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Contemporary Chinese historical television drama as a cultural genre

Production, consumption and state power

George Dawei Guo

Introduction

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 prime time 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), the last Chinese feudal empire. These historical dramas are characterised as 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 of well-known historical events and figures driven by the commercialisation process of Chinese media. For example, the 44-episode serial *Yongzheng Dynasty* (*Yongzheng wangchao*, 1998), produced by Beijing Tongdao Cultural Development Company, used more than 100 characters in more than 600 scenes to narrate the political struggles in the Qing Dynasty from the period of Emperor Kangxi (1662–1722) to Emperor Yongzheng (1723–35). It drew upon historical allegories and historical rewritings to explore the history and power relations of contemporary Chinese society. Since the early 2000s more dramas dealing with historical figures and events from a range of periods in ancient Chinese history have been produced and aired nationwide in China.

The popularity of these television historical dramas has attracted the attention of both critics and audiences in China and abroad. Many scholars of Chinese culture and society explain the popularity of television historical dramas by referring to a revival of Confucianism in contemporary Chinese politics (e.g. Bell 2008; Zhang 2008; Zhu 2008a). Confucianism (*rujia sixiang*) is a Chinese ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC). The origin of Confucianism dates back to China's Spring and Autumn Period (771–476 BC) when an ethical socio-political teaching emerged. Following the abandonment of Legalism (*fa jia*)¹ in China after the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), Confucianism became the official state ideology of China. It developed metaphysical and

cosmological elements in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220). 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.

The end of the Cold War not only greatly eased the political and military stand-off between China and the western world, but it also witnessed increasing human, cultural and economic mobility at both regional and transnational levels. China, as one of the longest continuous civilisations, 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 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'. Briefly speaking, 'Chinese characteristics' 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 mobilising political, social and economic resources. However, as economic growth continued under this one-party authoritarian rule, rampant political corruption has become a pressing issue in Chinese society. Concerns about corruption were also behind the outbreak of student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, with calls for stricter anti-corruption (*fan fubai*) measures the most important demand. The Tiananmen protest was ended by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but political corruption remains a challenge to the legitimacy of the CCP's rule. Unlike the Maoist period, where the party-state ideologies 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.

Since the 1990s, 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. However, as Daniel Bell (2008: 8) observes, the 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'.

Jiang Zemin, who served as the secretary-general of the ruling CCP between 1989 and 2002, initiated 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 Beijing, 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 in Beijing, one of China's top universities in humanities and social sciences. As the Qing Dynasty was the last Chinese feudal empire, it is always considered a crucial period for a critical examination of traditional Chinese culture.

After Hu Jintao became secretary-general of the CCP in 2002, new Confucianism, as a state ideology, was pushed to a higher level. Along with the prime minister, Wen Jiabao, Hu advocated that the building of 'a socialist harmonious society' should be the new leitmotiv for Chinese society. According to the Hu-Wen administration, harmony, as the most important principle of Confucianism, should be implemented and mobilised by China's major cultural and

educational institutions. At the opening ceremony of the 8th Congress of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the 7th Congress of the Chinese Writers Association in November 2006, Hu urged Chinese artists and writers to devote themselves to promoting 'cultural harmony'.

Many prominent scholars of Chinese media have pointed out that it is under this political climate that the television historical dramas set during the dynasty era have been at the forefront of articulating political and legal principles based on the Confucian-influenced traditional Chinese culture and thereafter have been playing their roles in support of the state's propagandist purposes (e.g. Li and Xiao 2006; Yin 2002: 28–39; Yin and Ni 2009: 103–22; Zhu 2008a). In her discussion of the popularity of the Qing drama, US-based Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu (2008b: 30) establishes 'the symbolic link between neo-authoritarianism's justification of the Tiananmen crackdown and the drama's ideological positioning'. 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 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. As the Chinese people were fed up with corruption and the society's perceived loss of its moral grounding as the economy developed, 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 (Zhu 2008b: 32). 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 (Zhu 2008b: 32). For Chinese intellectuals like Zhu, 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.

