’ in the sample historical television drama texts. However, although it generates different ways of understanding the historical drama by my respondents, this conceptual framework remains inadequate to fully address the performance of cultural citizenship by the respondents in watching historical drama. This is due to the fact that the conceptual framework of fact/fiction mainly involves a process of definition and interpretation of historical drama, but fails to incorporate a value judgment. By a value judgment here, I mean a judgment of the goodness or badness of a particular television historical drama, or of the social and cultural function of the drama, based on the audience’s personal view. As I suggested in Chapter 2, both Mittell and Corner provide me with useful positions on the relationship between television genres and the audience’s value judgment. Referring back to Mittell’s cultural approach to television genres, a cultural genre analysis is incomplete without an evaluation process apart from those of definition and interpretation. According to Mittell (2004), if we accept that genres are constituted by generic discourses, we need to acknowledge that these discourses are circulating within larger systems of power as well as located within ‘the common process of generic evaluation’ (p27). For him, these larger systems of power can also be understood as systems of ‘cultural hierarchies’ (ibid. p26) or ‘hierarchies of cultural value’ (ibid. p27).

At the same time, Corner (2007a) rightly observes this emergence of value judgment in his discussion on the new trend of television criticism. He terms judgments on television programmes themselves as ‘primary judgments’ and those on ‘the broader culture and politics that the programmes evidence and perhaps support’ as ‘secondary judgments’ (ibid. p367). As far as the audience is concerned, Corner points out that he or she ‘might be regarded as variously wittingly or unwittingly affiliated to’ those second judgments within a new round of television criticism (ibid.). Here, audiences’ ‘various witting or unwitting

affiliation' to the value judgment on a particular television genre can be seen as the way(s) that they may contribute to the discursive formation of the genre as a cultural category. From this, it can be seen that Mittell mainly argues for an open rather than a closed analytical attitude towards a given television genre and its generic function, whereas Corner proposes to bring the value judgment into that analysis.

Speaking of an examination of the audience's value judgment, I would also re-emphasise the great potential usefulness of Nick Couldry's work *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (2003) here. In the book, he launches a careful critique of the neo-Durkheimian type of functionalism notably represented in Dayan and Katz's work on broadcasting events (1992); he puts forward a crucial assertion that, as Buonanno (2008) summarises, 'shared values emanating from the "core" of society find elements in televisual events that have...a "coagulating" effect, in that they keep the diverse and disunited parts of society together' (p46). Nevertheless, as Couldry himself argues, media rituals are not something universal; they are social forms 'which legitimate a fact that about the current organization of mediation, in most parts of the world, that is contingent, not necessary' (ibid. p135). The current organization of mediation, as he goes on to remind us, is 'the intense concentration of society's symbolic resources in centralized institutions that we call "the media"' (ibid.).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Couldry's mediation analysis reintroduces a sociological perspective to Cultural Studies. Compared to Mittell's television genre theory and Corner's idea of second judgment on television programmes, what Couldry attempts to do is to provide a missing link between the cultural and the social by reexamining the symbolic dimension of social life (see Couldry 2006b). In other words, only by treating contemporary media representations as a corpus of symbolic resources that are produced, regulated and distributed by the centralized media institutions in a particular society would one be possibly able to grasp shared values that hold that society together.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that when it comes to the presentation of the findings on my data analysis, I draw much inspiration from van Zoonen's work *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (2005). In the book, as discussed in Chapter 2, through an online forum study of American audience's reaction to political dramas like *Mr. Smith*, *Dave* or *The West Wing*, van Zoonen finds that 'people seem to apply the same frames to make sense of fictional and true politics' (ibid. p137). These 'frames' including

description, realism, judgment, reflection and utopia, according to her, provide opportunities for people to ‘sharpen their overall angle on politics and express an overall sense of utopia’ (ibid. p139). Thus, she argues that popular culture is a resource for ‘political citizenship’; it produces ‘comprehension and respect for popular political voices that allow for more people to perform as citizens...in other words, a resource that can entertain the citizen’ (ibid. p151).

Guided by a juxtaposition of Mittell, Corner, Couldry and van Zoonen’s work, therefore, this chapter is focused on the quality issues connected with historical drama from the point of view of the audience. This theme of ‘classic’ (*jingdian*) emerged from my respondents’ discussion about the third and fourth questions that I asked them in the interviews. The third question was what they think about the quality of Chinese historical television drama. The fourth question was how they associate the contents of the historical television drama with contemporary Chinese society.

From the focus group interviews, I encountered two levels of cultural discourse that are closely associated with the quality debate about historical drama. The primary level concerns a series of important theatrical factors including settings, acting and audio-visual effect. These factors should not be simply regarded as the reference points used by the respondents in their evaluation of the historical drama. More importantly, they prompt a discussion about the commercialization process of Chinese television and its influences on the Chinese audience. The secondary level of the quality debate about the historical drama focuses on the respondents’ broader concerns about the social and cultural implications of this particular television genre. Through a careful examination of these two levels of cultural discourse, I identify that ‘classic-ness’ serves as a rhetorical frame that shapes the whole quality debate concerning the historical drama from the perspectives of my respondents. This rhetorical frame is put forward as well as challenged by the respondents both in focus group and in-depth interviews. The adoption of this frame by my respondents involves wider social and cultural processes focused around Chinese historical drama. Most importantly, it reflects a broader range of televisual participation and indeed social imaginaries amongst my respondents.

This chapter consists of three sections. The first section offers a reappraisal of the meanings of classic television drama based on my audience research. Against the

background of commercialization and trans-nationalization of China's television drama production, I realize that the way a certain respondent evaluates the authenticity issues concerning the historical drama remains co-determined by his or her gender, generation as well as social position. To follow upon a reappraisal of the discourse of classic television drama, Section Two examines my respondents' reflexive attitudes towards the changing nature of the 'classic' discourse in the case of the historical drama. Within this section, an emphasis has been put on the crucial influence of a television viewer's social position on his or her treatment of popular historical representation on contemporary Chinese television. Based upon all the factors discussed throughout this chapter that determine how my respondents evaluate the discourse of classic historical drama, the concluding section refers back to American anthropologist Lisa Rofel's suggestion (1994, 1999) of taking a close look at how state power in China operates through the way the state creates itself as an imagined entity, which I mentioned in Chapter 2. Now, I shall embark on the first section.

8.2 The classic television drama: a reappraisal

The notion of classic television was in varying degrees mentioned and discussed across all of my eight focus groups. My favourite example is that, immediately after I showed all of the clips that were taken from the three case-study historical television dramas to a group of young people from the city of Changsha (FG5), Yang, a female respondent, challenged me for not showing what she had had thought to be the most classic (*jingdian*) Chinese historical drama of the past decade. That is, the costume drama *The Princess Pearl*.³¹ She even led a short but fascinating debate on what a classic historical drama should be like. Here is how the debate proceeded:

YANG: Dawei, you didn't show us the most classical historical drama of the past decade!

INTERVIEWER: Alright! What's that then?

YANG: Just guess everybody!

³¹ *The Princess Pearl* (*huanzhu gege*), also known in Singapore and the Philippines as *My Fair Princess*, is a television series adapted from the widely-known Taiwanese romance novelist Yao Chiung's novel series of the same title. Produced by China's Hunan Television, the series is centred around the legendary figure Princess Huanzhu during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty. Huanzhu is widely considered to be a fictional character created by the author. In the series, although she is an orphan in her formative years, Huanzhu's life changes after she makes an accidental acquaintance with the Emperor and is made a princess by him. The series tells a story of how Princess Huanzhu fights against social injustice as well as remaining optimistic towards and confident in love and care in human relations. Some characters, the plot premise and certain sections of the story are based on historical events and figures, but considerable artistic license was employed. The series ran for three seasons. The first season was produced in 1997 and broadcast in 1998. The second was broadcast in 1999, and the third in 2003.

WEI: Emm...I am not sure what Yang's most classical one is but I also think that all the stuff that we were just shown are kind of new. There are some good and old ones as well.

YANG: I do mean the most classical one!

HO: I think I kind of know which one Yang is talking about. Is it this one that has been repeatedly shown on television for more than one decade [laugh]?

YANG: Yes! Every summer and winter holiday!

HO: Bingo! Now I know which one you are talking about [laugh].

MIAO: Is it *Dream of the Red Chamber*?

WEI: Is it *Tales of Emperor Qianlong*?

YANG: No! It is *the Princess Pearl*!!

HO: That's right [laugh]!

WEI: Come on, *the Princess Pearl* has not been repeatedly shown for more than one decade!

HO: I am afraid that it has!

YANG: Tell you what, *The Princess Pearl* has become such a classic that even the cross-talk³² comedians Qizhi and Dabing once said that they were now experts in the history of Qing dynasty because they had watched *The Princess* for too many times [laugh].

WEI: Well, just because it has been shown on television for a long time, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is something classical.

YANG: No, it's surely not just that. It's because *The Princess* was new, provocative and fundamentally different when it firstly came out!

WEI: OK. I see your point.

...

This short debate serves as a perfect example of what Joke Hermes (2005) calls an 'audience-led re-reading of popular culture texts' (p92). By that, she suggests that contemporary media scholars rethink the relationship between textual analysis and audience experience. She simply argues that 'we know a lot about the structures and meanings of many popular forms, but little about what readers do with them' (ibid.). This particular debate on classic television well illustrates Hermes' point. My highly-planned research agenda did not stop Yang from standing forward and making her own judgment on *The Princess Pearl*, a costume drama which I was not at all prepared to particularly mention in the interviews. Most importantly, she brought up the question of classic television into the group discussion. Based on my two-year long document research on Chinese historical drama, I can say that, to define popular historical drama like *The Princess Pearl* as classic series would be absurd and unacceptable to China's mainstream

³² Cross-talk (*xiangsheng*) is a traditional Chinese comedic performance in the form of a dialogue between two performers, or, much less often, a solo monologue or, even less frequently, a multi-player talk show. The language, rich in puns and allusions, is delivered in a rapid, bantering style. Being one of China's foremost and most popular performing arts, Cross-talk is typically performed in the Beijing dialect (or in Standard Mandarin with a strong Beijing accent). Qizhi and Dabing are two famous cross-talk comedians from China's Hunan province. Their dialogical performances gained rapid popularity via the local television channels in Hunan in the mid-1990s.

media scholars and literary critics. The main reason lies in the fact that the term ‘classic television drama’ (*jingdian dianshiju*) is often used within the contemporary Chinese public realm referring to those television series characterised by particular literary and political contents and the popular historical drama does not seem to fit into that ‘classic category’. At this point, I shall briefly explain the term ‘classic television drama’ in a contemporary Chinese context.

In a general sense, the term ‘classic’ refers to artistic work that has achieved canonical status over a long period of time. China’s mainstream classic television drama consists of two important sub-genres. First, there are classic ancient Chinese literary adaptations. As introduced in Chapter 5, ancient Chinese literary adaptations appeared as a new genre on Chinese television in good numbers in the mid-1980s. These literary adaptations produced in mainland China fall into two categories: ancient Chinese fictions (like *the Dream of the Red Chamber*, 1986) and ancient legendary folklores (like *Strange Tales of A Lonely Studio*, 1986).

In recent years, some of these literary adaptations have been remade catering to a new generation of Chinese television audiences. For example, *the Dream of the Red Chamber* was remade by the China Film Group Corporation (CFG) in 2010. These literary adaptations, for many leading television scholars in China like Qingrui Zeng (2000, 2002), are televisual representations of China’s national literary heritage. They are considered to have made a great contribution to the promotion of traditional Chinese culture in an age of cultural globalisation. However, there are differences. It is worth noting that, the 1980s dramas were required by China’s Central Ministry of Propaganda to dogmatically follow the so-called Marxist literary and artistic principles and serve the people and the socialist system, adopting a social realism style in their work. By contrast, the 1990s and 2000s literary adaptations incorporate increasingly more diverse theatrical styles as well as commercial elements.

Second, there are so-called ‘Red Classics’ (*hongse jingdian*). According to Australian-based Chinese media scholar Gong Qian (2008), the term ‘red classic’ started appearing within the Chinese press on a frequent basis in the late 1990s. As it can be easily understood, the word ‘red’ symbolizes the Communist Revolution in modern Chinese history. The Red Classics, therefore, refer to a series of prominent literary works that

emerged in the Maoist period.³³ These revolutionary works, as Qian explains, represented ‘a conscious endeavor by the Chinese state to create a revolutionary culture which would mold the socialist subject’ (ibid. p157). Take *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* (*linhai xueyuan*), written by Bo Qu in the 1950s. It tells a story of how the Communist Army eradicates the defeated Nationalist Army’s bandits who had joined professional brigands and landlord tyrants in northeast China in the 1940s. In 1967, the novel was turned into one of the eight Model Revolutionary Beijing Operas³⁴ (*yangbanxi*) widely performed during China’s Cultural Revolution. The 1990s witnessed a wave of these Red Classics remakes by China’s major television studios; this followed the renewed popularity of Mao as a popular culture icon from the late 1980s to the early 1990s (see Wang 1996).

Different from the original works, which advocated a strong sense of Communist ideology, the remade Red Classics are mostly characterised by a romanticized way of story-telling. For instance, *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* was remade into a television series under the supervision of the Propaganda Department affiliated to the Municipal Government of Shenzhen in 2003. Compared to the original novel and the play, the television series humanizes both the hero and the enemy characters with the introduction of a storyline dealing with their love affairs and moral complexes as well as their straight revolutionary or anti-revolutionary deeds. As Qian rightly comments, these television series based on the Red Classics capitalize on ‘nostalgia and cultural memory in a post-revolutionary age’ (ibid. p170).