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. In his discussion of soap opera in the western world, Robert Allen (1985: 10) claims that the study of soap operas had been conditioned within two related supervisory discourses: 'criticism (aesthetic discourses) and sociological research'. 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. It is possible that the chronic lack of sociological consideration of television dramas in China is because most of the media scholars in China come from a literature background and so give more attention to the textual elements of television drama than its contextual meaning.

At the same time, 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. Nevertheless, the use of 'the historical' as a term is not stable. 'Serious drama' (*zheng shuo ju*) versus 'popular drama' (*xi shuo 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.

Faced with this diversity and complexity, this chapter is intended to interrogate contemporary Chinese historical television dramas as a cultural genre. In discussing the global historical television phenomenon, historian Jerome de Groot (2009: 181) suggests that we consider the ways historical

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television has 'complicated "history" to the point that the "historical" becomes a genre itself to be challenged and subverted'. In my own study of Chinese historical drama, the diverse and inconsistent use of 'the historical' prompts the question of how the category of '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. On the other hand, it is not my intention to argue against the interconnections between Confucianism as an old Chinese political philosophy and its contemporary media representations proposed by media scholars like Ying Zhu. Rather, as a media sociologist, I am always suspicious of a narrow interpretation of a certain media phenomenon and its ideological positioning. As far as the historical television drama is concerned, I feel more inclined to interrogate the Chinese audience's televisual experience on the historical drama and its sociological groundings. To a large extent this echoes American anthropologist Lisa Rofel's (1994) approach to studying Chinese nationalism in the era of popular culture. 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. However, in her critique of Anderson's approach Rofel (1994: 701) argues that 'his [Anderson's] theory can explain the origin of imagined communities but not plots, climaxes, or denouement'. 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. 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' (Rofel 1994: 704). Inspired by Rofel's approach, I put forward a hypothesis that Chinese audiences' different modes of engagement with the historical drama text can reflect their different modes of cultural imagination conjured up by the state power.

It is worth noting that the genre analysis in this chapter is primarily influenced by the cultural approach to television genre advocated by Jason Mittell. According to Mittell (2004: xii), television genre is 'a process of categorization'; it is 'not found within media texts, but operate[s] across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts'. Within traditional genre studies, exploring textual assumptions is the key to understanding 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. For Mittell, 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' (Mittell 2004: 13). Meanwhile, the categorical rubric, not the textual property of a given genre, should be the primary site and material for genre analysis. By refocusing on the category and not the individual text Mittell reconceptualises 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 (2004: 13) argues, are 'the practices that define genres and delimit their meanings, not media texts themselves'.

Useful as it may be, Mittell's approach can be problematic in the study of Chinese television culture. The main problem lies in its inheritance of a Foucauldian legacy that regards power as diffused and discursive. This is incompatible in addressing the strict state supervision of television production and broadcasting that prevails in China. 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. Although China's TV dramatists are now afforded certain freedoms in managing the business aspects of production and distribution, they must still have their shooting proposals censored and approved by China's top audiovisual regulatory body, the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, prior to 2013 the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television or SARFT). It would be therefore naive 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, this chapter uses 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 examines the genre of the historical television drama from both the production and the consumption perspectives. The first section focuses on the Chinese television drama industry. The aim of this section is to look at how the Chinese television drama industry has been categorising and evaluating historical drama since the 1980s. Based on my document analysis and industry interviews between 2007 and 2010, I will divide the evolution of Chinese historical drama into three stages: 1984–92, 1992–2004 and 2004–present. At each stage, the meaning of 'the historical' has been conditioned by certain literary, production, scheduling and regulatory circumstances. My discussion on the audience response is based on some empirical audience research that I conducted between late September 2007 and early April 2008. The research was carried out in two urban settings in China – Beijing and Changsha. Ten focus groups and 11 in-depth interviews were conducted involving more than 60 respondents from young adult and middle-aged audience groups. Based upon their attitudes towards the historiographical traditions which take their character from contemporary China's system of television historical drama production, I group my respondents into three types including conservatives, culturalists and realists. Arbitrary as it may look, I argue that to a large extent these three audience types reveal my respondents' awareness and perception of state power in their cultural practices of watching the historical drama.