From these two sub-genres, one can see that China’s mainstream classic television dramas still carry the heavy ideological and rhetorical burdens of promoting nationalism and collectivism. At the same time, the last two decades saw the rise of commercialization in the Chinese television industry. This, I would argue, allows increasingly more space for a materialistic and individualistic reading of so-called ‘classic television’. In one word, as far as contemporary Chinese television drama text is concerned, the meaning of ‘classic-ness’

³³ A short list of the Red Classics includes *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* (*Linhai xueyuan*), *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*), *Shajiabang* (*Shajiabang*) and *Struggles in the Old-line City* (*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*).

³⁴ Model Revolutionary Beijing Operas were commissioned and engineered during the Cultural Revolution by Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao. As Communist Party-sanctioned operas, they were considered to be revolutionary and modern in terms of thematic and musical features when compared with traditional operas. At the time, traditional Beijing opera was criticised of being feudalistic and bourgeois and therefore banned in China. The revolutionary operas were made in accordance with Mao’s provision that ‘art must serve the interests of the workers, peasants, and soldiers and must conform to proletarian ideology’. In total, eight revolutionary operas were made. The operas are now widely viewed as paradigmatic of the Party-dominated art of the Cultural Revolution and have been condemned as an aesthetic and cultural aberration.

has become increasingly pluralistic and complex.

Referring back to the example of the young audience's debate on classic historical drama mentioned above, one can easily identify this plurality and complexity from the respondents' understanding and perceptions about the idea of classic television. The alternative use of the term 'classic television' by Yang, that 25-year-old female college teacher, is a perfect case in point. By putting *The Princess Pearl* into the category of classic historical drama, Yang effectively challenges a mainstream generic knowledge system of classic television. Unlike the classic literary adaptations or the Red Classics, which more or less convey serious messages about traditional cultural or mainstream nationalist ideologies, *The Princess Pearl* came out as a piece of pioneering costume drama that was intended to provide the audience with pure fictional entertainment through a mixture of romance, martial arts and comedy in a dynastic setting. Most importantly, the protagonist Princess Huanzhu (played by Wei Zhao), also nicknamed as the Little Swallow (*xiao yanzi*) in the show, impressed Chinese audiences with a fictional portrayal of a royal princess of great fun, pleasant cuteness and indeed sentimental kind-heartedness. This was a princess figure that they had never seen before within the genre of costume drama. This intention of offering 'pure entertainment' (*chun yule*), according to Li and Xiao (2006), well demonstrates a market driven television production logic.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 5, this market-driven logic began to be widely accepted and adopted by China's television dramatists from the early 1990s. It is under this television production context that when it was first broadcast on Chinese television in 1997, *the Princess Pearl* enjoyed sudden and massive popularity amongst the Chinese audience as a new costume drama genre. The comment of 'new, provocative and fundamentally different' made by Yang represents a typical kind of generic evaluation as well as cultural memory about this new drama genre, as far as my respondents, especially the young ones, are concerned. This, in my opinion, came as a result of the rise of television consumerism in Chinese society followed by the commercialization of the Chinese television industry starting from the late 1980s. It is, therefore, mostly those who grew up with the rise of commercial television culture that tend to challenge a mainstream understanding of classic television drama by welcoming and embracing the emergence of new historical television drama genres. Within Yang's group, for example, another respondent, Ho, a 28-year-old male office worker, to a large extent shares Yang's value judgment on the classic-ness of

The Princess Pearl. Although he has neither claimed to be a fan of the television show nor to have watched the whole series throughout the entire focus group interview, Ho at least expresses his good awareness and familiarity of the generic characteristics of *The Princess Pearl*. On the basis of this generic awareness and familiarity, Ho agrees with Yang's alternative use of the term classic television in the case of the television show.

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Yang's alternative use of the term classic television was not without controversy within her group. Although she challenges a mainstream understanding of classic television by bringing forward the example of *The Princess Pearl*, Yang herself believes that the term classical can mean different things according to different artistic standards when it comes to historical drama on contemporary Chinese television. Her revisionist interpretation of the term classical is well reflected in her answers below when I asked her to further explain what she meant by her claim that *The Princess Pearl* was a classic historical television drama:

INTERVIEWER: Yang, what do you mean by classical here?

YANG: The term classical has different meanings in different places. For example, I agree that *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is classical because it's a piece of classic literary work imbued with rich traditional Chinese cultural meanings...

INTERVIEWER: How about *The Princess Pearl* then?

YANG: Well, if *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is classical in terms of literary value, then *The Princess Pearl* is classical in terms of artistic style of costume drama. The acting of the Princess Pearl by Wei Zhao is just so funny and authentic. It was so different from what you normally saw in costume dramas that you simply wouldn't forget her images...

From her answers, it can be seen that Yang made her judgment on the classic-ness of *The Princess Pearl* mainly based on the acting of the protagonist. The portrayal of Princess Pearl presents her with a breakthrough example of how far the performance of a costume drama character can go to be different. However, Miao and Wei, the other two respondents in the group, express their own concerns about classic television other than those of acting. By proposing the example of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Miao, the 26-year-old female university teacher, concentrates on a close link between classic historical dramas with national literary heritage. For her, a classical historical drama should, first of all, have a serious, classic literary origin. According to her, *the Dream* has set the standard for quality costume drama on contemporary Chinese television. The 'standard' here, as she later makes clear in the discussion, is sustained by the widely-accepted fact within China

that the television series remains a near-definitive adaptation of the original novel.

One may argue that those who identify this ‘standard’ take historical authenticity as the core cultural value of a classic historical drama. Standing from a critical stance on the commercialization of Chinese television industry, Wei, the 28-year-old self-employed male, criticizes the broadcasting practices of Chinese television that work to make possible the great popularity of the show. In Wei’s opinion, the popularity of the show is largely attributed to its being repeatedly broadcast on Chinese television over a ten-year period. By that, he throws into question the classic-ness of *The Princess Pearl* put forward by Yang as a commercial television phenomenon in contemporary Chinese society.

All in all, what can be learnt from this short but rather unexpected debate about classic historical drama from the Changsha young audience group, as I would argue, is the fact that, rather than dwelling on a serious/popular divide of the historical drama widely recognized by the television dramatist and the media scholar, these young audiences tend to evaluate the generic characteristics of both types of historical dramas according to far more diverse and flexible standards. These standards are generated and conditioned by the commercial demands of contemporary popular television in China. Nevertheless, it is by the adoption of a certain standard that they establish a certain relationship between the historical and the classical within the contemporary realm of Chinese popular. This, therefore, to borrow media scholar Joe Grixiti’s (2009) argument in his study of consumer culture and contemporary screen adaptations of literary classics, produces the consequence that the notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’, canonical and popular, have become ‘inevitably and deeply implicated in the consumerist orientations of contemporary commercial culture’ (p464).

Across all my focus groups as well as in-depth interviews, it can be found that the respondents’ consumerist orientation towards the classic-ness of the historical drama is characterised by the fact that they tend to keep two separate concepts in great tension - the idea of historical factuality and that of fictional style. Moreover, it is through articulating with this tension within a particular historical drama text that my respondents form their own opinions on the classic-ness of the text. The following two quotes, for example, well illustrate my point:

A classic historical serial like *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is expected to stick to important history and literary facts. No commercial-oriented artistic work should be done to it at the cost of distorting those important facts (male, aged 50, university teacher).

I quite like Hong Kong costume dramas because there is a seamless and natural combination of classic Chinese old sayings and entertaining modern-style conversations in actors' dialogues in them. They may sound a bit too entertaining according to mainland Chinese standard, but for me that is a very classic style of scriptwriting! (female, aged 25, self-employed)

These two quotes represent two main different approaches to the treatment of the classic-ness of the historical drama text amongst my respondents. The 50-year-old male university teacher places more emphasis on the significance of truth claim than on artistic claims. In other words, he prioritizes the factual over the fictional in the formation of a classic historical drama text. For him, historical factuality forms the basis of the authentic viewing experience of the historical drama. On the other hand, the 25-year-old self-employed female, like many other young respondents involved in my interviews, pays greater attention to creative components of audio-visual effects within the historical drama text than most of their middle-aged counterparts. In her case, it is the style of the dialogue that lies at the heart of her affinity with Hong Kong costume dramas. She considers the dialogical style to be constitutive of the classic-ness of the dramas.

Nevertheless, by using the words 'seamless and natural' to describe her feelings about the dialogue, she in fact expresses a positive attitude towards a popular representation of classic Chinese culture texts within Hong Kong costume dramas. For her, the commercialization and trans-nationalization of China's television drama industry has transformed prominent historical figures and events of pre-modern Chinese history into a corpus of popular cultural resources that are available to be appropriated by the television dramatists in the Greater China region.

As far as I am concerned, these two competing views on the classic-ness of the historical drama prompt the very question of authentic historical representation from the perspective of the audience. It is worth noting here that British historian Jerome de Groot (2009), in his book *Consuming History*, proposes this assumption on how the audience would perceive a certain classic television historical serial. He argues that 'a viewer is expected to be quite happy that this is a story or narrative occurring within the framework of authentic historical

representation' (ibid. p187). In a general sense, De Groot's assumption proves largely true in the answers given by my two respondents. Although they come to grips with the meanings of classic-ness from two different angles, both of the respondents appear to have received much viewing pleasure from the particular historical dramas that they mention respectively. At the same time, their viewing pleasure is largely derived from their treatment with the tension between the factual and the fictional that characterizes the particular historical drama text. From this, one can say that De Groot rightly establishes the relationship between viewing pleasure and authentic historical representation.

Nevertheless, De Groot offers an explanation of the notion of authentic historical representation from a textual point of view. For him, the authenticity of a historical drama should be understood as an aesthetic quality of representing history to a viewer. This aesthetical quality, as he goes on to argue, has an impact on the viewer when the narrative of the drama gives 'a flavor of the time' despite the fact that the drama is 'self-evidently fictional' (ibid.). The concept of 'a flavor of the time' is a highly inspiring one here. On the one hand, it is adopted by De Groot as a textual assumption referring to a viewer's popular conceptualization of the past, based on the narrative as well as the setting of a particular historical drama. On the other hand, also more importantly, the term 'flavor' conveys a sense of fluidity and contingency, so the concept creates a great deal of interpretive opportunities for me to examine the authenticity of that drama text.

At this point, I would like to link De Groot's concept of 'a flavor of the time' with Couldry's mediation analysis on contemporary media rituals, which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. As argued before, for Couldry (2003), media rituals are not something universal but social forms 'which legitimate a fact that about the current organization of mediation, in most parts of the world, that is contingent, not necessary' (p135-p136). The current organization of mediation, as he goes on to remind us, is 'the intense concentration of society's symbolic resources in centralized institutions that we call "the media"' (ibid. p136). By treating contemporary media representations as a corpus of symbolic resources, Couldry provides a missing link between the cultural and the social by reexamining the symbolic dimension of social life in his work. Influenced by this approach of mediation analysis proposed by Couldry, therefore, I realize the analytical inadequacy of dwelling on my respondents' discussion on the classic-ness of the historical drama from a textual level. Instead, I suggest that one take the discussion as a point of departure to

interrogate the respondents' wider cultural concerns depending on their social and cultural status.

This also quite well echoes one of the key gradual developments in international cultural and media studies in the last decade identified by the Finnish media scholar Pertti Alasuutari (1999). That development, which I introduced in my methodological discussion in Chapter 5, 'has been to reflect upon and to take distance from the cultural concerns embedded in the way we conceive of contemporary society and its characteristic new phenomena' (Alasuutari, 1999, p9). By 'reflect on' and 'take distance from', Alasuutari suggests a renewed interaction between the individual and social reality. As far as a television programme or genre is concerned, according to Alasuutari, one 'does not necessarily analyse the programme or genre "itself" at all' (ibid. p16). Rather, one has to treat it as a historical phenomenon, around which public debate and discussion are developed and media policy decisions are made. Following upon this methodological guideline, I hence find two main strands of cultural concerns amongst my respondents; on the one hand, of course, there is an assessment about the rise of commercial culture in contemporary China's television industry; on the other hand, there is a contested yearning for transnational Chinese imagination.

If I return to the two quotes mentioned above as an illustration of my point about the evaluative tension between historical factuality and fictional style and the classic-ness of the historical drama text, these two quotes exactly reflect those two strains of cultural concerns. In the first quote, that 50-year-old male university teacher criticizes the rise of commercial culture on Chinese television by re-emphasising the classic-ness of the 1986 version of the literary serial *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. As previously mentioned, the 1986 version of *the Dream* was produced by Chinese state broadcaster, CCTV, at a time when the Chinese television industry was yet to experience commercialization. Meanwhile, Chinese television dramatists were then required to dogmatically follow so-called Marxist literary and artistic principles, which basically advocated that artists and writers serve the people and the socialist system, adopting a social realism style in their work. For this middle-aged male, 'commercial-oriented artistic work' that has been increasingly added to the historical drama since the early 1990s runs the great risk, in his words, of 'distorting' important historical figures and events as well as literary works in the historical drama.

In the second quote, that 25-year-old self-employed female respondent expresses her preference for Hong Kong costume dramas when it comes to historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television. By distinguishing ‘a mainland Chinese standard’ from a Hong Kong one, she effectively challenges the ethos of mainland Chinese television drama productions as a whole. The fact that she uses the words ‘seamless’ and ‘natural’ to describe her viewing pleasure gained from a combination of classic Chinese old sayings and characters’ dialogues within Hong Kong costume dramas suggests her positive identity with the artistic style in which traditional Chinese cultural elements are represented within those drama texts. For her, compared to the mainland Chinese one, the artist style of Hong Kong costume dramas represents less of a propagandist tone, and more of an entertaining and indeed, in her word, more ‘modern’ representation.

At the surface level, the fact that my respondents express these two strains of cultural concerns demonstrates their good awareness of the production context of the historical drama as a whole television genre. From their positions, commercialization and transnationalization serve as two groups of cultural discourse that contribute to the discursive formation of the classic-ness of historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television. As I have introduced the three-stage development of China’s television drama industry in Chapter 3, I shall not repeat here the commercial and transnational issues concerning the production of the historical drama from a media institutional point of view. Rather, in a response to the notion of ‘a flavor of the time’ proposed by De Groot, I will consider the discourses of commercialization and trans-nationalization to be two categories of interconnected television experience; it is based on these two categories of television experience that my respondents manage to work through ‘a flavor of the time’, make a value judgment on that ‘flavor’ and, most importantly, take a reflexive attitude towards the classic-ness of the historical drama in contemporary Chinese context. It is this reflexive attitude that I shall continue to analyse in the next section.

8.3 The new ‘classic’ discourse and the audience’s reflexive attitudes

As I mentioned in Chapter 4 on the use of my research methods, each one of my focus group and in-depth interviews lasted for at least one and a half hours. Although they to a varying degree tend to appear either somewhat nervous or awkward in answering my questions or participating in the discussion in the first half an hour or so, most of my

respondents would behave relatively more relaxed and be more comfortable during the rest of the interviews. Because of that, when it came to the third question regarding the quality of historical television drama, my respondents became much more enthusiastic than when they dealt with the first two questions. Within quite a few focus groups, the discussion even started drifting away from the question itself and some respondents could not stop talking about ‘real’ social problems until I began showing them another clip in order to direct the discussion back to my research questions. Methodologically speaking, this act of ‘drifting away’ offers me a wonderful opportunity to further my research. It is exactly in these moments where the atmosphere is lively and heated that my respondents would demonstrate a sense of cultural reflexivity at their best.

In these moments, I strongly feel that, instead of addressing the issues of commercialization and trans-nationalization per se, my respondents would treat them as crucial aspects of contemporary cultural life in China. Nevertheless, respondents from different social and cultural backgrounds tend to hold different views on this ‘contemporary cultural life’. More importantly, these views are largely reflected in the way they re-evaluate and re-imagine the classic-ness of the historical drama. Next, I shall present my findings on how my middle-aged and young adult respondents critically evaluate the discourse of classic historical drama respectively.

8.3.1 The middle-aged adults

After they had several rounds of discussion of classic television drama, I asked this group of middle-aged respondents in Beijing (FG3) what the notion of classic means to them personally:

INTERVIEWER: Now we’ve talked quite a bit about classic television drama. Some say that *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is a classic historical series. Some others say that *The Princess Pearl* is a classic as well. From your personal point of view, what do think of the classic here?

LENG: Well, I think that the meanings of classic-ness have changed a lot and they are still changing in China. The stuff like the 1986 version of *the Dream of the Red Chamber* is definitely outmoded according to today’s standard.

GUO: Exactly, time has changed!

LENG (continue): Any television genre can be a classic these days. Not just historical stuff or revolutionary stuff. As long as it very well captures ordinary people’s attention and conjures up their imagination, it is very likely to be a classic.

WU: Being a classic or not, a certain television drama has to be about and for ordinary people these days.

GUO (continue): Agreed! I am not sure about how a television show can become a classic, but if it is a really good television show it has to be something that you find easy to relate to in the first place. *The Bronze Teeth* is a case in point!

ZHAO: In my opinion, the Chinese people have become more and more individualistic and entertainment-oriented. This is very different from, say, how they were like in the Eighties. In that time, you had all this very serious, classic stuff on television. Nowadays people are just materialistic so they are only interested in watching realistic things. This is the spirit of the age, I am afraid.

LENG (continue): Absolutely. Whatever subjects a television drama deals with, it should have its selling points!

...

From this group interview, one can easily notice that the four respondents extend the discussion of classic historical drama from the mass media sphere to the wider socio-cultural arena. By using such phrases and expressions as ‘outmoded’, ‘time has changed’ and ‘the spirit of the age’, they comment on historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television with sharp social criticism. At the same time, although all of the four respondents belong to the middle-aged groups (40-55) as I broadly define, there exist not only similarities but also differences in terms of how they understand and value classic television drama among themselves. These similarities and differences, according to my observation, apply to the other middle-aged groups as well.

As far as the similarities are concerned, all of the four respondents have come to terms with the fact that the nature of classic television drama has changed in China over the last two decades. They are also quite aware of the fact that this change happened as a result of the development of a market economy in the country since the early 1990s. Compared with their young adult counterparts, these middle-aged respondents have witnessed this cultural change on Chinese television for a longer period of time. They, therefore, tend to have stronger feelings about the changing nature of Chinese television drama since the late 1980s. For them, differently from the classic television dramas in the 1980s, which were characterised by a serious educational and propagandist face, contemporary television dramas including the historical ones need to reflect ordinary people’s concerns in an absorbing way.

On the other hand, their critical attitudes on the discourse of classic television reveal differences. There are two main factors involved in the making of these differences. First,

there is the gender factor. As my focus group interviews are all mixed gender, I find that the male respondents are always more assertive in expressing their opinions on the classic-ness of the historical drama than their female counterparts. Within this group, for instance, the two male respondents adopt quite a taken-for-granted attitude towards the discourse of classic television drama. This taken-for-granted-ness, as the quotes show, leads them to naturally accept that discourse and immediately link it with what they define as ‘the spirit of the age’. That is, in their words, ‘materialistic’ and ‘having selling points’. The two female respondents, however, criticize the discourse of classic television drama in a less straightforward manner. Instead of directly commenting on it, they tend to approach the theme of classic-ness from a more personal position. Wu simply emphasises the importance of being ‘about and for ordinary people’ for a contemporary television drama. Guo believes that a ‘good television show’ has to be easy to ‘relate to’ for its viewers.

It is worth revealing here that, when it comes to how important the fact/fiction issues have to do with the social impact of the historical drama, which I discussed at great length in Chapter 7, Guo also belongs to one of the respondents that take a realistic attitude. This gender-based attitude difference reminds me of the fact that China’s mainstream discourses of classic television drama were originally formulated in a dual ideological framework of socialist revolution and aesthetic Marxism in the 1980s; both of the mainstream classic sub-genres including classic literary adaptations and the Red Classics serve the main purpose of communicating nationalist and collectivist message to the general public. However, for Chinese female audiences, especially the middle-aged ones, one may argue that those classic discourses to a large extent operate within a male-dominated representational system. As a result, most of my middle-aged female respondents are either disinterested in or pragmatic about the classic-ness of the historical drama.

Second, the factor of social position also influences the way a certain respondent evaluates the discourse of classic television drama. In Chapter 7, I established an important linkage between a certain respondent’s social position and the extent to which he or she considers the importance of the fact/fiction debate of the historical drama in China’s public realm. As far as my respondents are concerned, a striking finding is that those who occupy senior administrative positions in state-owned enterprises as well as those who are middle school or university teachers appear much more concerned with the debate than those who are self-employed or low-rank employers in state-owned enterprises. In other words, it is only

those respondents, who have accumulated a considerable amount of political and educational capital, are actively and consciously participating in the fact/fiction debate. When it comes to an evaluation of classic television drama, my respondents at different social positions also expressed different opinions. Those who occupy senior administrative positions in state-owned enterprises like Mr. Leng, a company manager shown in the example above-quoted, mainly take a welcoming and positive attitude towards the changing nature of the classic-ness due to the rise of television commercialization. For them, as long as it ‘conjures up ordinary people’s imagination’ and ‘has selling points’, a certain television show has sufficient artistic qualities to become a classic.

However, many respondents who are self-employers or low-rank employers in state-owned enterprises like Mr. Zhao, a bus driver shown in the example, tend to take a more critical stance towards the commercialization of the television industry. They demonstrate a sense of ‘socialist nostalgia’ (Rofel 1999) about the quality of television production during the transitional period of the development of China’s television industry (1978-1987). They would sing high praise for, as what they perceive to be, sincere and serious work ethics of the television dramatists in the 1980s in terms of how they dealt with adaptation issues of costume drama. At the same time, they would criticize a profit-driven logic that characterizes contemporary China’s television production. For instance, in saying that ‘people are just materialistic so they are only interested in watching realistic things’, Zhao to some extent expresses negative feelings towards this profit-driven logic. Hence, from what has been discussed so far, I would argue that what distinguishes my respondents of different social positions on the debate of classic television drama lies in the fact that they hold different views on the status-quo of television production in contemporary China. Generally speaking, facing the status-quo of the television production, the more social and political power a certain viewer is able to exercise, the more optimistic he or she appears to be.

8.3.2 The young adults

Compared with their middle-aged counterparts, my young adult respondents have been under a heavy influence of the rise of television consumerism in China since the early 1990s. This influence, as I pointed out previously, allows increasingly more space for a materialistic and individualistic reading of so-called ‘classic television’. Referring back to

the quotes mentioned above where there are young adult respondents involved, one can easily find this materialistic and individualist reading.

For example, within the young adult group that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Miao, a female university teacher and Wei, a self-employed male gave different answers to Yang's question of what they consider to be the most classical historical drama of the past decade on Chinese television. For Miao, the 1986 version of the literary adaptation *the Dream of the Red Chamber* is the most classical one. Here, the classic-ness, as argued previously, is sustained by the widely-accepted fact within China that the television series remains a near-definitive adaptation of the original novel. On the other hand, Wei puts forwards the 42-part series *the Tales of Emperor Qianlong* which debuted on China's cable television channels in 1992. As previously introduced, based on the well-known historical tale about the Qing Emperor Qianlong's visit to South China, *the Tales* tells a story of the Emperor's wish to pursue freedom and true love. It is worth noting that *the Tales* was one of the pioneering television series co-produced by Taiwanese and Chinese television production companies in the Post-Cold War era. For most of China's television dramatists, it marked the first appearance of the genre of popular historical drama on contemporary Chinese television.

Miao and Wei's answers are typical of a consumerist evaluation of the classic-ness of the historical drama on contemporary Chinese television amongst my young adult respondents. For a critical understanding of this consumerist evaluation, I would suggest that the notion of consuming citizenship fulfill a good analytical function here. In Chapter 2, I introduced that the nature of Chinese citizenship has undergone a fundamental change in the past two decades. Although the concept of citizen still intends to modify social conduct to the Chinese socialist spiritual civilization template, contemporary citizenship and civic awareness in China need to be, as Keane (2001b) points out, 'contextualized within the twin freedoms of property rights reform and consumerism' (p8).

For example, unlike their middle-aged counterparts, for whom the traditional discourse of classic television drama represents a conscious endeavor by the Chinese state in the 1980s to create a revolutionary culture which would mold the socialist subject, they appropriate the classic discourse in a depoliticized manner. For Miao, the classic-ness of *the Dream of the Red Chamber* lies in its literary aesthetical values, whereas for Wei, *the Tales of*

Emperor Qianlong, initiated an innovative way of representing historical tales on mainland Chinese television with the introduction of Taiwanese television entertainment culture. In other words, as far as they are concerned, the political implications of the original idea of classic-ness have been eclipsed by aesthetical as well as innovative ones. Nevertheless, this ideological transformation is made possible by the rise of television consumerism in Chinese society.

Despite the fact that the idea of classic television drama is depoliticized by my young adult respondents, the factor of social position also largely contributes to their evaluation on the classic-ness of the historical drama. More importantly, the young adult respondents are very critical of the factor of social position in the reproduction as well as legitimatization of the discourse of classic historical drama in China's public realm. As I discussed a bit earlier in this section, the way a certain middle-aged respondent evaluated the discourse of classic historical drama is largely determined by the social position he or she occupies. It is worth adding that, although there is this causal relationship between their social positions and their reflexive attitudes towards the classic discourse, my middle-aged respondents appear quite cautious in touching upon the social position issues as such. Their cautious attitudes, according to my observation, are mainly derived from the fact that most of the middle-aged respondents are more or less reserved about their own social and economic lives in the group discussion. Hence, they tend not to rush into a social hierarchy debate while commenting on a certain television programme.

On the contrary, the young adult respondents generally demonstrate greater acuteness of the relationship between a particular generic evaluation of the historical drama and its sociological groundings. For example, Xiong, a young male local government worker from Beijing, expresses his likeness for *The Great Emperor Hanwu* in his group discussion. For him, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* has good potential of becoming a classic historical drama on Chinese television since the year 2000. His evaluation is mainly based on the fact that the series unprecedentedly presents a melodramatic style incorporating many spectacular realistic war scenes. However, Xiong's evaluation is challenged by the other three respondents within his group. The issue at stake here is the relationship between a melodramatic style and its value for different social groups. Here is how the discussion proceeded:

- XIONG: What makes *the Great Emperor Hanwu* stand out as a classic historical drama, in my opinion, is its melodramatic style. Apart from those well-known battles between the Han army and the *Xiongnu* army, the series successfully represents political power struggles among characters, such as the one between the Emperor and the Queen Mother and that between the Emperor and his younger brother. Those political power struggles apparently narrate contemporary political and social situations in China as well!
- LI: Oh yes! You definitely need to learn how to deal with all sorts of political power struggles on a daily basis because you work for a governmental organization [laugh].
- WENG: I cannot agree more with Li! I think the reason why Xiong ranks the series as a classic is mainly because that it addresses lots of similar human relationship problems as he may encounter from his daily work. In a governmental organization, you've got to know how to play politics in a smart way. That is exactly what *the Great Emperor Hanwu* is all about, isn't it?
- XIONG (continue): Come on, not necessarily! It depends on how you understand the idea of power struggle. After all, power struggle is human nature, isn't it? The classic-ness of the series is nothing but its vivid representation of human nature in a dynasty setting. It should not be confined to representation of actual politics, I think.
- WANG: I kinda agree with Xiong! But I am not a big fan of the serious stuff like this anyway, although I know lots of people are. For me, be entertaining is key to a successful television drama whatever subject it concerns.