The evolution of the historical drama: an industry perspective

Stage one: 1984–92

The period between 1984 and 1992 not only witnessed the Chinese television industry's recovery from the Cultural Revolution, but also observed television drama becoming more mature and diverse in terms of content and style. 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* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*, 1986), *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*, 1987) and *The Last Emperor* (*Modai huangdi*, 1988). Most of these dramas were based on popular literary work, so the term 'literary adaptation' (*wenxue gaibian*) often referred to historical drama by the television drama directors at the time (see Li and Xiao 2006). These literary adaptations produced in mainland China fell into three categories: classic ancient Chinese novels (like *The Dream of the Red Chamber*), ancient legendary folklores (like *Strange Tales of a Lonely Studio*) and contemporary historical novels (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 China Central Television (*Zhongyang dianshi tai*, 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, which basically advocated that artists and writers serve the people and the socialist system, and should adopt a social realism style in their work. In this political climate, Chinese television dramatists throughout the 1980s treated historical or literary subjects in a relatively serious manner compared to those in the 1990s. This 'seriousness' 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 CCTV-1, the most watched television channel in the country, in the evening slot between 8:00 p.m. and 8:45 p.m., which became China's daily national television prime time throughout the 1980s until the present. In short, 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.

Stage two: 1992–2004

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' and 'popular drama' emerged in the public discussion about historical drama in the mid-1990s. Taiwanese television culture and the ongoing commercialisation of Chinese television worked together to generate and reinforce this dichotomy.

With regards to the influence of Taiwanese television culture, Michael Curtin (2005: 293–313; 2007) revisits this important political and cultural change which had a significant impact on contemporary Taiwanese and Chinese television culture. Curtin writes (2005: 297), 'as martial law began to wither and new media outlets began to flourish', reformers within the Taiwanese ruling Kuomintang (KMT, i.e. the Nationalist Party) decided to loosen their control of the China Television Company (CTV, *Zhongshi*), one of the three state-controlled television stations in Taiwan. The others were the Chinese Television System (CTS, *Huashi*) and the Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV, *Taishi*), controlled by the military and the provincial government respectively. The 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 realise 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 at CTV managers who were sympathetic to the KMT. 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: 298). 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 favour of imagining a Greater China (*dazhongguo xiangxiang*).

Under these circumstances, CTV started to devote itself to producing costume drama (*guzhuang ju*) 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 Taiwan 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 8:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on weekdays between May and July in 1991. One year later in 1992, it was shown on most of China's cable television channels as well. In my view, the rise of the costume drama represented by *Tales of Emperor Qianlong* can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, as Curtin (2005: 311) 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'. On the other hand, it suggested to television producers on either side of the Straits that despite the fact that there is 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 of Emperor Qianlong* introduced them to the new idea of 'popular historical drama'. 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 recognised 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 of Emperor Qianlong*, a wave of popular historical dramas thus emerged in China and saturated prime time provincial television schedules in the mid-1990s. The 40-episode *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister* (*Zaixiang Liu Luoguo*), which was produced and distributed by Shanghai Hairun Film and Television Production in 1996, was a perfect example. The story of Hunchback Liu is centred around the conflicts between two famous senior officials during the Qianlong period (1711–99) of the Qing Dynasty. Liu Yong (or Hunchback Liu) is an honest and caring official and He Shen is notoriously corrupt and evil-hearted. *Hunchback Liu* is widely documented as the earliest domestically produced popular – or *xishuo* – historical drama that enjoyed massive popularity (see Li and Xiao 2006).

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, was remade by the state-owned television studios, including 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, the Qing emperor serials emerged. The most prominent examples have to be Eryuehe's biographical novels of Qing emperors. The Chinese novelist Eryuehe, among those historical writers, is worth special attention here. Born in Shanxi Province in north China in 1945, Eryuehe was originally named Ling Jiefang. He is best known for his works of three Qing Dynasty emperors, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, all of which have been adapted into award-winning television series. Similar to the popular historical drama, Eryuehe's emperor serials use the past to mirror the present and draw upon the past to satirise the present. However, the fact that they claim to be based on official historical records differentiates them from the popular serials.