It is widely acknowledged by Chinese television critics that *The Great Emperor Hanwu* presents a hybridized dramatic style of historical realism and family melodrama (see Li 2007). In Chapter 5, I summarised the artistic characteristics of Chinese family melodrama compared with European one. Briefly speaking, the distinction between the two is apparent; it produces a tension between two different models of secular subjectivity, 'one based on psychology and its expression and the other based on ethically defined social and kinship roles' (Berry, 2003, p186). At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 5, British media scholar Christine Geraghty (2006) observes that there has been a shift from traditional realist modes to melodramatic modes in the storylines of *Eastenders* over the last few years. By referring to Zygmunt Bauman's book (2002) on risk society, she argues that 'the turn to melodrama (of *Eastenders*) can be understood as a way of trying to fill the vacuum created by the instabilities and lack of trust that Bauman describes' (Geraghty, 2006, p226).

Although in quite a different social context, the melodramatic television culture discussed by Geraghty is compatible with the evolution of historical drama on Chinese television since the early 2000s when anti-corruption has become the main theme of the historical drama produced in Chinese mainland, *The Great Emperor Hanwu* being a perfect example

here. Featuring a melodramatic mode, the video clip that I chose to screen in the focus groups is one of the most intense scenes showing ethical conflicts among the characters in the series. It is a family gathering scene, where the Queen mother of the Emperor Wu tries to persuade the Emperor himself into making his brother his successor; because the Emperor distrusts his brother, he shows his disagreement and thus argues with his mother. This 10-minute scene ends with a furious verbal conflict between the Queen mother and the Emperor followed by the Emperor's kneel-down apology for his disobedience with respect to his mother's request.

The audience discussion mentioned above well illustrates the Chinese model of secular subjectivity represented in the series. The respondents involved in the discussion take the ethical conflict between the Queen mother and the Emperor Wu as the starting point for evaluating the melodramatic style of the series. They extend an interpretation of this political power struggle (*zhengzhi quanli douzheng*) within the royal family into that of contemporary political and social situations in China. Interestingly enough, through their interpretation of the text of *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, Li, a 24-year-old male accountant in a private company and Weng, a 25-year-old female English teacher even consider political power struggles to be constitutive of human relationships within China's governmental organizations. Somewhat extreme as it may be, Li and Weng's interpretation at least demonstrates their awareness of as well as negative impression on rampant political corruption in Chinese society. More importantly, their interpretation echoes Geraghty's discussion about contemporary melodramatic television culture in relation to instabilities and a lack of trust in contemporary British society.

In the case of *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, it is deep concerns about political corruption within Chinese society that characterizes the interpretation of the historical drama by my young adult respondents. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, for the young adult respondents from different social positions, this melodramatic television culture has different values. For example, Xiong, the young local government worker, positively identifies the message of fighting against political corruption embedded in the story of the Emperor Wu. For him, the melodramatic mode of the series successfully serves as an important purpose for criticising contemporary Chinese political culture and thereafter contributes to it becoming a potential classic television drama. As two members of non-governmental organizations, however, Li and Weng challenge Xiong's positive reading of

the series. By ‘you definitely need to learn’ and ‘you’ve got to know’, they identify an educational function of the melodramatic mode of the series instead. As far as they are concerned, this educational function is performed by the series less for those who work in the governmental organizations to criticize political corruption than for them to learn to survive in the current political climate. For them, Chinese historical dramas like *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, which are full of political implications, therefore offer the Chinese audience cultural resources which they can turn to for strategies to lead a political life.

Of course, it is worth noting that Xiong disagrees with Li and Weng’s highly-politicized way of interpreting the series. Rather, he emphasises a humanist expression of the political power struggle shown in the series. He suggests that one draw a line between an understanding of the historical drama and that of, in his words, ‘actual politics’. Unlike all of the three respondents, Wang, a 23-year-old female tourist guide, goes to the other extreme of the spectrum of the interpretations. Staying away from a political interpretation of any kind, she prioritizes entertainment as the most important criterion for a successful television drama.

8.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I find that there are different ways of evaluating the discourse of classic historical drama according to the audience’s generation, gender and most importantly social position. It is mainly due to different social positions of the respondents that those different evaluative modes continue to be sustained. In dealing with these cultural and social differences, I would suggest that one refer back to American anthropologist Lisa Rofel’s study of Chinese nationalism in the era of popular culture, which I have discussed in Chapter Two.

In her critique of using Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined community to studying Chinese nationalism in the era of popular culture, Rofel (1994) argues that ‘his (Anderson’s) theory can explain the origin of imagined communities but not plots, climaxes, or denouement’ (p701). She goes on to claim that a simple description of the administrative structure of the party-state China is inadequate for an understanding of how official power works in the post-Mao era. Rather, she suggests that we need to take a close look at how state power in China operates, not merely through its institutions, but ‘through

the way the state creates itself as an imagined entity' (ibid. p704).

Inspired by Rofel's argument, I would argue that the audiences' different modes of evaluating the discourse of classic historical drama reflect their different modes of cultural imagination. Furthermore, this mode of cultural imagination can be also seen as a way that the audience negotiates with the cultural power that the state exerts over the production and regulation processes of the historical drama. It is within this negotiation process that the audience manages to make his or her own judgment on the public and private values of the historical drama.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

As discussed at the beginning of this thesis, media scholars in China have long interpreted historical dramas produced for contemporary Chinese television mainly by using textual analysis, but little academic effort has been made to look at the meaning of these dramas from a sociological perspective. With the primary aim of filling this knowledge gap, this study attempts to explore how historical dramas are understood and socially and culturally valued in Chinese society, taking into account personal, social, historical and cultural issues that relate to viewers' engagement with this television genre. It is worth emphasising that a critical sociological study of the reception of Chinese historical drama within China can contribute in a distinctive way to an understanding of contemporary television culture and social changes in China. For the last decade, the historical drama genre has topped the list of Chinese audiences' favourite television genres, as well as the highest selling prime-time programmes on China Central Television. It cannot be denied, therefore, that historical dramas serve as a perfect case study for examining important factors that constitute the status quo of contemporary Chinese television. On the other hand, the production and consumption process of the historical drama text involves a series of contradictions and negotiations between state interventions, popular historical representation as well as television consumerism, so that the historical drama can be seen as a popular cultural forum where the process of modern Chinese identity formation is revealed and can be evaluated. Bearing in mind these two potential areas of original contribution to knowledge, in this chapter I shall provide a summary of the key findings of this study.

The findings are summarised in three parts. The first part reviews the major cultural and political forces behind the generic production of the historical drama. It points out that, the Party-state apparatus remains the ultimate power in historical drama production and broadcasting, as the commercial and transnational management of the Chinese television drama industry is one of the driving forces behind the evolution of the genre. Part Two focuses on how my respondents understand and evaluate the selected historical drama texts. Based on the two interpretive frameworks adopted by my respondents discussed in

Chapters 7 and 8, I argue that the interaction between the audience agency and the state power means that history becomes a body of popular cultural knowledge itself to be challenged and subverted. The third part extends the Chinese audience's response to the historical drama to a wider Chinese popular cultural arena. It identifies new tendencies in contemporary Chinese television culture that go beyond Confucianism-influenced totalitarian nostalgia. Finally, taking this study as a starting point, I shall propose a number of further research directions.

9.2 Political and cultural forces at work in the production of historical dramas

Since the early 1990s, Chinese historical drama has experienced an enormous transformation in both its content and artistic style. In terms of content, Chinese historical drama produced since the early 1990s has been distinctive for the vivid narration of contemporary political and social issues in the guise of historical representation. When it comes to sub-genres, these historical dramas can be mainly grouped into three categories: emperor drama, anti-corruption satirical costume drama and period drama. As far as artistic style is concerned, 'serious history' versus 'popular history' remains the most common dichotomy within the Chinese television industry and academia in relation to the broad genre of historical television. This study uses American media scholar Jason Mittell's (2004) cultural genre approach as the analytical tool to examine the genre. Compared to traditional genre studies, which consider textual assumptions to be the key to an understanding of the formation and operation of a given genre, Mittell's approach argues for an open rather than a closed analytical attitude towards a given television genre and its generic function. By adopting this cultural genre analysis to examine the evolution of the historical drama since the mid-1980s, this study has identified three major political and cultural influences that are influencing their production.

Firstly, the Party-state apparatus still plays a dominant supervisory role in the production and broadcasting of historical dramas. Through its regulatory policies implemented by China's top visual-audio regulatory body, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the Chinese Communist Party forcefully determines whether a certain historical figure or event can be represented within a particular drama text or not. Chapter 5 gives a detailed account of the generic changes within the historical drama genre from its inception on Chinese television in the mid-1980s until the present. Although, as it

is widely acknowledged, China's television drama industry has undergone a commercialization process since 1987, the Communist Party would argue that the role of the nation-state remains critical in regulating China's national television production and broadcasting practices and this role cannot be left to the market alone. As the latest consequence of this state supervision over historical drama productions, there have been less and less mentions of the dichotomy between 'serious and popular' drama within Chinese popular press since 2004, when the incident of *Towards the Republic* occurred (see 5.3). Because of the incident, Chinese television dramatists became more cautious in dealing with serious historical events and figures. Faced with this degree of state control, one can argue that Mittell's cultural genre analysis, which considers media power as diffused and discursive, is inadequate for a proper understanding of the Chinese context, where the government still occupies the dominant position in supervising the media and organizing media-based symbolic resources.

Second, as rigid as the state control may seem in China's television drama industry, the cultural function of the historical drama goes beyond simply propagating government ideologies. Rather, the nature of the historical drama since the mid-1990s has been shaped by the interplay between official culture, mass culture and elite culture in Chinese society. When analysing the generic changes within historical dramas since the early 1990s in Chapter 5, this study has explained those three strands of cultural forces as well as their manifestations within the historical drama text. Official culture, promoted and sustained by Chinese government, serves as a mainstream ideology embedded in popular historical representation. Here, 'mainstream' in essence means a quality of maximizing the influence of positive state ideology in the logic of popular communication. The rise of mass culture resulted from the commercial management of the Chinese cultural industry. As commercialization of China's television industry continued, content production within the state-owned television studio system was unable to satisfy demand. Independent television companies subsequently appeared in China and the practice of outsourcing production flourished from the early 1990s. Today, independent production companies are the main content providers for China's television market including that of the historical drama.

The influence of elite culture is largely attributable to those Chinese novelists, literary critics and historians who pursue historical re-enactment and artistic creation through popular communication. The historical drama provides them with a means of expression

and certain rhetorical strategies. For them, using the past to mirror the present and drawing upon the past to satirize the present are part of a complementary historiographical tradition in China. The outcome of the interplay between these three cultural forces is well demonstrated by the distinctions between serious and popular historical drama. Briefly speaking, a serious historical drama text is expected to narrate certain officially recognized pre-modern historical facts and express their contemporary symbolic meanings. On the contrary, not based on official historical records, a popular historical drama addresses such issues as corruption, romance, tradition and identity in the guise of historical events and characters.

Thirdly, increasingly more frequent co-production of television drama in the Greater China region since the early 1990s has given a new impetus to the evolution of the historical drama. The end of the Cold War not only greatly eased the political and military stand-off between China and the western world; it also witnessed increasing Chinese-related human, cultural and economic mobility at both regional and transnational levels. Early in the mid-1980s, popular television drama produced by Hong Kong television organizations, comprising mainly of martial arts programmes, started to be shown on mainland Chinese television. Immediately after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, television co-productions, mainly romance costume dramas, between Taiwan and mainland China took off and achieved huge success on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. The mid-1990s witnessed the coming of a golden age for the co-production of historical drama within the Greater China region (also see 5.3). There are two main reasons why historical drama became the most popular choice for co-productions in the region, one being commercial and the other ideological. Commercially, Taiwanese television producers sought alliances beyond the island of Taiwan in order to respond to their local market pressures. Ideologically, it suggested to television producers in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan that despite the fact that there exists intense ideological tension between contemporary Chinese politicians and their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan, pre-modern Chinese history provides them with opportunities for much less sensitive and culturally specific artistic inspiration. More important, the co-production practices in the region have challenged the ethos of mainland Chinese television drama productions as a whole. In general, compared to the mainland Chinese style, the artistic style of historical dramas in Hong Kong and Taiwan has less of a propagandist tone, and offers more of an entertaining historical representation. Nevertheless, this has triggered a yearning for

transnational Chinese imagination among China's viewing public. It is at this point that I shall move on to summarise my findings concerning the audience response.

9.3 The historical drama and its audiences: articulating and disarticulating state power

As I have proposed in Chapter 2, the paradigm of television audience research in China has shifted from an Encoding/Decoding model (see 2.4.1) to a reflexive sociological approach that addresses issues concerning the question of cultural citizenship of particular social groups (see 2.4.3). This paradigmatic shift suggests a crucial trend in conducting critical television audience research in contemporary China. That is, moving beyond Lull's use of the Encoding/Decoding model, which was based on the thesis of cultural resistance on the part of Chinese television audiences, we now adopt a more nuanced and multidimensional approach to examine the articulation and disarticulation of contemporary China's authoritarian politics and their interpretation by Chinese audiences. It needs to be pointed out that the theories of cultural citizenship, first developed in the field of Anglo-American and Nordic media studies, face some challenges when applied to Chinese situations. A large proportion of discussion on television and cultural citizenship studies has yet to be formulated in the context of Chinese television studies. This, in my opinion, is explained to an extent by the debate on the ways that 'the Foucault effects' may happen in the Chinese context, where the state apparatus remains the ultimate power in cultural production (see 2.2). In recent years, however, there has been a boom in the study of youth culture and fandom in Chinese media and communication research (e.g. Chang, 2007; Fung, 2003, 2009); these scholars have made great critical efforts to analyse the liberal values and public discourses generated by the rise of popular culture and consumerism. As Keane (2001b) argues, although the concept of citizenship still intends to modify social conduct to the Chinese socialist spiritual civilization template, contemporary citizenship and civic awareness in China need to be 'contextualized within the twin freedoms of property rights reform and consumerism'(p8). It is with an aim to contextualize the idea of cultural citizenship in the Chinese context that I conducted this Grounded Theory-informed empirical study on the reception of the historical drama in two urban settings in China.

This study analysed three important issues concerning historical representations within the drama texts from the point of view of the audience. These issues, including the significance

of historical accuracy, totalitarian nostalgia and contemporary use of historical representations, are drawn from a long-standing debate of historical dramas that can easily be found both within the Chinese television drama industry and academic debates. Through the use of a focus group and in-depth interview research, I found that the way that the audience engages with historical representations is far more complex than generally thought; rather than insist on a literal interpretation of the dramatic text, the audience engages with the historical television drama in quite a divergent way due to his or her age, gender, life stage and socio-cultural status. In order to examine this relationship between generic knowledge of the historical drama and audience agency, I suggest using the theory of cultural competence developed by Bourdieu (1984). For Bourdieu, a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone 'who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (Bourdieu, 1984, p2). By the same token, I argue that to what extent an audience understands a certain television genre is determined by the extent that he or she possesses relevant cultural competences. Guided by the theory of cultural competence, I identify two main text-based interpretive frameworks that are adopted by my respondents across all the focus groups and in-depth interviews in their understanding and evaluation of the historical drama text. They include the framework of fact/fiction and that of 'classic-ness'. According to my study, these two interpretive frameworks constitute the two most important cultural concerns that challenge and subvert the legitimacy of the historical as a cultural category as far as the historical drama is concerned. At the same time, I realize that the ways that these two cultural concerns are expressed by my respondents largely depend on how state power in China operates on their social and personal lives. As summarised earlier in this chapter, the Party-state apparatus plays a dominant supervisory role in the production and broadcasting of the historical drama. These two cultural concerns that emerge from my audience research, therefore, offer clues to help explore the extent that my respondents are aware of and perceive that dominant supervisory role played by the Party-state.

There are two main observations that I would like to make about my respondents' awareness and perception of state power. First, those who occupy senior administrative positions in state-owned enterprises appear much more concerned with as well as pay much more serious attention to the Chinese historiographical traditions inherent in the historical drama, compared with those who are self-employed or low-ranking employees in state-owned enterprises. For example, within the fact/fiction debate, nearly all my

respondents who are working in senior administration in China's state-owned enterprises would address China's Confucianism-related political cultural issues in a more active manner than others. Quite a few of them would coincidentally associate the emperor figures in the Qing emperor dramas with China's current leading political authority, the Hu-Wen Administration. They acknowledge that the Qing emperor dramas provide the Hu-Wen Administration with inspiration and lessons in maintaining China's national unification and social stability in the present day. On the contrary, those respondents who are self-employed or low-ranking employees in state-owned enterprises would normally choose to approach the historical drama from a contemporary perspective. Instead of dwelling on actual and solid historical facts, they tend to focus on their personal interests in historical knowledge and the entertainment values of a particular historical drama text.

Secondly, there is a much stronger oppositional reading of the serious historical drama from those who work in non-governmental organizations than those who work in governmental ones. My respondents' discussion of the 'classic-ness' of contemporary Chinese historical drama well reflects this. For most of the respondents who work in state-owned enterprises in my research, the melodramatic mode of the historical drama, especially the serious dramas, serves a purpose of criticising contemporary Chinese political culture and thereafter contributes to it becoming a potential classic television drama. They would easily, and, in most cases, positively identify the message of fighting against political corruption embedded in those historical drama texts. Most of the respondents affiliated with non-governmental organizations, however, tend to undermine and even oppose an educational function of the melodramatic mode of the historical drama. As far as they are concerned, this educational function performed by the historical drama is less for those who work in the governmental organizations to criticize political corruption than for them to learn to survive in the current political climate. For them, Chinese historical dramas like *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, which are full of political implications, therefore offer those Chinese audiences who develop careers in state-owned organizations cultural resources which they can turn to for strategies to lead successful political lives within those organizations. It is worth noting that the dichotomy of the so-called 'inside the state institution' (*tizhi nei*) and 'outside the state institution' (*tizhi wai*) is frequently mentioned and widely accepted by those respondents who are self-employed and employed by private firms when they try to challenge the legitimacy of the serious historical drama and stand against their assumed way of historical interpretation by the government workers.

In sum, my respondents' awareness and perception of the state power in their cultural practices of watching the historical drama to a large extent confirm Lisa Rofel's theoretical model (1994) of studying how official power works in the past-Mao era. Basically, she suggests that we need to take a close look at how state power in China operates, not merely through its institutions, but through the way the state creates itself as an imagined entity. My study demonstrates that the battle of historical interpretation between state institutions and non-state ones emerges as a result of a widespread suspicion and mistrust of the Party-state in China mobilizing the Chinese public through the medium of historical dramas. In other words, the relationship between the historical drama genre and its audiences represents imaginative conflicts and ideological clashes in the treatment of the state as a totalitarian entity in China's television culture sphere.

9.4 Towards Chinese television culture beyond totalitarian nostalgia and future research directions

As introduced at the beginning of this study, many Chinese media culture scholars have in the past made the association between contemporary Chinese historical television drama and a wave of totalitarian nostalgia within China's popular cultural sphere, which began from the late 1980s. The most notable scholar holding this opinion has to be US-based Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu (2008a, 2008b). In a series of discussions on the popularity of the Qing drama, she points out, what she phrases as, 'the symbolic link between Neo-authoritarianism's justification of the Tiananmen crackdown and the drama genre's ideological positioning' (Zhu, 2008a, p30). She reminds us that, the revisionist Qing drama emerged at a time when Chinese society was undergoing rapid economic growth due to the Deng Xiaoping-led economic reforms in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. At that time, the Chinese people were fed up with corruption and society's perceived loss of its moral grounding along with the economic development. These dynasty dramas attempted to present exemplary emperors from bygone dynasties and 'capitalize on the popular yearning for models of strong leadership' on Chinese television (ibid. p32). Although scholars like Zhu have interpreted the popularity of television historical dramas as a revival of Confucianism, virtually no empirical research has been done to explore how Chinese audiences relate their viewing experiences to the revival of Confucianism according to their own social and cultural conditions. Media

scholars have failed to closely investigate how these television historical dramas are perceived, discussed and criticised by the audiences.

Faced with the chronic lack of empirical study of the historical drama genre and its social and cultural impact on Chinese society, I chose to examine the theme of totalitarian nostalgia from a critical sociological approach. Nick Couldry's concept of symbolic power in his book *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (2003) provides a useful critical sociological approach. For him, media rituals are not universal; they are social forms 'which legitimate a fact that about the current organization of mediation, in most parts of the world, that is contingent, not necessary' (Couldry, 2003, p135). The current organization of mediation, as he goes on to remind us, involves 'the intense concentration of society's symbolic resources in centralized institutions that we call "the media"' (ibid.). To apply Couldry's concept in the Chinese context, the embedded discourse of authoritarian nostalgia within the Chinese historical television drama text can be understood as a corpus of symbolic resources provided by the drama production and broadcast organization; its connections with symbolic power cannot be ignored, as these connections exist in two territories. Firstly, the very heart of the drama production and broadcast organization, and secondly, their social consequences, which I am mainly concerned with in this study. As shown, the Chinese audience's response to historical drama goes beyond the literal, political sense of totalitarian nostalgia. Instead, the audience's responses are characterised by an increasingly more liberal, diverse and indeed open-ended engagement with the historical drama text due to their age, gender, life stage and socio-cultural status. Nevertheless, a critical re-evaluation of Maoist revolutionary classic literary works is manifested within that engagement process.

The historical drama offers Chinese audiences a dramatised account of the past and traditional Chinese society at a time when major change is taking place in contemporary China. As the process of cultural globalisation continues, this provides the Chinese viewing public with a televised forum to reflect on their rich cultural traditions and spiritual heritage as well as reconsider their orientation in a future order of global culture. Echoing the Harvard professor Wei-ming Tu's influential essay *Cultural China: the Periphery as the Centre* published in 1991, one can say that Chinese historical drama, as an important part of Chinese cultural industry, remains an unfinished project for modern Chinese identity formation. It is thus worth making continuous effort in investigating and

evaluating this ongoing identity-formation process by treating the future development of the historical drama as a changing cultural phenomenon. Looking beyond this study I now wish to push my research agendas related to the historical drama into two main areas.

The first of these is to carry out a constant critical review of the content and artistic style changes within the historical drama, as a broadly defined television genre. For example, there is currently a new wave of so-called ‘time-travel television series’ (*chuanyue dianshiju*) on Chinese television. This deserves much more academic attention than it has done so far. The last few years have seen the emergence of these television series on Chinese cable and satellite systems. By situating their plots between contemporary and historical or imaginary settings, this newly emerged television drama genre represents a hybridisation of a contemporary subject, costume drama and science fiction. This time-travel television phenomenon can be seen as the latest development in Chinese historical drama. A new round of public debate and discussion has developed and media policy decisions are being made around this phenomenon from an early stage. For instance, in response to the rise of the time-travel television series, the SARFT has expressed its own concerns. In 2011, some senior officials from the SARFT publicly accused those television series of misrepresenting traditional Chinese culture and thus playing a negative role in Chinese audiences formulating their historical understanding. In the same year, the SARFT even banned turning well-known ancient Chinese classic novels into time-travel television series; this was done with the aim of avoiding any potential impacts of the time-travel television phenomenon on those classic literary works. A critical examination of these television series would contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary China’s televisual nostalgia culture in all its forms, which this study has tried to address.

Secondly, moving beyond audience research in relation to historical dramas, I shall examine a broader field of historical television programme production and consumption in the Greater China region. Both fictional and non-fictional history programming in the region will be considered, with an emphasis on looking at how particular cultural and television policies are adopted in relation to this. As well as programmes that deal with pre-modern Chinese history, televisual art work that concerns events and figures in modern Chinese history since the early twentieth century will also be treated as the object of further study. As previously reviewed in this chapter, although there exists intense ideological tension between contemporary Chinese politicians and their counterparts in

Hong Kong and Taiwan, pre-modern Chinese history provides television producers in these three Chinese societies with much less sensitive and culturally specific artistic inspiration. In the last five years, however, a rewriting of modern Chinese history since the May Fourth Movement³⁵ (*wusi yundong*) has emerged in China's popular culture scene. At the same time, themes such as the Chinese Civil War between 1945 and 1949 and the coalition of the Nationalists and the Communists during the Anti-Japanese War between 1939 and 1945, previously regarded as political taboos during the Maoist Period, have frequently been represented in popular television dramas. A wide range of fictional and non-fictional television programmes that deal with prominent Chinese historical subjects since the early twentieth century can also be found in the television programming of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Given these changes within television culture taking place in the Greater China region, I propose that a comparative production and policy study of historical television programmes across the region will reveal differences and similarities of contemporary Chinese historical and cultural identities within television productions. Most importantly, such a study would be expected to provide insight into the increasingly more complicated question of what it means to be Chinese in the 21st century.

³⁵ The May Fourth Movement is known as an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement growing out of student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919. It protested against the then Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, especially the sovereign authority issues that relate to the Shandong Peninsula. These demonstrations sparked national protests and marked the upsurge of Chinese nationalism, a shift towards political mobilization and away from cultural activities, and a move towards populist base rather than intellectual elites. It is widely considered to be the beginning of modern Chinese history.