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Ever since Eryuehe'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. Fu Le, 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'.² '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 Eryuehe'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 rewriting history reached a climax in spring 2003 with the *Towards the Republic* (*Zouxiang gonghe*) incident. *Towards the Republic* 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 nineteenth century and the early twentieth 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 provoked heated public discussions in the media as well as on the internet. Due to its portrayal of historical issues deemed politically sensitive by the Chinese government, the series was subject to censorship. Some episodes had to be re-edited, and its planned repeated airing on provincial television channels was cancelled.

In a general sense, the restrictions that *Towards the Republic* faced in the end were primarily because, as Muller (2007: 3) states, the serial's historical interpretation 'did not accord with the widely-held official one supported by the government'. 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 criticise contemporary political and social problems using historical memories and reflection.

Stage three: 2004 to the present

Not surprisingly, the popularity of this televised rewriting of history soon attracted the attention of the Chinese authorities, the incident of *Towards the Republic* being an obvious sign. In 2004, SARFT issued its Fortieth Regulatory Policy on the censorship of television drama attached to 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'. According to the policy, 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 fewer mentions of the old dichotomy between serious and popular drama within the Chinese popular press. I suggest that there are three main reasons behind this change of television culture. First of all, because they were restrained by the SARFT's Fortieth Regulatory Policy in 2004, Chinese television dramatists became more cautious in dealing with serious historical events and figures. The forced re-editing of the historical drama *The First Emperor (Qin shi huang)* by CCTV's Drama Unit taught them a lesson. *The First Emperor* is an epic television series produced by CCTV. It is based on the story of Ying Zheng, the founder as well as the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). 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 the Drama Unit raised two issues about its adaptation: First, the historians in 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. Because the love affair was judged to be overemphasised 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.

Second, moving away from the controversial Qing Dynasty which marked the end of ancient Chinese empires, China's veteran television dramatists re-emphasised the role of the historical drama in promoting Chinese culture and philosophy. *The Great Emperor Hanwu (Hanwu dadi)* is a case in point. This 38-part television drama was co-produced by CCTV and China Film Group Corporation, which are China's largest state-owned media organisations in the sectors of television and film respectively. With a huge cast of more than 1,700 characters, this epic drama series covers a 45-year period of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) under the reign of Emperor Wu, who was the seventh Han emperor from 141 BC to 87 BC. It tells a story of how Confucianism was established as China's state political philosophy by Emperor Wu.

Last but not the least, more and more popular historical dramas are also devoted to promoting different aspects of traditional Chinese culture and societies in diverse artistic styles. On the one hand, they have started to touch upon such issues as commerce, medicine and the legislative system in different periods of pre-modern China. On the other hand, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of so-called 'time-travel television series' (*chuanyue dianshiju*) on Chinese television. By situating its plot between contemporary and historical or imaginary settings, this television drama genre presents a hybridisation of contemporary subject, costume drama and science fiction. In response to the rise of the time-travel television series, however, SARFT expressed its 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 for Chinese audiences to formulate their historical understanding. In the same year, SARFT put a ban on the remaking of the well-known ancient China's big four classic novels on Chinese television. This was done to avoid potential impact of the time-travel television genre on the classic novels (also see Creemers, Chapter 3 in this volume).

This section has used Jason Mittell's cultural genre approach as the analytical tool to look at how the Chinese television drama industry categorises and evaluates historical drama through its production, regulatory and scheduling practices. Compared to traditional genre studies, which

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consider textual assumptions to be the key to understanding 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 section reveals that 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' and 'popular drama' emerged in the public discussion about historical drama in the mid-1990s. However, the stricter censorship of historical drama since 2004 resulted in fewer mentions of the old dichotomy between serious and popular drama within the Chinese popular press. Therefore, one can say that the party-state apparatus remains the ultimate power in Chinese cultural production and the strict state supervision of television production and broadcasting still prevails in China. It is at this point that I shall discuss audience responses to the historical television drama.