REFERENCES

- Abercrombie, N. and Longhurst, B. (1998) *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, London: Sage.
- Alasuutari, P. (1992) “‘I’m ashamed to admit it but I have watched *Dallas*’: the moral hierarchy of TV programmes’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 14(4): 561-582.
- Alasuutari, P. (1999) ‘Introduction: three phases of reception studies’, in P. Alasuutari (ed.) *Rethinking the Media Audience: the New Agenda*, London: Sage, 1-21.
- Allen, R. C. (1985) *Speaking of Soap Opera*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Anderson, Benedict (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso.
- Ang, I. (1996) *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, London: Routledge.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bai, R.Y. (2008) “‘Clean officials’, emotional moral community, and anti-corruption television dramas’ in Y. Zhu, M. Keane and R. Y. Bai (eds.) *TV Drama in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 47-60.
- Barker, M. and Brooks, K. (1998) *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bauman, Z. (2002) *Society under Siege*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bell, D. A. (2008) *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, T. (1998) *Culture: A Reformer’s Science*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Berry, C. (2003) ‘Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair’ in C. Berry (ed.) *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, London: BFI, 183-190.
- Berry, C. (2009) ‘Shanghai Television’s Documentary Channel: Chinese Television as Public Space’ in Zhu, Y. and C. Berry (eds.) *TV China*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 71-89.
- Billig, M. (1995) *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage.
- Blackman, L. (2006) “‘Inventing the Psychological’: Lifestyle Magazines and the Fiction

- of Autonomous Life' in J. Curran and D. Morley (eds.) *Media and Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 209-220.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London: Routledge.
- Brunsdon, C. (1990) 'Problems with quality', *Screen*, 31(1), Spring, 67-90.
- Brunsdon, C. (1997) *Screen Taste: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, London: Routledge.
- Buonanno, M. (2008) *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories*, Bristol: Intellect.
- Butsch, R. (2008) *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals*, New York: Routledge.
- Calhoun, C. (1994) *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chan, J. M. (2009) 'Toward television regionalization in Greater China and beyond' in Y. Zhu and C. Berry (eds.) *TV China*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 15-39.
- Chang, S. (2007) 张婧, '迷研究理论初探' [Towards a theoretical framework of fandom studies in *International Journalism*, May 2007], 《国际新闻界》2007年5期, 北京: 中国人民大学出版社.
- Chu, Y. C. (2007) 'The New Chinese Citizen and CETV', *Critical Asian Studies*, 39(2): 259-272.
- Chua, B. H. (2004) 'Conceptualizing an East Asian popular culture', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5(2): 200-221.
- Cohen, P. and Robbins, D. (1978) *Knuckle Sandwich: Growing Up in the Working-class City*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Connell, I. (1978) 'Monopoly Capitalism and the Media'. In S. Hibbin (ed.) *Politics, Ideology and the State*, London: Lawrance and Wishart.
- Connell, I. (1983) 'Commercial Broadcasting and the British Left', *Screen*, 24(6): 70-80.
- Corner, J. (1991) 'Meaning, Genre and Context: the Problematics of "Public Knowledge Project" in the New Audience Studies' in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*. London: Edward Arnold, 267-284.
- Corner, J. (1994) 'Debating culture: quality and inequality', *Media, Culture and Society*, 16 (1): 141-148.
- Corner, J. (1995) *Television Form and Public Address*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Corner, J. (1999) *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Corner, J. (2001) “‘Ideology’: a Note on Conceptual Salvage”, *Media, Culture and Society*, 23(4): 525-533.
- Corner, J. (2007a) ‘Television studies and the idea of criticism’, *Screen*, 48 (3): 363-369.
- Corner, J. (2007b) ‘Epilogue: Sense and Perspective’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10 (1): 135-140.
- Corner, J. and Richardson, K. (2008) ‘Political Culture and Television Fiction: The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(4): 387-403.
- Corner, J. (2009) ‘Public Knowledge and Popular Culture: Spaces and Tensions’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 31(1): 141-149.
- Couldry, N. (1999) *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*, London: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2000) *Inside Culture: Re-imaging the Method of Cultural Studies*, London: Sage.
- Couldry, N. (2003) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, London: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2004) ‘The Productive “Consumer” and The Dispersed “Citizen”’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1):21-32.
- Couldry, N. (2006a) ‘Transvaluing media studies: or, beyond the myth of the mediated center’ in J. Curran and D. Morley (eds.) *Media and Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 177-194.
- Couldry, N. (2006b) ‘Culture and Citizenship: the Missing Link?’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(3): 321-339.
- Coward, R. and Ellis, J. (1977) *Language and Materialism*, London: Routledge.
- Curran, J. (1990) ‘The “New Revisionism” in Mass Communications Research’, *European Journal of Communications*, 5(2, 3), 135-164.
- Curtin, M. (2005) ‘From Kung Fu to Imperial Court: Chinese Historical Drama’ in G. R. Edgerton and B. G. Rose (eds.) *Thinking outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 293-313.
- Curtin, M. (2007) *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: the Globalization of Chinese Film and TV*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (1995) *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*. London: Sage.
- Dai, Y. (2002) 戴逸, ‘盛世的沉沦—戴逸谈康熙乾隆历史’, [A fallen Prosperity: Yi Dai on the history of Kong-Yong-Qian in *China Reading Weekly*, 21st March], 《中华读书报》2002年3月21日, 北京: 光明日报社.

- Dai, Y. (2004) 戴逸, ‘怎样认识康雍乾盛世—答周思源先生’ [online] [How to understand the Kang-Yong-Qian Prosperity: a response to Mr. Siyuan Zhou], available from: <http://www.gmw.cn/content/2004-08/09/content_71937.htm> [Accessed 25 October 2010]
- Davis, F. (1979) *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, New York: The Free Press.
- Dayan, D. and Katz, E. (1992) *Media Events: the Live Broadcasting of History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- De Groot, J. (2009) *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Dirlik, A. (2005) ‘Asia Pacific Studies in an Age of Global Modernity’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6(2): 158-170.
- Durkheim, E. (1995) *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by K. E. Fields, New York: the Free Press.
- Eagleton, T. (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso.
- Ellis, J. (2000) *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language*, London: Longman.
- Fong, V. L. and Murphy, R. (2006) (eds.) *Chinese Citizenship: Views from the Margins*, London: Routledge.
- Fong, V. L. (2007) ‘Media, Identity, and Struggle in Twenty-first-century China’, *Critical Asian Studies*, 39(1): 58 -62.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1980) ‘Truth and Power’, in C. Gordon (ed.) *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon, 109-133.
- Foucault, M. (1991) ‘Governmentality’ in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 87-104.
- Fung, A. and Ma, E. (2002a) “‘Satellite Modernity’: Four Modes of Televisual Imagination in the Disjunctive Socio-mediascape of Guangzhou’ in S. H. Donald, M. Keane and Y. Hong (eds.) *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 67-79.
- Fung, A. and Curtin, M. (2002b) ‘The anomalies of being Faye (Wong): Gender politics in Chinese popular music’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5(3): 263-290.

- Fung, A. (2003) 'Marketing Popular Culture in China: Andy Lau as Pan-China Icon' in Chin-Chuan Lee (ed.) *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 257-269.
- Fung, A. (2009a) 'Fandom, youth and consumption in China', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(3): 285-303.
- Fung, A. (2009b) 'Faye and the fandom of a Chinese diva', *Popular Communication*, 7(4): 252-266.
- Garnham, N. (1983) 'Public Service versus the Market', *Screen*, 24(1):6-27.
- Garnham, N. (1995) '*Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliations or Divorce?*', University of Westminster; reprinted (1997) as 'Political Economy and the Practice of Cultural Studies', in Ferguson and Golding (eds.) 1997.
- Gauntlett, D. and Hill, A. (1999) *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge.
- Geraghty, C. (2003) 'Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(1): 25-45.
- Geraghty, C. (2006) 'Discussing Quality: Critical Vocabularies and Popular Television Drama' in J. Curran and D. Morley (eds.) *Media and Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 221-234.
- Guo, D. W. (2010) 'Editorial', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 7(1): 1-6. [online] Available from: <<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/schools/media/camri/wpcc/chinese-media-culture,-autonomy-and-the-state>> [Accessed 25 October 2010]
- Gray, J. (2003) 'New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-fans', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(1): 64-81.
- Gray, J. (2008) *Television Entertainment*. New York: Routledge.
- Gripsrud, J. (1995) *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies*, London: Routledge.
- Grixti, J. (2009) 'Pop goes the canon: consumer culture and artistic value in screen adaptations of literary classics', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(4): 447-467.
- Hall, S. (1973) 'Encoding and decoding in the television discourse', Stencilled Paper 7, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, CCCS.
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding', in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*. London: Unwin Hyman, 128-138.
- Hall, S. (1994) 'Reflections upon the Encoding/Decoding Model', in J. Cruz and J. Lewis

(eds.) *Viewing, Reading, Listening, Boulder, Col: Westview Press.*

Harding, J. and Pribram, E. D. (2002) 'The power of feeling: locating emotions in culture', in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5(4), 407-426.

Hermes, J. (1995) *Reading Women's Magazines*, Cambridge: Polity.

Hermes, J. (1999) 'Media figures in identity construction', in P. Alasuutari (ed.) *Rethinking the Media Audience: the New Agenda*, London: Sage, 69-85.

Hermes, J. (2005) *Re-reading Popular Culture*, London: Blackwell.

Hill, A. (2007) *Restyling Factuality: The Reception of News, Documentary and Reality Genres*, London: Routledge.

Hutchby, R. and Wooffitt, R. (1998) *Conversation Analysis*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hymes, D. (1972) 'On Communicative Competence', in J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 129-293.

Jordin, M. and Brunt, R. (1988) 'Constituting the television audience: A problem of method', in P. Drummond and R. Paterson (eds.), *Television and Its Audience*, London: BFI, 231-249.

Keane, M. (1999) 'Television and Civilization: The Unity of Opposites?', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(2) : 246-259.

Keane, M. (2001a) 'Broadcasting policy, creative compliance and the myth of civil society in China', *Media, Culture and Society*, 23 (6): 783-798.

Keane, M. (2001b) 'Redefining Chinese citizenship', *Economy and Society*, 30 (1): 1-17.

Keane, M. (2003) 'A revolution in television and a great leap forward for innovation? China in the global television format business' in M. Keane and A. Moran (eds.) *Television across Asia: TV Industries, Program Formats and Globalization*, London: Routledge, 88-104.

Keane, M. (2005) 'Television drama in China: remaking the market', *Media International Australia*, 115:82-93.

Keane, M. (2007a) 'Chinese citizenship and globalization' in W. Hudson and S. Slaughter (eds.) *Globalization and Citizenship: The Transnational Challenge*. London: Routledge, 43-51.

Keane, M., Fung, A. and Moran, A. (2007b) (eds.) *New Television, Globalization and the East Asian Cultural Imagination*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Kellner, D. (1987) 'TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture' in H. Newcomb (ed.) *Television: The Critical View*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Kim, S. J. (2009) 'Interpreting Transnational Cultural Practices', *Cultural Studies*, 23(5): 736-755.

Larrain, J. (1979) *The Concept of Ideology*, London: Hutchinson.

Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial labour', in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 132-146.

Lee, C.C. (2000) (ed.) *Power, Money and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Lee, C. C. (2001) 'Rethinking political economy: implications for media and democracy in greater China', *The Public*, 8(4): 81-102.

Lee, C. C. (2003) 'The Global and the National of the Chinese Media' in Chin-Chuan Lee (ed.) *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 1-31.

Lei, Y. (2007) 雷颐, “当‘历史’成为消费品” [online] [When history becomes consumer products], Available from: <<http://www.confucianism.com.cn/html/lishi/2539050.html>> [Accessed on 30 September 2010]

Leung, L. (2008) 'Mediating nationalism and modernity: the transnationalization of Korean dramas on Chinese (satellite) TV' in Chua, B. H. and K. Iwabuchi (eds.) *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 53-69.

Li, J. S. (2007) (ed.) 李京盛 主编, *中国电视剧年度发展报告: 2005-2006* [Annual Report on Chinese Television Drama: 2005-2005], 北京: 中国传媒大学出版社.

Li, S. L. and Xiao, J. H. (2006) 李胜利 肖惊鸿, *历史题材电视剧研究* [Researching on Historical Television Drama], 北京: 中国传媒大学出版社.

Liebes, T. and Katz, E. (1990) *The Export of Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lim, T. (2008) 'Renting East Asian popular culture for local television: regional networks of cultural production' in Chua, B. H. and K. Iwabuchi (eds.) *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 33-51.

Liu, K. (2000) *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Liu, K. (2004) *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Liu, L.W. (2004) *历史题材剧研究* [A Study of Chinese Historical Drama], 北京: 北京广播学院出版社.

Liu, R. (2010) 'Chinese TV changes face: the rise of independents', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 7(1): 73-90. [online] Available from: <

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/schools/media/camri/wpcc/chinese-media-culture,-autonomy-and-the-state>> [Accessed 25 October 2010]

Liu, Y. N. and Meng, Y. (1999) 刘燕南 孟颖, ‘电视传播者眼中的收视率 [TV Ratings in the Eyes of Communication Scholars]’, *中国广播电视学刊* (12) .

Liu, Y. N. (2007) 刘燕南, ‘中国电视剧播出和收视市场’ [the Broadcasting and Reception Market of Chinese Television Dramas], *中国电视剧年度发展报告 (2005-2006)*, 北京: 中国传媒大学出版社, 165-232.

Livingstone, Sonia (1990, 1998a) *Making Sense of Television: the Psychology of Audience Interpretation*, London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S. and Lunt, P. (1994) *Talk on Television: The critical reception of audience discussion programs*, London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S. (1998b) ‘Audience Research at the Crossroads: the “Implied Audience” in Media and Cultural Theory’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1(2): 193-217.

Lull, J. (1991) *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance*. London: Routledge.

Lunt, P. & Livingstone, S. (1996) ‘Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research’, *Journal of Communication*, 46 (2): 79-98.

Ma, E. K. W. (2000) ‘Rethinking Media Studies: the Case of China’ in J. Curran and M.J. Park (eds.) *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, London: Routledge, 21-34.

Ma, Ning (1989) ‘Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama of the Early 1980s’, *East-West Film Journal*, 4 (1):32-49.

Marcus, George E. (2002) *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Martin-Barbero, J. (1993) *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*, London: Sage.

Meng, F. H. (2003) 孟繁华, *传媒与文化领导权: 当代中国的文化生产与文化认同* [The Media and Cultural Hegemony: Cultural Production and Cultural Identity in Contemporary China], 济南: 山东教育出版社.

Meng, J. (2006) 孟静, “胡玫: 用 ‘新历史主义’ 的眼光拍历史剧” [online] [An interview with Mei Hu: directing historical drama from a new historical perspective], available from <<http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2006/0307/14730.shtml>> [Accessed on 2 October 2010]

Meng, Z. (2005) 孟琢, *六大历史剧批判* [A Critique towards Six Famous Historical Dramas], 北京: 中国工人出版社.

Merton, R. K., Fiske, M., & Curtis, A. (1956). *The focused interview*. New York: Free

Press.

McArthur, C. (1978) *Television and History*, London: BFI.

Miller, T. (1993) *The Well-tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture, and the Postmodern Subject*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Miller, T. (2007) *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism and Television in a Neoliberal Age*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Mittell, J. (2004) *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, London: Routledge.

Morley, D. (1980) *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (British Film Institute Television Monograph No. 11), London: BFI.

Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London: Comedia.

Morley, D. (1992) *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge.

Morley, D. (2007) *Media, Modernity and Technology: the Geography of the New*, London: Routledge.

Mosco, V. (1996) *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*, London: Sage.

Müller, F. and Hermes, J. (2010) 'The Performance of Cultural Citizenship: Audiences and the Politics of Multicultural Television Drama', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27(2), 193-208.

Muller, G. (2007) *Representing History in Chinese Media: The TV drama Zou Xiang Gonghe (Towards the Republic)*, Berlin: LIT.

Murdock, G. and Golding, P. (1977) 'Capitalism, Communications and Class Relations'. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacot (eds) *Mass Communications and Society*, London: Arnold.

Murdock, G. (1995) 'Across the Great Divide: Cultural Analysis and the Condition of Democracy', *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, 12(1): 89-95.

Neale, S. (1977) 'Propaganda', *Screen*, 18(3): 9-40.

Newcomb, H. And Hirsch, P. (1987) 'Television as Cultural Form' in H. Newcomb (ed.) *Television: The Critical View*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Ouyang, J. (2003) 欧阳健, *历史小说史* [A History of Historical Fictions], 杭州: 浙江古籍出版社.

Pan, Z. D. (2009) *Articulation and Re-articulation: Agendas for Understanding Media and*

Communication in China. Draft Essay for Submitted to the USC Annenberg Forum on Comparative Communication and Media Studies, Los Angeles, December 14-15, 2009 [online] Available from: <http://api.ning.com/files/PdIhhmlOZFadyART-AmlSs9Rej*c1am12geqhXdhxxc_/Pan_USC_Annenberg_Dec09.pdf> [Accessed 26 December 2009].

Peters, J. D. (2001) 'Witnessing', *Media, Culture and Society*, 23(6): 707-723.

Philo, G. (1993) 'Getting the message: Audience research in the Glasgow University Media Group in Glasgow University Media Group' in J. Eldridge (ed.) *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power*, London: Routledge, 253-270.

Philo, G.. and Miller, D. (1997) '*Cultural Compliance: Dead Ends of Media/Cultural Studies and Social Science*', Glasgow Media Group, University of Glasgow.

Qian, G. (2008) 'A Trip Down Memory Lane: Remaking and Rereading the Red Classics' in Y. Zhu, M. Keane and R. Y. Bai (eds.) *TV Drama in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 157-171.

Rofel, L. (1994) '*Yearnings: Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics in Contemporary China*', *American Ethnologist*, 21(4):700-722.

Rofel, L. (1999) *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, LA: University of California Press.

SARFT (2009) Report on China's Development of Radio, Film and Television, Beijing: Xin Hua Press (China).

Schroder, K. C. and Philips, L. (2007) 'Complexifying media power: a study of the interplay between media and audience discourses on politics' in *Media, Culture and Society*, 29(6): 890-915.

Seiter, E. (1990) 'Making distinction in TV audience research: case study of a troubling interview' in *Cultural Studies*, 4(1): 61-84.

Shi, A. B. (2000) 'Toward a Chinese National-Popular: Cultural Hegemony and Counter-hegemony in Maoist and Post-Maoist China', in *Social Semiotics*, 10 (2): 201-210.

Shi, T. Y. (2003) 时统宇, *电视批评理论研究* [Television Criticism], 北京: 中国广播电视出版社.

Silverstone, R. (1993) 'Television, ontological security and the transitional object', *Media, Culture and Society*, 15 (4): 573-598.

Silverstone, R. (1994) *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.

Sinclair, J. and Harrison, M. (2004) 'Globalization, Nation, and Television in Asia: The Cases of India and China', *Television and New Media*, 5 (1): 41-54.

Sparks, C. (1996) 'Stuart Hall, cultural studies and Marxism' in D. Morley and K. H. Chen

- (eds.) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 71-101.
- Sparks, C. (2008) 'Media systems in transition: Poland, Russia, China', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 1(1): 7-24.
- Strauss, A. (1987) *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sun, W. N. and Zhao, Y. Z. (2009) 'Television Culture with "Chinese Characteristics": the politics of Compassion and Education' in G. Turner and J. Tay (eds.) *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, London: Routledge, 96-104.
- Tay, J. (2009) 'Television in Chinese Geo-linguistics Markets: Deregulation, Reregulation and Market Forces in the Post-broadcast Era' in G. Turner and J. Tay (eds.) *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, London: Routledge, 105-114.
- Thomas, S. L. (2004) '*Heroes, Assassins, Mobsters, and Murders: Martial Arts TV and the Popular Chinese Imagination in the PRC*', doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego.
- Thompson, J. (1984) *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Thompson, J. (1990) *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Thornham, S. and Purvis, T. (2005) *Television drama: Theories and Identities*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Toynbee, J. (2008) 'Media Making and Social Reality' in D. Hesmondhalgh and J. Toynbee (eds.) *The Media and Social Theory*, London: Routledge, 265-279.
- Tu, W. M. (1991) 'Cultural China: the periphery as the centre', *Daedalus*, 120(2): 1-32.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2003) "'After Dallas and Dynasty we have...Democracy: Articulating Soap, Politics and Gender'", in J. Corner and D. Pels (eds.) *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, London: Sage, 99-116.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2005) *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2007) 'Audience Reaction to Hollywood Politics', *Media, Culture and Society*, 29(4): 531-47.
- Wagner, R. G. (1990) *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wang, D. D. W. (1992) *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wang, J. (1996) *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wang, J. (2001) 'The State Question in Chinese Popular Cultural Studies', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2(1): 35-52.

Wang, X. (2008) 王昕, *在历史与艺术之间: 中国历史题材电视剧文化诗学研究* [Between History and Art: the Cultural Poetics of Chinese Historical TV Dramas], 北京: 中国传媒大学出版社.

Weber, I. (2003) 'Localizing the Global: Successful Strategies for Selling Television Programmes to China', *International Communication Gazette*, 65 (3): 273-290.

Womack, B. (1986) (ed.) *Media and the Chinese Public: A Survey of the Beijing Media Audience*, translated by Li, S. and B. Womack, New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Xing, F. S. (2006) 邢贲思, '历史, 历史学, 历史剧', 中国文明网 [online] [History, History Studies, Historical Drama], available from <http://hxd.wenming.cn/mkszy/2009-12/02/content_73246.htm> [Accessed on 24 October 2010]

XinhuaNet (2010) '专访《义和拳》作者冯骥才: 义和团是心中的一个结' [online] [An interview with *The Boxers*' author Jicai Feng: *Yi He Tuan* is a mystery in my heart], available from <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-05/11/c_1290015.htm> [Accessed on 25 October 2011]

Yin, H. (2001a) 尹鸿, '意义, 生产与消费: 当代中国电视剧的政治经济学分析' [Meaning, production and consumption: a political economy analysis on contemporary Chinese TV drama], *现代传播*, (111,4) .

Yin, H. (2001b) 尹鸿, '冲突与共谋: 论中国电视剧的文化策略' [Conflict and conspiracy: concerning cultural strategies of Chinese TV drama], *文艺研究*, 6.

Yin, H. (2002) 'Meaning, Production, Consumption: the History and Reality of Television Drama in China' in S. H. Donald, M. Keane and Y. Hong (eds.) *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis*, London: Routledge, 28-39.

Yin, H. and Ni, Y. (2009) 尹鸿, 倪燕, "中国类型化电视剧发展分析", 收入《第一媒介: 全球化背景下的中国电视》, 郭镇之等主编 ['An analysis of the development of Chinese TV drama genres', in *The First Medium: Chinese TV in the age of Globalization*, edited by Z. Z., Guo, L.F., Deng and Z. X., Zhang, 103-122], 北京: 清华大学出版社.

Yu, H. Q. (2006) 'From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of Post-Mao China', *Social Semiotics*, 16(2): 303-326.

Yu, H. Q. (2009) *Media and Cultural Transformation in China*, London: Routledge.

Zeng, Q. R. (2000a) 曾庆瑞, '守望电视剧的精神家园——回眸 20 世纪 90 年代一场电视剧文化的较量 (上)' [In the defense of spiritual value of TV drama: a review on conflicting TV drama culture in the 1990's (Part One)], *杭州师范学院学报* (2) .

- Zeng, Q. R. (2000b) 曾庆瑞, ‘守望电视剧的精神家园——回眸 20 世纪 90 年代一场电视剧文化的较量（下）’ [In the defense of spiritual value of TV drama: a review on conflicting TV drama culture in the 1990's (Part Two)], *杭州师范学院学报* (4) .
- Zeng, Q. R. (2002a) 曾庆瑞, ‘艺术事业, 文化产业与大众文化的混沌和迷失——略论中国电视剧的社会角色和文化策略并于尹鸿先生商榷（上）’ [Chaos and confusion of Artistic institution, cultural industry and mass culture: a dialogue with Yin Hong on the cultural roles and strategies of Chinese TV drama (Part One)], *现代传播* (2) .
- Zeng, Q. R. (2002b) 曾庆瑞, ‘艺术事业, 文化产业与大众文化的混沌和迷失——略论中国电视剧的社会角色和文化策略并于尹鸿先生商榷（下）’ [Chaos and confusion of Artistic institution, cultural industry and mass culture: a dialogue with Yin Hong on the cultural roles and strategies of Chinese TV drama (Part Two)], *现代传播* (3) .
- Zeng, Q. R. (2005) 曾庆瑞, ‘当代中国的电视剧艺术和文化产业’, 收入《中美电视剧比较研究》, 曲春景, 朱影编[‘Contemporary Chinese television drama: between art and cultural industry’, in *Comparative Research on Television Drama between China and America*, edited by C. J. Qu and Y. Zhu, 402-420], 上海: 上海三联书店.
- Zhang, X. D. (2008) *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zhao, Y. Z. (1998) *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Zhao, Y. Z. (2008) *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Zhou, B. H. (2006) 'Audience Research Trends in Mainland China: An Analysis of Three Major Journalism and Mass Communication Journals, 1985-2002', *Asian Journal of Communication*, 16(2): 119-131.
- Zhou, S. Y. (2008) 周思源, ‘正确看待康雍乾盛世’, [online] [Take a right look at the Kang-Yong-Qian Prosperity], available from: <<http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class18/200806/41569.html>>, [Accessed on 25 October 2011]
- Zhu, Y. (2008a) ‘Yongzheng Dynasty and Totalitarian Nostalgia’ in Y. Zhu, M. Keane and R. Y. Bai (eds.) *TV Drama in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 21-32.
- Zhu, Y. (2008b) *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market*, London: Routledge.
- Zhu, Y. (2008c) ‘Transnational Circulation of Chinese Language Television Dramas’, *Global Media and Communication*, 4(1): 59-80.

APPENDIX 1

LIST OF FOCUS GROUP AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

| FG1: BEIJING YOUNG ADULTS | FG2: BEIJING YOUNG ADULTS |
|--|--|
| <i>Date:</i> 14 October 2007 <i>Location:</i> Tea house in Beijing <i>Duration:</i> 99 minutes | <i>Date:</i> 25 November 2007 <i>Location:</i> Communication University of China <i>Duration:</i> 153 minutes |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chang (m), assistant mechanical engineer, 24 2. Fang (m), electronic technician, 35 3. Li (m), accountant, 25 4. Lin (f), accountant, 24 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Xiong (m), office worker, 25 2. Li (m), accountant, 24 3. Weng (f), middle school teacher, 25 4. Yu (f), middle school teacher, 27 5. Wang (f), tourist guide, 23 |

| FG3: BEIJING MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS | FG4: BEIJING MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS |
|---|--|
| <i>Date:</i> 16 February 2008 <i>Location:</i> Office building in Beijing <i>Duration:</i> 91 minutes | <i>Date:</i> 2 December 2007 <i>Location:</i> Tea house in Beijing <i>Duration:</i> 147 minutes |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leng (m), company manager, 55 2. Zhao (m), bus driver, 48 3. Wu (f), civil clerk, 47 4. Guo (f), accountant, 42 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wu (m), civil clerk, 47 2. Liu (m), factory worker, 50 3. Zhai (m), technician, 48 4. Zhang (f), shop assistant, 47 5. Wang (f), office worker, 50 6. Huang (f), medical secretary, 51 |

| FG5: CHANGSHA YOUNG ADULTS | FG6: CHANGSHA YOUNG ADULTS |
|---|---|
| <i>Date:</i> 1 March 2008 <i>Location:</i> Tea house in Changsha <i>Duration:</i> 137 minutes | <i>Date:</i> 24 February 2008 <i>Location:</i> Domestic parlour, Changsha <i>Duration:</i> 120 minutes |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wei (m), self-employed, 28 2. Ho (m), office worker, 28 3. Miao (f), university teacher, 26 4. Fang (f), bank clerk, 24 5. Yang (f), college teacher, 25 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tan (m), self-employed, 35 2. Chen (m), engineer, 24 3. Liu (m), engineer, 24 4. Zhang (f), university student, 22 5. Yuan (f), technician, 24 6. Hong (f), office worker, 37 |

| FG7: CHANGSHA MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS | FG8: CHANGSHA MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS |
|--|--|
| <i>Date:</i> 2 March 2008 <i>Location:</i> Demostic parlour, Changsha <i>Duration:</i> 130 minutes | <i>Date:</i> 9 March 2008 <i>Location:</i> Office building in Changsha <i>Duration:</i> 86 minutes |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cai (m), university instructor, 44 2. Peng (m), primary school teacher, 45 3. Wu (m), primary school teacher, 40 4. Lei (f), hospital nurse, 44 5. Li (f), senior manager, 40 6. Xiang (f), bank clerk, 40 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Liu (m), university teacher, 50 2. Li (m), self-employed, 45 3. Kuang (m), mechanical engineer, 53 4. Guan (f), office worker, 43 5. Peng (f), administration officer, 52 |

| IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: BEIJING | |
|--|-------------------------|
| FANS | ANTI-FAN |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chen (m), company manager 55 2. Li (m), professional dancer, 25 3. Yu (m), self-employed, 26 4. Wang (f), college teacher, 23 5. Liu (f), self-employed, 27 | Guo (f), accountant, 42 |

| IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: CHANGSHA | |
|--|---------------------------|
| FANS | ANTI-FAN |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Xia (m), surgeon, 55 2. Peng (m), administration officer, 45 3. Wu (f), bank clerk, 27 4. Zhao (f), hospital nurse, 32 | Zhang (f), bank clerk, 43 |

APPENDIX 2

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

This glossary contains all the simplified Chinese characters given in the thesis in *pinyin* romanisation. Phrases and names are listed according to English alphabetical order of the first character.