The Chinese historiographical tradition and its three types of TV interpreters

Since the mid-1990s, the popularity of historical dramas on contemporary Chinese television has triggered a massive cultural debate within the Chinese popular realm. 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. Media and literary scholars who look solely at the production and content aspects of historical dramas believe they 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: 35).

US-based Chinese scholar David D.W. Wang (1992) points out that one of the most remarkable literary phenomena in the post-Mao China is the resurgence of historical fiction. As he argues, 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 fictions demonstrate new tendencies in historical interpretation. A significant tendency 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.

During the Cultural Revolution, the emperors and high officials of China's bygone dynasties were generally depicted in literary works as anti-revolutionary feudalism remnants. Under the Maoist ideology, which prevailed until the early 1980s, it was always the ordinary people not a particular hero that were treated as the ultimate force in the making of history. According to Mao's revolutionary agenda, the petty-bourgeois intellectuals should, first of all, live and labour with the workers, peasants and the soldiers, and thereby familiarise themselves with the latter's language, lifestyle and thoughts. More importantly, as the Chinese media scholar Anbin Shi (2000: 204) observes, 'the intellectuals should subjugate themselves to the ideological reform of the people'. That is to say, intellectual elitism should be abandoned and the sanction of the proletariat hegemony should be paramount.

The new wave of historical novel is characterised by the re-emergence of Qing emperors as heroic protagonists in historical representations. Notable examples include Li Ling's *The Young Son of the Heaven* (*Shaonian tianzi*, 1987) and *Evening Drum, Morning Bell* (*Mugu chenzhong*, 1991), Tang Haoming's *Zeng Guofan* (1990–92), and Eryuehe's *Great Emperor Kangxi* (*Kangxi dadi*, 1985–89) and *Emperor Yongzheng* (*Yongzheng huangdi*, 1991–94). Interestingly enough, unlike

the historical novels of the 1980s 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 they wrote the novels. One could 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.

As far as the evolution of the historical drama is concerned, a dichotomy has emerged between the serious historical drama and the popular historical drama. For instance, Yin (2002: 23) claims that popular costume dramas like *The Tales of Emperor Qianlong* have no intention of exploring 'contemporary China's political and power struggle in reality'; they simply offer the Chinese public 'pure entertainment in the disguise of historical representation'. In contrast, serious historical dramas like *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, while adopting diverse theatrical styles, are judged to have inherited Chinese intellectuals' historiographical tradition. This programme not only 'recalled history, but also simulated history' and 'provided intellectuals with a means of expression and certain rhetorical strategies' (Yin 2002: 24).

From the perspective of audience research, however, the historiographical traditions discussed by those media and literary scholars serve as nothing but text-based assumptions made 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. 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 Colin McArthur (1978: 15), they 'take their character from the system of production relationships in the social formation they inhabit'. By the same token, rather than dwell on the historiographical traditions, one has to shift 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 the production-consumption relationship, I thus identify three main types of attitudes amongst the respondents who were involved in my audience research – conservatives, culturalists and realists. These three audience types are determined by how those respondents perceive the historiographical traditions inherent in the historical drama. Next, I shall elaborate on each one of the audience types.

Conservatives

The first type of respondents is what I would term as conservatives. 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 prioritise its claim to historical truth over that to artistic truth by emphasising the avoidance of realising dramatic effect at the sacrifice of distorting historical facts. The following two respondents are representative of this type of audience. For example, when talking about *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, they express their opinions as follows:

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.

Contemporary Chinese historical TV drama

It looks more like a disco dance party than any event that would take place in ancient times.