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| A, Cheng | 阿城 |
| A, Nuo | 阿诺 |
| Ba Ba Ba | 爸爸爸 |
| Baijia Jiangtan | 百家讲坛 |
| Beijing | 北京 |
| Ben Sheng Ren | 本省人 |
| Cao, Xueqin | 曹雪芹 |
| Cha Guan | 茶馆 |
| Chen, Baoguo | 陈宝国 |
| Chengdu | 成都 |
| Chongbai Lishi Yizhi Shenhua | 崇拜历史，抑制神话 |
| Chou, Shucheng | 丑述成 |
| Chiung, Yao | 琼瑶 |
| Chuanmei yu Wenhua Lingdaoquan | 传媒与文化领导权 |
| Chuantong Wenhua Re | 传统文化热 |
| Chuantong Zhongguo Wenhua | 传统中国文化 |
| Chuanyue Dianshiju | 穿越电视剧 |
| Chun Yule | 纯娱乐 |
| Cui, Zhiyuan | 崔之元 |
| Dabing | 大兵 |
| Dai, Houying | 戴厚英 |
| Dan Ben Ju | 单本剧 |
| Daxue Wuhen | 大雪无痕 |
| Dazhongguo Xiangxiang | 大中国想象 |
| Deng, Xiaoping | 邓小平 |
| Dianshi Lishiju | 电视历史剧 |
| Dianshi Piping | 电视批评 |
| Diwang Jiangxiang | 帝王将相 |
| Er, Yuehe | 二月河 |
| Fa Jia | 法家 |
| Falun Gong | 法轮功 |
| Fan Fubai | 反腐败 |
| Fan Geming Fengjian Canju | 反革命封建残余 |
| Fan Tanwu Dianshiju | 反贪污电视剧 |
| Fansi Ju | 反思剧 |
| Fang, Yulin | 方雨林 |
| Feng, Jicai | 冯骥才 |

| | |
|--------------------|--------|
| Fu, Le | 傅乐 |
| Gan Bu | 干部 |
| Gaige Ju | 改革剧 |
| Gongqingtuan | 共青团 |
| Guangzhou | 广州 |
| Guanyin | 观音 |
| Guojia Yishu Shiye | 国家艺术事业 |
| Guo Xue Re | 国学热 |
| Hairun | 海润 |
| Haizi Wang | 孩子王 |
| Hai Run | 海润 |
| Han | 汉 |
| Han, Shaogong | 韩少功 |
| Hanwu Dadi | 汉武帝 |
| He, Shen | 和绅 |
| Hong Lou Meng | 红楼梦 |
| Hong Qi | 红旗 |
| Hong Xue | 红学 |
| Hongse Niangzijun | 红色娘子军 |
| Hongse Jingdian | 红色经典 |
| Hu, Mei | 胡玫 |
| Hu, Jintao | 胡锦涛 |
| Hu-Wen | 胡-温 |
| Hu, Yaobang | 胡耀邦 |
| Hualu Baina | 华录百纳 |
| Huangdi | 皇帝 |
| Huangdi | 黄帝 |
| Huangtaiji | 皇太极 |
| Huanzhu | 环珠 |
| Huanzhu Gege | 环珠格格 |
| Hunan | 湖南 |
| Ji, Xiaolan | 纪晓岚 |
| Jiang, Zemin | 江泽民 |
| Jiao, Huang | 焦晃 |
| Jiating Lunli Ju | 家庭伦理剧 |
| Jiechu Jieyan | 解除戒严 |
| Jiemi | 解密 |
| Jinde | 金德 |
| Jingdian | 经典 |
| Jingdian Dianshiju | 经典电视剧 |
| Jingji Xiaoyi | 经济效益 |
| Jing, Ke | 荆轲 |
| Jun | 郡 |
| Kangde | 康德 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|
| Kang-Qian | 康乾 |
| Kang-Yong-Qian | 康雍乾 |
| Kangqian Shengshi | 康乾盛世 |
| Kangxi | 康熙 |
| Kangxi Dadi | 康熙大帝 |
| Kuei, Ya-Lei | 归亚蕾 |
| Langman Ouxiang Ju | 浪漫偶像剧 |
| Lao She | 老舍 |
| Li, Dingxing | 李定兴 |
| Li, Shengli | 李胜利 |
| Li, Si | 李斯 |
| Li, Xiangnan | 李向南 |
| Lianxu Ju | 连续剧 |
| Liao, Hongyu | 廖红雨 |
| Liaozhai Zhiyi | 聊斋志异 |
| Ling, Jiefang | 凌解放 |
| Ling, Li | 凌力 |
| Linhai Xueyuan | 林海雪原 |
| Lishi Zhenshi | 历史真实 |
| Liu, Yong | 刘墉 |
| Luotuo Xiangzi | 骆驼祥子 |
| Ma, Ning | 马宁 |
| Makesi Zhuyi Wenyiguan | 马克思主义文艺观 |
| Makesi Zhuyi Wenyi Meixue Yanjiu | 马克思主义文艺美学研究 |
| Meng, Fanhua | 孟繁华 |
| Meng, Zhuo | 孟琢 |
| Ming | 明 |
| Minjian | 民间 |
| Minjian Chuanshuo | 民间传说 |
| Minjian Shenhua Chuanshuo | 民间神话传说 |
| Minzu Wenhua | 民族文化 |
| Modai Huangdi | 末代皇帝 |
| Mugu Chenzhong | 暮鼓晨钟 |
| Nankai | 南开 |
| Nishi | 拟史 |
| Nu Nu Nu | 女女女 |
| Pinzhi | 品质 |
| Pu, Songling | 蒲松龄 |
| Pu, Yi | 溥仪 |
| Qi Wang | 棋王 |
| Qianlong | 乾隆 |
| Qin | 秦 |
| Qin Shi Huang | 秦始皇 |
| Qing | 清 |

| | |
|--------------------------|---------|
| Qing Shi Gao | 清史稿 |
| Qiushi | 求是 |
| Qiye | 企业 |
| Qizhi | 奇志 |
| Qu, Bo | 曲波 |
| Ren ah Ren | 人啊人 |
| Renmin | 人民 |
| Renmin Qunzhong | 人民群众 |
| Rujia Sixiang | 儒家思想 |
| Sanfan Zhiluan | 三藩之乱 |
| Shajiabang | 沙家浜 |
| Shandong | 山东 |
| Shanghai | 上海 |
| Shanghen Ju | 伤痕剧 |
| Shangxing | 上星 |
| Shaonian Tianzi | 少年天子 |
| Shawujing | 沙悟净 |
| Shehui Xiaoyi | 社会效益 |
| Shehui Zhuyi Gaige | 社会主义改革 |
| Shenmei | 审美 |
| Shenmei Hua | 审美化 |
| Shenzhen | 深圳 |
| Shi, Anbin | 史安斌 |
| Shi, Tongyu | 时统宇 |
| Shiguan | 史观 |
| Shiji | 史记 |
| Shiren Zhisi | 诗人之死 |
| Shishi Ruyan | 世事如烟 |
| Shiye | 事业 |
| Shu Wang | 树王 |
| Shunzhi | 顺治 |
| Sichuan | 四川 |
| Sima, qian | 司马迁 |
| Sige Xiandaihua | 四个现代化 |
| Siji Ban Guangbo Dianshi | 四级办广播电视 |
| Sishi Tongtang | 四世同堂 |
| Sun, Se-Wen | 孙式文 |
| Sun, Wanning | 孙皖宁 |
| Sunwukong | 孙悟空 |
| Tang | 唐 |
| Tang, Haoming | 唐浩明 |
| Tian, Fen | 田蚡 |
| Tiananmen | 天安门 |
| Tianjin | 天津 |

| | |
|---------------------------|---------|
| Tiechi Tongya Jixiaolan | 铁齿铜牙纪晓岚 |
| Tizhi Nei | 体制内 |
| Tizhi Wai | 体制外 |
| Tongdao | 同道 |
| Tongsu | 通俗 |
| Tong Ya | 铜牙 |
| Tu, Wei-ming | 杜维明 |
| Wang, Der-wei | 王德威 |
| Wang, Gang | 王刚 |
| Wang, Hui | 汪晖 |
| Wang, Jing | 王瑾 |
| Wangshi yu Xingfa | 往事与刑罚 |
| Wenchuan | 汶川 |
| Wen, Jiabao | 温家宝 |
| Wenjian | 文件 |
| Wenxue Gaibian | 文学改编 |
| Wenxue he Dianying Yanjiu | 文学和电影研究 |
| Wenyipian | 文艺片 |
| Wenyizaidao | 文以载道 |
| Wu | 武 |
| Wu, Chengen | 吴承恩 |
| Wu, Tianming | 吴天明 |
| Wusi Yundong | 五四运动 |
| Xi You Ji | 西游记 |
| Xian | 县 |
| Xi'an | 西安 |
| Xiandaihua | 现代化 |
| Xiangsheng | 相声 |
| Xiao, Jinghong | 肖惊鸿 |
| Xiao Yanzi | 小燕子 |
| Xiaozhuang | 孝庄 |
| Xin Lishi Xiaoshuo | 新历史小说 |
| Xin Tian | 新天 |
| Xin Xing | 新星 |
| Xin Zuo Pai | 新左派 |
| Xing, Fensi | 邢贲思 |
| Xinwen Chuanbo Xue | 新闻传播学 |
| Xiongnu | 匈奴 |
| Xishuo Ju | 戏说剧 |
| Xishuo Lishi | 戏说历史 |
| Xishuo Qianlong | 戏说乾隆 |
| Xuantong | 宣统 |
| Xuanzang | 玄奘 |
| Xue Ren | 学人 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Xungen Yundong | 寻根运动 |
| Yahuan | 亚环 |
| Yan | 燕 |
| Yang Ban Xi | 样板戏 |
| Yehuo Chunfeng dou Gucheng | 野火春风斗古城 |
| Yeshi | 野史 |
| Yi He Quan | 义和拳 |
| Yi Jiu Bai Liu Nian | 1986 年 |
| Yi, Zhongtian | 易中天 |
| Yibairen de Shinian | 一百人的十年 |
| Yin, Hong | 尹鸿 |
| Ying, Zheng | 嬴政 |
| Yishi Xingtai Hua | 意识形态化 |
| Yishu Zhenshi | 艺术真实 |
| Yongzheng | 雍正 |
| Yongzheng Huangdi | 雍正皇帝 |
| Youxiao Guojia Yishixingtai Kongzhi | 有效国家意识形态控制 |
| Yu, Hua | 余华 |
| Zaixiang Liuluoguo | 宰相刘罗锅 |
| Zeng, Guofan | 曾国藩 |
| Zeng, Qingrui | 曾庆瑞 |
| Zhao, Wei | 赵薇 |
| Zhao, Yuezhi | 赵月枝 |
| Zhao, Ziyang | 赵紫阳 |
| Zhang, Guoli | 张国立 |
| Zhang, Tielin | 张铁林 |
| Zhang, Xun | 张勋 |
| Zhengshuo Ju | 正说剧 |
| Zhengshuo Lishi | 正说历史 |
| Zhengzhi Quanli Douzheng | 政治权利斗争 |
| Zhongguo Gudian Xiaoshuo | 中国古典小说 |
| Zhonghua Shiji Tan | 中华世纪坛 |
| Zhongwen | 中文 |
| Zhong Xuan Bu | 中宣部 |
| Zhou, Baohua | 周葆华 |
| Zhubajie | 猪八戒 |
| Zhu, Ying | 朱影 |
| Zhun Shichanghua | 准市场化 |
| Zhuzi Baijia Sixiang | 诸子百家思想 |
| Zouxiang Gonghe | 走向共和 |