(male, aged 44, university instructor)³

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-known 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, secondary school teacher)⁴

From these two quotes, one can easily feel a sense of strictness concerning the extent of factual accuracy that these two male respondents expect of the historical drama. In other words, the quotations demonstrate the respondents' strong yearning for a fair and candid representation of historical facts by historical dramas, especially those that 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. For example, the 44-year-old male university instructor quoted above constantly expressed unsatisfactory feelings with the misrepresentation of historical facts. 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 the 27-year-old male secondary school teacher illustrates well this interpretive approach. In interview, this young 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 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 mainly because they have relatively high educational levels. From the focus group discussions, I find that educational workers always 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 criticise the issues of misrepresentation in a way that echoes that of middle-aged males through a sensory engagement of particular historical drama texts. It is possible to argue that this is largely due to the fact that they have cultivated a strong awareness of historical knowledge by watching the historical drama.

Culturalists

In contrast to those conservative audiences who have high expectations of factual accuracy, many other respondents are much more relaxed in dealing with this issue. 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 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 not be actually realised on contemporary Chinese television in the way that those conservative respondents assume. I call these respondents culturalists for analytical reasons. The following two quotes are from two respondents within this category:

There is absolutely no doubt that all these emperor dramas including *The Great Emperor Hanwu* and even *Hunchback Liu the Prime Minister* 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)⁵

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 cultural question. You may get different answers from different people. I think that a good understanding of historical representation has a lot to do with the audience's life experience. You have to be old and mentally mature enough to truly understand the heroic deeds of those emperors. Those emperors are just like our country's leaders today. Although from different periods of history, they have a lot in common as human individuals.

(female, aged 47, civil clerk)⁶

From these two quotations it is easy to identify a high level of cultural competence. According to Bourdieu (1984: 2), 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'. In this particular case, this high level of cultural competence is reflected in the respondents' ability and flexibility to deal with the issues of historiography that relate to the historical drama. For example, the 55-year-old company manager believes that Chinese historical drama, whichever sub-genre it is, performs an important propagandist function for the Chinese government. From this, one can say that the respondent is quite aware of the fact that the rise of traditional Chinese culture as content 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 that 'the serious historical drama also needs to be entertaining' shows his positive attitudes towards the commercial operation of China's television drama industry.

Instead of making a serious/entertaining distinction, the 47-year-old female civil clerk considers an understanding of historical representation to be 'a cultural question'. By proposing the notion of 'the audience's life experience', she brings to this issue a humanist perspective. Nevertheless, she addresses positively China's Confucianism-related political and cultural issues. She even associates the emperor figures in the historical dramas with China's current leading political authority.

These culturalist respondents have two characteristics worthy of special attention. First, like the two respondents quoted above, most of them are middle-aged viewers, hence they are more

likely to have established patterns of television viewing than their younger counterparts. As a result, they tend to regard the practice of watching television drama as a serious business of being entertained as well as engaging with public concerns. The culturalist audiences in particular would view historical drama as an important cultural forum in which prominent Confucian values are disseminated and debated in contemporary Chinese society.

Second, nearly all the 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 cultural issues more actively than others. The above-quoted middle-aged male respondent – a senior manager of a small-sized state-owned retail company in Beijing – is a perfect example. For instance, when discussing *The Great Emperor Hanwu*, he enthusiastically associated the Emperor Wu with China's leading political authority, the Hu–Wen administration. He repeatedly claimed that the Hu–Wen administration had a lot to learn from Emperor Wu in maintaining China's national unification and social stability.

Realists

The third type of my respondents is what I call realists. Unlike the two preceding types of respondents, realists distance themselves 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 employees in state-owned enterprises. They not only choose to approach the historical representation from a contemporary perspective, but also their understanding of the historical representation is entirely derived from their personal social and cultural concerns. The following two quotes illustrate this point:

I am a complete realist. I only care about contemporary life. Those dynasties are too far away from me. Getting the message they attempt to convey is the key. That is, in most cases, those historical figures would show great loyalty to their own countries!

(female, aged 40, senior manager)⁷

I think the reason why so many people like *The Great Emperor Hanwu* is mainly because the serial addresses lots of similar human relationship problems as those people may encounter in their daily work. In a governmental organisation, for example, 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?

(male, aged 28, self-employed)⁸

Instead of directly addressing the historical drama in relation to its social meanings, these respondents tend to focus more on their personal concerns with the genre. In the first quote, the middle-aged female respondent claims in a rather blunt way that she is 'a realist'. She goes on to explain that she would always interpret television content from a contemporary perspective. It is worth pointing out that this female respondent is a senior manager in a high-profile privately owned dairy products company in the city of Changsha. Amongst the respondents, those 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.

At the same time, there is a much stronger oppositional reading of the serious historical drama from those who work in non-governmental organisations than those who work in governmental

ones. The 28-year-old self-employed male respondent is a case in point. According to my audience research, most of the self-employed respondents like this male respondent tend to undermine and even oppose an educational function of the historical dramas. As far as they are concerned, this educational function performed by the historical drama is less for those who work in the governmental organisations to criticise political corruption than to learn to survive in the current political climate. 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 organisations cultural resources which they can turn to for strategies to lead successful political lives within those organisations.

Conclusion

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, 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 production and consumption of these dramas. With the primary aim of filling in this knowledge gap, this chapter attempts to use Jason Mittell's (2004) cultural genre approach as the analytical tool to examine the genre of the historical television drama from both the production and the consumption perspectives.

Although China's television drama industry has undergone a process of commercialisation since 1987, the CCP 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 has been less and less mention of the dichotomy between 'serious and popular' drama within the Chinese popular press since 2004 and the *Towards the Republic* incident. Because of this episode, Chinese television dramatists became more cautious in dealing with serious historical events and figures.

The audience research presented here offers clues to help explore the extent that the respondents are aware of and perceive the party-state's dominant supervisory role. There are two main observations about the respondents' awareness and perception of state power. On the one hand, those who occupy senior administrative positions in state-owned enterprises appear much more concerned with and pay much more 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. On the other hand, there is a much stronger oppositional reading of the serious historical drama from those who work in non-governmental organisations than those who work in governmental ones. The respondents' awareness and perception of the state power in their cultural practices of watching the historical drama largely confirm Lisa Rofel's (1994) theoretical model of how official power works in the past-Mao era introduced at the beginning of this chapter. My study demonstrates that the battle of historical interpretation between audiences living under different social and political conditions emerges as a result of a widespread suspicion and mistrust of the party-state in China mobilising 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 cultural sphere.

In conclusion, the historical drama provides Chinese audiences with a dramatised account of the past and traditional Chinese society at a time when major change is taking place in contemporary China. It also provides the Chinese viewing public with a televised forum to reflect on their Confucian cultural traditions and spiritual heritage as well as reconsider their orientation in a changing order of political culture in contemporary Chinese society. Echoing

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Wei-ming Tu's influential essay of 1991, 'Cultural China: the periphery as the centre', one can say that Chinese historical drama, as an important part of the Chinese cultural industry, remains an unfinished project for modern Chinese identity formation. It is therefore valuable to continue to investigate and evaluate this ongoing process of identity formation by treating the future development of the historical drama as a changing cultural phenomenon.

Notes

- 1 Legalism was a school of philosophical thought in Chinese history. It emphasised strict obedience to the system of laws, and was one of the main philosophical currents during the Warring States period (c.475–221 BC). Legalism was a utilitarian political philosophy that did not address higher questions like the purpose and nature of life. The school's most famous proponent and contributor Han Fei Zi believed that a ruler should use three main tools to govern his subjects. These three tools can be summarised as principle, tactics and charisma.
- 2 My telephone interview with Fu Le, senior TV drama producer at the Drama Unit of Hunan Television was conducted in Beijing in December 2007.
- 3 This quote is derived from a focus group interview conducted in Changsha on 9 March 2008.
- 4 This in-depth interview was conducted in Beijing on 2 December 2007.
- 5 This quote is derived from a focus group interview conducted in Beijing on 16 February 2008.
- 6 This quote is derived from a focus group interview conducted in Beijing on 3 December 2007.
- 7 This in-depth interview was conducted in Changsha on 2 March 2008.
- 8 This quote is derived from a focus group interview conducted in Changsha on 1 March 2008.

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Introduction

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